



The Constructive Side of Fear: Wilhelm Röpke's Discourse on Europe between Crisis and Integration

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1. Introduction

Fear has a key role in the history of modern political thought, as the theoretical construction of Thomas Hobbes clearly shows. In his philosophy, the original fear proves to be a “productive power” of politics, driving men to leave the state of nature and to create the civil society, where fear comes up again in an institutionalized form, administrated by the State (Esposito 1998: 6-10). Consequently, it appears as a “rational passion” that helps man to control his destructive instincts and to establish the community (Pulcini 2009: 128-130). Moreover, the reflection on the “political productivity” of fear could be a starting point for sketching out a conceptual genealogy transcending Hobbes and involving authors like Machiavelli, Vico, Hegel and Nietzsche (Galli 2010).

On the basis of these considerations about the “constructive” function of fear, this paper aims to study the political thought of Wilhelm Röpke (1899-1966) - a German economist, an anti-Nazi intellectual refugee to Switzerland and a protagonist of the debate for re-establishing liberalism, when it was submerged by the totalitarian wave (Hennecke 2005; Solchany 2015) - stressing that the argumentative strategy of his writings is largely founded on fear. Firstly, this essay illustrates Röpke's discourse on the crisis afflicting the Western and European society in the XX century, listing the dangers and the menaces for humanity evoked by the author. Secondly, it focuses on the fact that those expectations are directed to raising or emphasising the fear of the citizens and to provoking their positive reaction, as Röpke openly reveals. Finally, the paper analyses how that rhetorical and political mechanism is applied to the special case of European integration and the peculiar paradox it generates.

2. The European and Western crisis

In the 1940s Röpke devoted a “trilogy” of studies to the crisis that had exploded in the developed world, producing effects able to distort the ideal, cultural and moral achievements that characterized the Western civilization: *The Social Crisis of Our Time* (1942, Röpke 1950); *Civitas Humana. A Humane Order of Society* (1944, Röpke 1948); *International Order* (1945, Röpke 1945).

These works present the Second World War as the climax of the general crisis of a society that was losing all its references between XIX and XX centuries. The population growth and the technological progress are the main causes of a degeneration that is marked by secularization and massification, triggering a disintegrating dynamic by virtue of which the individuals are no longer active and aware subjects in the political and economic fields, and become a group of "insects" or "termites" at the mercy of a State without limits and a multitude of proletarians forced to work in the inhuman conditions existing in the big firms (Röpke 1950: 5-16). The political-institutional centralisation and the economic and urban concentration are the most visible effects of a decadence that, according to Röpke, roots in the "cult of colossal" theorised in the XIX century and implemented in the XX century (Röpke 1950: 62 ff.).

Röpke introduces some acute medical metaphors to point out that the crisis arises from the moral and spiritual corruption of the European and Western peoples. It is described as a "progressive hardening of the arteries" (Röpke 1950: 176), "an infection" (Röpke 1948: 1), "one large abscess on the entirely decayed body of society", from which the virus could spread to the international community (Röpke 1946: 9). A series of philosophical and literary quotations contribute to outline the deep causes of this crisis. The dark scenario Aldous Huxley narrates in *Brave New World* (Huxley 1932) strengthen Röpke's criticism against the "techno-scientific rationalism" of "social engineers" imbued with positivistic culture (Röpke 1950: 157-159). The triumph of "the 'natural-science-mathematical' intellect" against the human sciences, reverberating in the project of mechanizing the social life, discloses "the 'tragic in technology'" and seriously risks fulfilling Nietzsche's "nightmare of a veritable Hell of civilisation brought about by the complete instrumentation and functionalisation of humanity" (Röpke 1948: 53, 63, 180).

The menaces coming from this crisis are many-sided, e.g. the actions by "the civilized barbarian, the spiritually stark-naked savage, but one with a radio and a machine gun and now equipped with an apparatus for splitting the atom" (Röpke 1948: 65), thanks to which he could fight a devastating nuclear war. Nevertheless, the "mortal danger" is represented by "socialism" or "collectivism" (Röpke 1948: 2). The author uses these terms as synonymous to indicate both the eclipse of the market economy - "the 'autonomy of the economic will' [...] is suspended and replaced by the order from above" (Röpke 1950: 88) - and the social change. Socialism tends to "exacerbate the arch evil of our time, namely, spiritual collectivization and proletarianization" and to generate a "uniform dusk in which 'all cats are grey'" (Röpke 1950: 154-155). While the totalitarian collectivists - fascist or communist - are his favourite targets, the not totalitarian ones - defined as "social-democrats" - are accused of ignoring that collectivism/socialism could not be realized without producing the fall of the whole liberal-democratic political system (Röpke 1948: 2-3).

