

*Ralph E. Ancil*

## The Radical Roepke

*The Moral Foundations of Civil Society* by Wilhelm Roepke,  
with a new introduction by William F. Campbell.  
Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, N.J., 1996.

*The Social Crisis of Our Time* by Wilhelm Roepke, with a foreword  
by Russell Kirk and an introduction by William F. Campbell.  
Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, N.J., 1992.

Without a vision the people perish. So says the writer of Proverbs. In both *The Moral Foundations of Civil Society* (MF) and *The Social Crisis of Our Time* (SC), Wilhelm Roepke presents a vision of economic and social order calculated to help reverse the decline of the West. In this German economist one finds an original thinker who makes his significant contribution to political economy, not by an abstract, vivisectional analytics, but in the composition of humane policies to realize the good society.

In both volumes, which are part of Transaction Publishers' Library of Conservative Thought started by the late Russell Kirk, Roepke begins with an essential critique documenting the interrelated evils most responsible for the breakdown of our social structure. These forces include urbanization, mechanization, proletarianization, and excessive specialization which are both the cause and the effect of spiritual and social collectivism. The typical worker has mostly casual relationships and re-

turns home evenings to "neighbors" he hardly knows. He is alienated from neighbor and nature and from a stable, settled way of life. Being only a proletarian, that is, one who has only his labor to sell, he has no productive assets (such as land) that stabilize his economic life over the business cycle and offer a source of economic and political security. Instead, in his need for security, the unemployed worker turns naturally toward the national government during hard times—yet another way in which democratic governments grow as a result of modern capitalism. Ultimately, these combined trends render modern man emotionally unstable, neurotic, and the prey of ideologies that promise him a bright future, including the regnant materialist ideology of a deformed capitalism.

Roepke distinguishes between the foundations of historical liberalism and the particular historical form they assumed

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between the essential/enduring and the variable/historical appendages. Briefly put, among its good and durable features may be counted the advantages of markets, freedom, private property, and limited government, not to mention the material advantages of increased production. Among the regrettable historical appendages he includes monopolies, poor corporation laws, excessive material growth, and distortions of economic power carried over from the feudalist period or due to unjust leverages on present governments.

Following this approach, Roepke's vision is both conservative and radical. As he states, it is "conservative in insisting on the preservation of continuity in cultural and economic development, making the defense of the basic values and principles of a free personality its highest, immutable aim...." Yet it is "radical in its diagnosis of the disintegration of our 'liberal' social and economic system, radical in its criticism of the errors of liberal philosophy and practice... [and] radical in its unorthodox choice of the means which today seem appropriate for the attainment of the permanent goal of every culture based on the freedom of the individual" (*SC*, 21-22). He insists "...the revolutionary character of our policy is to be sought not in its methods but in its aim, one which is radically contrary to the tendency of the times" (*MF*, 158).

The cornerstone of Roepke's criticism, however, is the "blindness of historical liberalism," its tendency to absolutize the market. "The glory of liberalism," he says, "would indeed be unblemished if it had not also fallen victim to rationalism and thereby increasingly lost sight of the necessary sociological limits and conditions circumscribing a free market" (*SC*, 51). This led to the unfortunate economic doctrine of the "automatic harmony of interests," and of corresponding laissez-faire policies. But, he says, the market is not a comprehensive self-

regulating machine that automatically harmonizes all interests without regard to other social considerations; failure to understand this contributed to those very problems which socialists believed they could correct. Instead, it should have been frankly admitted that a market economy requires extra-market foundations, a "firm moral, political and institutional framework" (*SC*, 52) to channel the flow of economic processes in constructive and beneficial ways.

In *Moral Foundations*, he emphasizes especially the more virulent French tradition of rationalism as the main source of our social and spiritual decay, calling it "eternal Saint-Simonism, "an ideology that embraces other "isms": biologism, evolutionism, and pragmatism. This "hubris of the intellect" in the "empire of reason" is at war with those "inner certainties which are not to be measured quantitatively and which are not immediately perceived by the senses, which can neither be weighed, nor measured nor touched, the imponderabilia of 'inward experience,' of Life, of Society and of History" (46). It is the error of the rationalist not to admit that for every freedom there is a boundary which we dare not cross, for by absolutizing freedom we ultimately negate freedom. For the truth of this in politics, Roepke traces the effects of excessive rationalism to the welfare state—as well as to the counter-action of irrationalism as found in National Socialism. In philosophy it clearly leads to nihilism, whereas in economics it is reflected in the 19th century "laissez-faireism," a secular dogmatism unfortunately still alive. In the natural and social sciences, "eternal Saint-Simonism" similarly degenerated into the all too familiar aberrations of scientism and positivism including the addiction to the mathematical and the quantitative. "It is," he says, "a type of thought which relentlessly ignores mankind as a spiritual and

