Modern Intellectual History (2026), 1–22
doi:10.1017/S1479244326100638

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FORUM

"Idyllischer Gartenzwergkapitalismus": A Distinct Ordoliberal Environmental Framework?

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(Received 19 February 2025 UTC; revised 22 February 2026 UTC; accepted 29 March 2026 UTC)

This article offers a systematic and critical analysis of ordoliberal engagements with nature. Drawing on published and unpublished writings, private correspondence, and public addresses of key ordoliberal thinkers, primarily Alexander Rüstow and Wilhelm Röpke, it argues that their environmental thought was neither a precocious ecological awareness nor a coherent policy program, but rather a deeply romantic and conservative cultural critique of modern industrial society. Situating ordoliberalism within the broader intellectual milieu of Lebensphilosophie *and the Conservative Revolution, the article traces how environmental ideas were embedded within their civilizational critique of modernity, functioning as a normative benchmark for social and cultural order. It further demonstrates how their conception of nature served to naturalize social hierarchy and legitimize a parochial vision of small-scale, locally embedded communities that proved increasingly difficult to reconcile with the economic realities they simultaneously promoted.*

Introduction

> A metropolitan child doesn't even know what it means to be a child. To be a child means to play in the fields, amidst grass and trees and birds and butterflies, under the endless canopy of a blue sky … to live with the seasons, the first snow and the first colt's foot, the cherry blossom and the cherry harvest, the scent of flowering crops and dry grass, and how it tickles one's bare feet.[1]

This excerpt from Wilhelm Röpke's *Jenseits von Angebot und Nachfrage* (1958) reveals the deeply romantic and poetic dimension of ordoliberal thought, conceiving of nature as a world of sensory experience and seasonal rhythm. Passages such as these have fueled the argument that ordoliberalism's early architects exhibited a precocious "ecological awareness."[2] Indeed, present-day supporters of ordoliberalism view the

[1] Wilhelm Röpke, *Jenseits von Angebot und Nachfrage* (Zurich, 1958), 103.

[2] According to Franz Kromka, "Das Grüne Denken der Väter der sozialen Marktwirtschaft," *Zeitschrift für Politik* 39/3 (1992), 264–85; see also Helge Peukert, "Wilhelm Röpke: Co-founder of the Social

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work of Röpke and his colleagues as representing the "avant-garde" of the twenty-first-century green economy and providing a "robust institutional framework" for addressing climate change.[3] This perspective has transcended academia, suffusing across the political spectrum in Germany and influencing even the erstwhile radical Green Party, whose members have called for "green ordoliberalism" or an "an ecological social market economy."[4] Similarly, Herman Scheer, a Social Democrat who played a key role in instigating the *Energiewende* in Germany, consistently advocated for an "ordoliberal framework for a socially acceptable power supply."[5]

These references have often been made without a precise understanding of what ordoliberalism historically entailed or how its leading thinkers engaged with environmental questions.[6] Existing scholarship has either marginalized environmental concerns within ordoliberal thought or projected current environmental agendas onto the interwar period without first reconstructing this intellectual milieu in which ordoliberal ideas developed.[7] As a result, the environmental dimensions of ordoliberalism remain undertheorized and historically underexamined. This article offers a systematic and critical analysis of ordoliberal engagements with nature, tracing how environmental ideas were embedded within their broader civilizational critique of modernity.

Ordoliberalism emerged in the 1930s, born from the ideas of Freiburg school economists, most famously Walter Eucken, who, together with his wife Edith Eucken-Erdsieck and other intellectuals such as Alexander Rüstow, a sociologist and economist; Wilhelm Röpke, a social critic and nominee for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1965; and Alfred Müller-Armack, who would become one of Chancellor Ludwig Erhard's principal advisers and coin the term "social market economy," came to develop a new

Market Economy and (Human) Ecological Mastermind," in Jürgen G. Backhaus, Günther Chaloupek, and Hans A. Frambach, eds., *Origins and Change of the Social Market Economy: History and Theoretical Foundations* (Cham, 2023), 25–46.