This point is developed in the last systematic work of the German thinker, *A Humane Economy. The Social Framework of the Free Market* (1958, Röpke 1960), which considers the reconstruction after 1945 and the cold war. The Western bloc strongly supported by Röpke has to face “the sole surviving, the Communist, variety of totalitarianism and [...] the apocalyptic prospects of unleashed atomic energy” (Röpke 1960: 2). However, the real threat is connected to the “chronic diseases, spreading secretly and thereby all the more malignant”; they “start slowly, but after a while the pace quickens until the deterioration is hard to arrest, and this multiplies the danger” (Röpke 1960: 151).

On the one hand, Röpke refers to the Welfare State born in the XX century. He shares the principle of the “assistance for the economically weak” and especially for the subjects overwhelmed by the transformations of production - such as the industrial revolution - and the traditional structures of society (Röpke 1960: 154). However, the initial “individual relief”, temporary and based on the responsibility of the individuals, is replaced by the “public social insurance” and eventually by “today’s stage of universal, all-encompassing security” (Röpke 1960: 157). Since this turmoil is fed by the increasing claims of the citizens, its final outcome will be a “state, where in the name of economic equality and to the accompaniment of the progressive blunting of individual responsibility, a sizable part of private income is constantly sucked into the pumping engine of the welfare state and diverted by it”; a society “resting on the levelling and state-idolizing theory that any expansion of social services of the masses is a milestone of progress” (Röpke 1960: 157-158). On the contrary, the individual responsibility - a cornerstone of the liberal society - “is in danger of slackening if the welfare state’s levelling machine lessens both the positive effects of better performance and the negative ones of worse performance” (Röpke 1960: 163).

On the other hand, Röpke pays particular attention to inflation, which is only apparently an economic issue. Although it has different dimensions in the various countries, inflation worries the German scholar as far as it seems an “endemic” and “chronic” pathology of the XX century and has a political nature: “Our inflation is the first to be marked, unequivocally and almost exclusively, by the ideologies, forces, and desires of modern mass democracy. It is a democratic and social inflation” (Röpke 1960: 191), related to the Keynesian theory of fighting deflation, which is, however, less dangerous:

Both inflation and deflation are monetary diseases, but, unlike deflation, inflation has an initial pleasant stage for wide circles of the population, and above all for the politically most influential, because it begins with the euphoria of increased economic activity and other boom symptoms.

It emanates therefore a “dangerous seduction” (Röpke 1960: 195).

Welfare State and inflation clearly signal an ethical and moral twisting that Röpke associates with the decline of the “bourgeois” (*bürgerlich*) spirit. This concept summarizes a complex of elements assuring happiness and prosperity to the European and Western civilization:

individual effort and responsibility, absolute norms and values, independence based on ownership, prudence and daring, calculating and saving, responsibility for planning one’s own life, proper coherence with the community, family feeling, a sense of tradition and continuity of generations combined with an open-minded view of the present and the future, proper tension between individual and community, firm moral discipline, respect for the value of money, the courage to grapple on one’s own with life and uncertainties, a sense of the natural order of things, and a firm scale of values (Röpke 1960: 98).

On the contrary, the mass society of the XX century is dominated by “an ‘unbourgeois’ way of life”, masterfully expressed by Keynes with the aphorism “in the long run, we are all dead”, that Röpke interprets as an incentive for “regarding it as a virtue to contract debts and as foolishness to save”, for “living as a parasite” or “being incompetent and irresponsible” (Röpke 1960: 100).

The collapse of the bourgeois values due to massification threatens not only the market economy, but also the democratic order (Quirico 2017b). Recalling Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835-1840, Tocqueville 2007), Röpke stresses “the difference between liberal democracy of the Anglo-Saxon and Swiss kind on the one hand and the Jacobin brand of democracy on the other”. The former “places the accent on liberty [...] rests on government with the consent and under the control of those governed”; the latter emphasized “equality” and “the principle of the sovereignty of the people” that he judges “a fiction”, but “it is a highly dangerous one because it opens the way to the worst despotism and makes it possible for a majority decision to establish a totalitarian government” (Röpke 1960: 66).

