The name and thought of Wilhelm Röpke awakens in me memories of the most tragic phase of German history, of a time when not a single star seemed to light over Germany, and the indispensable ultimate values of every human society and practice – truth, justice, and morality – were trodden under foot. In these inconsolable straits and in the most disturbing possible environment, I illegally obtained Röpke's books . . . which I absorbed as the desert drinks life-giving water.

Ludwig Erhard (1967, p. 22)

These words, spoken by the principal architect of West Germany’s economic resurrection after the abyss of World War II at a memorial service in 1967, exemplify the regard in which the person and writings of the German economist, Wilhelm Röpke, was held by many of his contemporaries. Though readers will soon discover that I am critical – sometimes quite critical – of aspects of Röpke’s thought, even Röpke’s critics find it difficult not to admire the scope and depth of his political economy. This went beyond superficial familiarity with subjects outside the realm of economic science, so much so that Röpke often unpretentiously assumed that others were as familiar with history, philosophy and ancient languages as himself and was shocked when he discovered that this was not the case among some of his students (Röpke, 1949f). If ever the much-overused expression ‘Renaissance man’ was applicable to any individual, Röpke merited it. He was one of the last great polymaths.

Nor is it possible to underplay Röpke’s courage as a man and a scholar. Against National Socialist and Communist totalitarianism Röpke spoke out fearlessly and at considerable personal risk at a time when many intellectuals proved all too willing to acquiesce with authoritarian regimes. Though Röpke and another prominent twentieth-century economic liberal, Friedrich von Hayek, had a falling out in the early 1960s, Hayek did not hesitate to write the following about his erstwhile friend and colleague: ‘let me emphasize a special gift for which we, his colleagues, admire him particularly – perhaps because it is so rare among scholars: his courage, his moral courage’ (Hayek [1959] 1992, p. 197). Similar sentiments were expressed by another well-known liberal economist, Ludwig von Mises, with whom Röpke had substantial intellectual disagreements: ‘[T]he future historians of our age will have to say that he was not only a great scholar, a successful teacher and a faithful friend, but first of all a
fearless man who was never afraid to profess what he considered to be true and right' (Mises, 1966b, p. 200).

To political leaders, Röpke did not hesitate to present hard truths about their economic policies. This was especially evident during the post-war period when neo-Keynesian ideas dominated economics and to question this consensus was to put oneself at odds with most policy-makers in the Western world. To the economics profession, Röpke insisted that economic science did not and could not encapsulate the whole truth about man and society. He also maintained that any claim to value-neutrality on the part of economics was itself unscientific, and stressed that economics should not be reduced to being a poor cousin of applied mathematics. Not all political leaders and economists react well to such arguments. But being ‘politically correct’ was never Röpke’s forte. He set a standard for integrity which, his biographers concur, cost him a great deal.

Today Röpke continues to be a subject of considerable controversy, with numerous groups in Europe and the Americas laying claim to his legacy. This may owe something to Röpke’s conception of political economy, which harkens back to an older, perhaps richer way of understanding and doing economics. The number of institutions willing to entertain political economy in the fuller, more classical sense of this expression is almost as limited as those which promote the history of economic thought. The Acton Institute is such a place, and, if one may say so, it is perhaps one of the few institutions today where Röpke himself might have found a congenial environment in which to pursue political economy as he understood it. Therefore, I would like to express my gratitude to the Acton Institute for its support of this book.

There are many individuals whose contributions to this project must also be acknowledged. As well as the original proposal’s anonymous referees whose comments substantially improved the text, my thanks for intellectual input (witting and unwitting) are due to Dennis Bark, Philip Booth, Alejandro Chafuen, John Finnis, J. Daniel Hammond, Carlos Hoevel, Kęstutis Kėvalas, Annette Kirk, Kishore Jayabalan, Kris Mauren, Michael Miller, Michael Novak, Marcelo Resico, Andrea Schneider, Amity Shlaes, Robert A. Sirico and Jeffrey Tucker. Particular thanks are extended to William Campbell, Leonard Liggio and Christian Watrin for their assistance with obtaining difficult-to-find materials relevant to this book.

Then there are the numerous graduate and undergraduate students in Europe, the United States and Latin America with whom themes of this book have been tested through the cut-and-thrust of vigorous discussion. I hope that they benefit from – and vigorously critique – the result. Röpke,
I have discovered, is one of those rare free-market economists to whom students quickly warm.

On a personal and intellectual level, my most significant debt is, as always, to my wife, Ingrid A. Gregg. As a historian of the Scottish Enlightenment, she was always available for me to ask questions or test untried notions. As my life’s companion, her moral and personal support is inestimable.

Finally, a note about sources: this book is for English-speaking audiences. It therefore utilizes as far as possible the extensive body of English-language translations of Röpke’s writings as the primary sources before turning to texts published in other languages, most notably German and French. It is also the case that many of Röpke’s works were published in several editions. In some instances, Röpke added and modified considerable sections of text in successive editions. In the cases where this occurs and provides fresh insights into Röpke’s thought, this is noted.

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