moral entity and which knows almost nothing of all these eternally human and social values, problems and their mutual relationships which, being elusive because qualitative and subtle, can be familiar only to a humane, historical, literary and philosophical type of educated mind" (55).

Even the democratic form of government is no more autonomous than the free market. It, too, has prerequisites which must be respected if it is to work well. Democracy must be kept within its proper sphere which is another way of saying that not all issues can be reduced to a referendum, or solved by a majority vote, any more than all things can be submitted to the market. Unlimited democracy is the soil of collectivism, a result which is prevented only when democracy is limited and balanced by the non-political spheres and intermediary institutions of traditional liberal societies and federated levels of authority.

These counterweights include science, the press, and the judge's bench as well as leading individuals. Roepke, of course, is aware such institutions themselves need redemption from the excessive rationalism, pragmatism and positivism which he elsewhere documents. But if such is achieved and these disciplines restored to social good health, they play an important part in disciplining government. Less formally, individuals can also tame the tyrannous tendencies of government by acting as "clerks" (Julian Benda) or secular saints who command respect and a *de facto* authority: "There must always be standing above government and independent from it, a class of intelligent and reliable men who coura-

geously represent these supra-national forces against the lurking tyranny of society, willing to oppose that tendency of the state to unbridled and forceful domination..." (MF, 117). Examples of such men range from Ambrose opposing the Emperor Theodosius to Luther confronting the Imperial Diet of Worms.

Especially interesting in both volumes is Roepke's attack on the problem of the "socially blind development of technology"

(SC, 137). He frankly states that our lives would be far better "if certain technical and organizational developments could be reversed..." (SC, 112). Roepke expresses disapproval of an over-technified society in phrases such as "militarization of work," "estrangement from nature," and the "mechanization of productive

activity" where compensation for the drudgery of work is sought in consumption, and contributes to our "floating humanity" (MF, 140). He asks rhetorically whether it would not be better to "retain our dependency on nature" which is more in keeping with our human dignity (MF, 70).

This is not to say Roepke is against all technical innovations. It is the *autonomy* of technology, its immanentist and autotelic quality, he condemns. For just as there must be balance and limits for the economy and government, so there must be for technology. We should use our intelligence, our moral imaginations in Burke's phrase, to discriminate between good and bad technology, that which harmonizes with human nature and a wholesome pattern of life and that which does not. He clearly does



Wilhelm Roepke

not want us to succumb to a belief in “technological inevitability” any more than he does to the supposed inevitability of political collectivism in whatever form. The former, like the latter, could be characterized as a pagan and unmanly fatalism. Roepke rightly argues that technological innovation and research are driven by the *extra-technical* aspects; the direction technology takes and its manner of application are determined *socially* (*SC*, 23, 24, 136-8).

The core of his radical recommendations for improvement is the principle of *decentralization* which must be applied to the *economy* and *society*, not merely government. This means, among other things, reducing the size of cities and of industries to an optimum that involves a balance between town and country. Roepke thus advocates town and country planning and recommends communities with a maximum size of 50 to 60 thousand inhabitants (*MF*, 161) for a humane life, large enough for the variety needed in a healthy economy and cultural expression, but not big enough to be deracinating and alienating. However, he paints in glowing terms a Swiss village of three thousand that one suspects is closer to his ideal (*MF*, 30-31). Decentralization especially means “deproletarianizing” workers by providing them with productive assets, especially land. Workers with some land can become partially self-sufficient in the growth of foodstuffs, which reduces the need to rely on the central government in times of social and economic stress, and this in turn re-enforces that freedom essential to a republic. More generally, we need a “lengthy but circumspect redistribution” of property with appropriate compensation and safeguards to reduce to the minimum the accumulation of large property holdings. Since agriculture is not like any other industry but possesses special features ministering to the needs of human nature, there should also be a large “yeomanry” or con-

tinental peasantry which requires a wide distribution of land ownership, on farms suitable in size to meet the needs of one family. Families living and producing together what they need are happier and more stable. Peasant farming especially is not a matter of maximizing yields but a subtle way of living involving the spiritual as well as the economic. The flight from the land should thus be viewed with alarm. Local trading in smaller communities centering around the family, church, and neighborhood, is also needed to personalize economic activity. Roepke is radical, indeed.