Although the democratic model could appear in different forms, only the liberal one respects the “metademocratic limits” traced “by the traditional principles of government, the unchallengeable commands of ethics and natural law, and the unwritten precepts of the history of nations” which “may not be transgressed by any popular or parliamentary majority” (Röpke 1960: 68). On the other hand, the Jacobin democracy, in the light of its connection with the mass society and “with its emphasis on the sovereignty of the people, does not acknowledge the decision of the ‘sovereign’ to be subject to any higher and absolute authority”, revealing the

perilous fragility of the undiluted democratic principle, which exposes us all along the line to arbitrary power and to the dissolution of inviolable principles of government and society and which can protect neither freedom nor property nor law from despotism (Röpke 1960: 68-69).

A serious menace looms over the realization of the democratic idea:

Democracy is, in the long run, compatible with freedom only on condition that all, or at least most, voters are agreed that certain supreme norms and principles of public life and economic order must remain outside the sphere of democratic decision (Röpke 1960: 69).

The general crisis is all the rage because the European citizens are too optimistic and forget that golden rule.

3. Fear as an impulse for overcoming the crisis

To Röpke, however, the fate of the European and Western society is not settled and his warning aims at reversing that tendency. The public opinion has to focus on the “Rubicon”, i.e. the critical point beyond which the victory of collectivism would become definitive and irreversible. In the economic system it coincides with the moment when the “powers of the market economy must [...] either be restored by a lessening of intervention or must be completely replaced by collectivism” (Röpke 1950: 159-160). Several countries share a situation of “gradual [...] pre- and quasi-collectivism”, as a result of the “piecemeal and occasional concessions into which we allow ourselves to be drawn without considering their consequences or their slippery nature”, that could finally lead “to total collectivism” (Röpke 1948: 11).

However, this problem concerns the political institutions as well. During the II World War, following what Friedrich A. von Hayek writes in *The Road to Serfdom* (Hayek 1944), Röpke witnesses

the constantly fluctuating struggle between the old democratic and liberal state system and the economic system of an ever-increasing collectivism. Neither fits in with the other since the liberal democratic system of *governance* requires its economic fulfilment in the Market, whereas the collectivist economic system requires for its political life an undemocratic and illiberal despotism,

consistent with “the totalitarian principle” (Röpke 1948: 22). The responsibility of choosing between these options falls down on the citizens:

everything depends on whether men understand that the present is a critical hour in the history of world, and that they act to show whether they desire a development towards collectivism and economic Cesarism or not. [...] This desire, or its absence, is by no means a question of the free and independent decision of the individual: it depends on the social climate, in which the opinions and the will of people at the helm have developed (Röpke 1950: 142).

Intellectuals have to rally to create a “climate” hostile to collectivism, crossing “the traditional division of scientific work”, since the crisis has moral,

economic, institutional dimensions (Röpke 1948: xxi). Obviously they should elaborate possible solutions, as Röpke tries to do in his books, recommending a new humanism against the ruling scientism, federalism and decentralization against the politico-institutional centralism; reinforcing the market economy on the basis of the ordoliberal theory¹; outlining a society composed by a plurality of families, owners and artisans in opposition to industrialization and proletarianization; and exposing a set of detailed proposals that this paper could not analyse.

The first step along this path, however, is the perception of the collectivist danger. In *The Social Crisis of Our Time* (1942) Röpke invokes a rational “pessimism” calling “for disillusionment as well as for constructive action” and focusing on the large number of risks humanity goes through, out of any fatalistic temptation (Röpke 1950: 23). Fifteen years later, in *A Humane Economy*, the German scholar verifies that the market economy has recovered a central role in Europe, above all in the countries that, like Germany, have welcomed the neo-liberal teaching. In the social and cultural spheres, the crisis has conversely deteriorated and the attempt by Röpke seems “a lone voice competing, without hope, against an hurricane” (Röpke 1960: 7).

Since the *Zeitgeist* is directed towards collectivism, the author claims the right - and the duty - of scaring his readers to change their minds:

It is quite terrifying to see how people, and not least their spokesmen in public, remain insensitive and criminally optimistic in the face of the social and cultural crisis of our times. If anything, the crisis is getting worse rather than better, and the danger of exaggerating it seems incomparably smaller than that of minimizing it with deceptive, soothing words (Röpke 1960: 11).

Röpke’s discourse has an instrumental feature leveraging on the symbolism and the political function of fear. This strategy has also an anthropological appendix, suggested by the

radical transformation of the prevailing human type, a new mutation of *Homo sapiens* [...] It is a poor species of human being which this grim vision conjures up before our eyes: “fragmentary and disintegrated” man, the end product of growing mechanization, specialization, and functionalization, [...] a race of spiritual and moral pygmies lending itself willingly [...] to use as raw material for the modern collectivist and totalitarian mass state, a new type of man that “is spiritually homeless and morally shipwrecked” (Röpke 1960: 12).

Man will be safe if he comprehends the materialist degeneration and “finds the way back to himself and to the firm shore of his own nature, assured value

¹ Although he lives and teaches in Switzerland, Röpke has close relations and intellectual affinities with the circle of scholars led by Walter Eucken at the Freiburg University and regularly publishes scientific articles in the *Ordo* yearbook (Nicholls 1994; Commun 2003; Ptak 2004).

judgement, and binding faith” (Röpke 1960: 13). Similarly, even for democracy the “recognition of the danger is the first condition of overcoming it”, defending the liberal nature of the political system. This implies that executive gains “in strength and independence so that it can become the safeguard of continuity and common interest without curtailing the essentials of democracy, namely, the dependence of government upon the consent of those governed”; a balance between the respect of the authority of the State and the reduction of its functions; the protection of “all the imponderables” - tradition, natural law, sense of community - and the “independent institutions” - judiciary, press, church - which guarantee a fair relationship between individual and State (Röpke 1960: 148-149).

In this framework, scholars - and particularly economists - must reject the opportunity of establishing a sort of “economocracy” fulfilling the ancient dream of Saint-Simon, i.e. transferring the power to an elite of economic and social scientists endowed with a high degree of specialization but lacking moral and cultural awareness. On the contrary, they have to act as intellectuals *tout court*, making “the logic of things heard the midst of the passions and interests of public life”, countering “illusions and confusions”, “political enthusiasm”, “demagogy” and “mass myths”, separating “the road to freedom, humanity, and unswerving truth” from the one “to serfdom, violation of human nature, and falsehood” (Röpke 1960: 149-150). Moreover, if the rational expositions are not enough, it is not embarrassing for an academic to evoke dangers and to raise fear, by addressing - just like Röpke in his discourse about the crisis - to the emotions of the human beings.

4. Fear and European integration

Röpke’s reflection on the European integration is an excellent example of the role fear plays in his political thought. His 1940s “trilogy” considers the hypothesis of re-founding the European and international relations on a liberal basis. On the one hand, Röpke denounces the danger of “a genuine World State in which the present day nations shall have renounced their sovereignty”, an omnipotent and collectivist actor corresponding to “those conditions on this planet which no words can describe in all its frightfulness” (Röpke 1948: 226, 232). On the other hand, he criticizes the anarchical scenario of the mere “coexistence of sovereign nations” with an unlimited power (Röpke 1946: 40). A European or Western federation, whose institutional features are not specified by the author, could constitute a “third way” between these extremes (Quirico 2017a).

After the adoption of the Schuman Plan (1950), Röpke’s writings deal with the functionalist approach inspiring the process of community integration (Warneke 2013; Quirico 2016) and appeal to the “destructive” side of fear to contest its fundamental principles. Firstly, the High Authority of the European

Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) is judged as “a supranational planning authority” incompatible with “an order of free nations”, since it tries to establish a supranational authoritarian collectivism that is - if possible - more dangerous than the national one (Röpke 1951: 288-293). Secondly, even the project of a European Economic Community (EEC) - partially different from the ECSC experience - implies “a whole apparatus of international concentration, conglomeration, uniformity, and economic planning” opposing the human passion for freedom and variety (Röpke 1960: 242). Thirdly, the European Communities follow the model of the customs union, which risks to transform the continent into a “great space” (*Großraum*, a term echoing the language of Carl Schmitt) isolated from the rest of the world (Röpke 1952: 5). Fourthly, the ECC system of institutional bodies has a monstrous face that Röpke compares to a “bureaucracy with a thousand heads” frustrating individuals when they take part in the common market (Röpke 1959b: 10). Finally, functionalism hides “the danger of *economocracy* [...] transferred from the national level to the international level. It means the yet stronger and more inescapable domination of the planners, statisticians, and econometricians”, and particularly of French technocrats à la Monnet, who are permeated by the “spirit of Saint-Simonism” and aim to implement it at the European level (Röpke 1960: 243; Röpke 1963: 280).