But decentralization is not always straightforward. One must distinguish between its *genuine* and *spurious* manifestations. For instance, the decentralization of big cities by the automobile was dubious since, by these often merely bedroom settlements, it fragmented families and communities further. Similarly, the replacement of the “Magnetism of the Hearth” (Pestalozzi, *MF*, 159) with central heating (*MF*, 166) is spurious because it disperses the family throughout the house rather than keeping them in the same room of a winter’s evening. Regular cinemas are thought to have a centralizing tendency (*MF*, 121) while the “private cinema in your own home” is seen as just another gadget of a dehumanizing science (*MF*, 69).

Given such views, one can only wonder whether Roepke would share today’s enthusiasms for computers as instruments of decentralization. Following his criteria, the answer may well be “no.” To be genuine, a particular policy or technology of decentralization must be judged in relation to the humane vision and all the desiderata needed to achieve that vision which it must re-enforce, not undermine. The incoherence of piecemeal, incremental thinking is misleading. While the automobile got the family out of the city, as Roepke argued, it also got it out of the home. Roepke likely would

have been suspicious that the same computer technology which brings the father to work at home does nothing to restore that sense of “vital satisfaction” the worker needs, but further mechanizes and regiments work in the service of what he called the cults of “analysis,” the “colossal,” and the “future” (*MF*, 68–69; *SC*, 64, 78, 114).

But inevitable tensions that arise from this approach raise other questions. How, for example, can one reconcile even those forms of modern technology which Roepke accepted and free markets with social stability and other features he describes as essential to the humane economy? Or, how far would Roepke’s kind of governmental interference in the economy have to go to achieve his goals in the U.S. today? How does one reconcile the insistence on free international trade with the problematic commercialism it enhances? But these are perhaps questions more of detail and application than of principle, and are answerable within Roepke’s framework.

Due to the nature of this framework, however, Roepke must wear many hats. As economist, he treats important aspects of business cycles, unemployment, and international trade. As sociologist, he gives the refreshingly traditional argument that the locus of the woman is in the home. In the endnotes, which themselves provide important reading material, he discusses the decline of the West in such topics as “The exaggerated cult of youth” and the “Withering of family life.” He reminds us that the older, healthy bourgeoisie, unlike today’s besotted middle class, educated their children at home, which was a central function of the mother. As historian, he speaks of the nature of history and the lag-time between the acceptance of ideas and their social and political impact. All this is handled with the ease of a man comfortable and well read in the subjects he deals with, supporting his

arguments with examples and careful thinking. The indices and many references to European authors with which many Americans, including many academics, are unfamiliar, also make these volumes valuable. Not surprisingly, though, the books overlap and yet, because their emphases and particular array of facts and arguments differ, they serve to complement one another.

It should be noted that Roepke never sacrifices the insights of the science of economics to “higher values.” He remains faithful to his own discipline. Thus, for sound economic reasons he rejects protectionism or the welfare state as much as libertarianism. Roepke simply refuses to allow economics and the market to encroach on other domains, and instead affirms and integrates its legitimate insights into a larger vision of life.

Perhaps most important in both volumes, is Roepke’s explicit awareness that the root problem of our present crisis is religious and spiritual. Because in the last century “[m]en were forsaking the things of the spirit and turning to externals...” (*SC*, 59), he speaks of our present need for “the spiritual and moral change indispensable to a lasting improvement...” (*SC*, 24). We have lost our sense of *reverence* which “is perhaps the most fundamental element of every civilization” (*SC*, 11). Deliverance begins with a restoration of piety for the “permanent things.” Roepke’s reverence for traditional values and his wide range of study enabled him to see how to humanize the modern economy. Because he saw how deeply the disease was advanced, he did not flinch from recommending the radical surgery required. For those bold enough, and desiring an applied conservative philosophy in economics, *The Social Crisis of Our Time* and *The Moral Foundations of Civil Society* are definitely required reading.