In order to outline an alternative way to the European unity Röpke resorts again to fear, but he highlights its “constructive” side. In 1945, when a rift occurs between the Allies of the II World War, the Europeans feel the necessity of defending themselves against “the external danger” coming from the Soviet communism and this could be the core of “a sort of European patriotism” (Röpke 1946: 36). It consists in a “feeling of moral and spiritual solidarity” - forged by a common history, including wars and crises - and in a “specific way of living and thinking” that made Europe “the home of humanity, tolerance, reason and religious veneration” (Röpke 1946: 38-39). To Röpke Europe is not only an economic concept, but also “a moral and spiritual community anchored in the Christian and humanistic tradition” (Röpke 1952: 1), that - especially during the cold war - understands “the necessity of uniting all political and spiritual forces in Europe in elementary defence against the imperialism of world Communism as organized and directed by Russia” (Röpke 1959a: 51).

In 1950s, with the beginning of decolonization, the international threats seem to increase. Röpke writes: “it is self-evident that our continent must consolidate [...] not solely in opposition to the common foe of the entire free world, but also within the great defensive front of the West and in coming to terms with the coloured peoples”; and Europa could not achieve this goal by means of the community integration favouring centralization, but according to the “old-fashioned view”, that means

regaining its self-confidence, reviving its political and military power, and bethinking itself of the spirit and great heritage in the joint safekeeping of all Europeans [...]: unity in diversity, freedom in solidarity, respect for the human personality and for distinctions and particularities (Röpke 1960: 244).

Such a Europe would be stronger also within the United Nations Organization; otherwise UNO risks “to become an instrument of power (*Herrschaft*) of the non-Europeans on the Europeans” (Röpke 2000: 6).

Thus, Röpke’s discourse on the European integration shows an ambivalent character. On the one hand, his attack to the community method is carried out in the name of freedom - threatened by the latent authoritarianism of functionalism - and internationalism, countered by the new protectionism realized by the EEC. On the other hand, his emphasis on the external dangers is able to product a “constructive fear”, by virtue of which Europeans could develop a common identity distinguishing them from other peoples. Nevertheless, this mechanism induces Röpke to theorize a moral supremacy and to legitimate the particular interests that Europe and the West have to defend in the international arena, substantially denying the multilateral and cooperative purpose they claim. Consequently, the European unity would not fulfil the teachings of the wide-opened and internationalist liberalism, but a gloomy and realistic vision, close to the idea of a “fortress Europe” besieged by its fears.

5. Conclusion: the paradox of fear

The starting point of Röpke’s discourse is the crisis afflicting Europe and the West in the XX century. It has spiritual and moral features, since it is the result of the eclipse of the European and Western civilization, whose values are declining. However, the crisis has also political, social and economic dimensions, expressed by massification, centralization, collectivism and illiberal democracy.

The German scholar makes it clear that this degeneration has to be imagined as a process that is not finished. Humanity lives a condition of pre-collectivism and pre-totalitarianism that will shift to full collectivism and full totalitarianism without any concrete intervention. The European and Western citizens are called to recognize the turning point they are facing. On the one hand, they may choose to go on the road to collectivism and serfdom, to quote the famous book of Hayek. On the other hand, they have the possibility of stopping the process and diverting its direction. That means to oppose collectivism and authoritarianism by restoring liberalism as a new humanism.

Fear is the weapon the intellectuals use to influence this decision. Consequently, Röpke aims to scare his readers emphasizing the dangers connected to the crisis. In so far as the citizens react against the threats and

support the neo-liberal restoration, fear actually shows its constructive side.

The author adopts a similar approach with reference to the process of European integration emerging after the II world war, which he criticizes for two main reasons. Firstly, the functionalist method is destined to drive the Communities towards an oppressive European Superstate. Secondly, the institutional model of the customs union will divide Europe from the rest of the world. Spreading fear of authoritarianism and isolation seems to be the best way for countering this kind of integration.

Fear, however, is even the key element of a different construction, according to which a genuine European unity - inspired by the Western culture and characterized by a political objective - could be built only against some external enemies, i.e. the Soviet and communist bloc, but also the various States menacing the European hegemony within the international institutions. This argument conveys the paradoxical nature of the rhetoric based on fear. On the one hand, it maintains a constructive side in the light of which Röpke shares the positive goal of uniting Europe in the name of peace, freedom, democracy and solidarity. On the other hand, that actor would develop precarious or conflicting relations with many other countries; jeopardizing the liberal internationalism that Röpke himself evokes to blame the political and economic structure of the functionalist communities.

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