[3]Remi Maier-Rigaud, "Social Policy in an Entrepreneurial Society," in Thomas Biebricher, Peter Nedergaard, and Werner Bonefeld, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Ordoliberalism* (Oxford, 2022), 500–13; Justus Enninga, "Environmentalism, a Flirt with Eco-authoritarianism and the Robustness of Ordoliberalism," *Constitutional Political Economy* 36 (2025), 495–519, at 495.

[4]Ralf Füks, "Ja. Ich bin für einen grünen Ordoliberalismus," interview by Ulf Poschardt, *Die Welt*, 9 April 2013, at www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article115153743/Gruener-Ralf-Fuecks-Ja-Ich-bin-fuer-einen-gruenen-Ordoliberalismus.html; Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, "Von der sozialen zur sozial-ökologischen Marktwirtschaft" (2022), at www.gruene.de/artikel/von-der-sozialen-zur-sozial-oekologischen-marktwirtschaft.

[5]Hermann Scheer, *The Energy Imperative: 100 Percent Renewable Now* (Abingdon, 2011), 141.

[6]The few German-language studies that have examined the issue more closely (see note 2 above) have tended to do so uncritically, framing the ordoliberals as "ecological pioneers."

[7]William Callison and Tatjana Söding provide invaluable insights into ordoliberalism and environmentalism, yet their analysis projects ordoliberal thought onto the contemporary political context, resulting in a few minor anachronisms. See William Callison and Tatjana Söding, "A Climate Fit for Capitalism: Ordoliberalism's Political Ecology and German Environmental Politics," *Environmental Politics* 33/6 (2024), 997–1018. For more explicitly anachronistic accounts see Martin Dahl, "Ordoliberal Roots of Ecological Market Economy," *Review of Economic and Business Studies* 11 (2018), 115–29.

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and more contextually informed economic liberalism.[8] The instability of the Weimar period in particular reinforced the ordoliberals' preoccupation with order and with insulating politics from the encroachment of organized economic interests, which they believed had come to dominate contemporary economic and public life.[9] This underscored their broader commitment to institutional stability—indeed, they conceived competition as a stabilizing and ordering principle that, when properly structured, would prevent concentrations of economic power and promote both economic efficiency and social harmony.[10] Ordoliberals thus believed that the market's "invisible hand" depended on the visible hand of good government.[11] The liberal state formed the indispensable foundation of a free economy: a political authority tasked with designing and maintaining the framework within which competition could operate as an ordering principle.[12]

Alongside this, ordoliberals aimed to construct a social order capable of cushioning the more disruptive social effects of their market economy, thereby stabilizing society and ensuring that their competitive order could operate without provoking social conflict. Among the ordoliberals, Rüstow and Röpke were the principal architects of this social framework. Their efforts extended beyond social policy to broader reflections on moral cohesion, cultural stability, and the importance of nature. Accordingly, they engaged more extensively than their ordoliberal colleagues with environmental questions. In their thought, parochialism and closeness to nature were central components of a framework for social stability, depicted by economist Helge Peukert as "idyllic garden gnomecapitalism" (*idyllischer Gartenzwergkapitalismus*).[13] This makes their work a particularly revealing lens through which to examine how ordoliberalism contended with environmental concerns.

This article examines the published and unpublished writings, private correspondence, public addresses and conference presentations of, primarily, Rüstow and Röpke, as well as Eucken and Müller-Armack, during the inter- and postwar years in order

[8]Other important members were his student Leonhard Miksch and the lawyer Franz Böhm. The term "ordoliberalism" was introduced in 1950 by Eucken's colleague, the Tübingen economist Hero Moeller, who derived it from the journal *ORDO: Jahrbuch für die Ordnung von Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. This was the principal academic outlet of ordoliberal thought, founded in 1948 by Eucken and Böhm. Over a decade later, in the foreword to the twelfth volume of *ORDO* (1961), the ordoliberals formally adopted Moeller's term as their own. The term itself invokes the Latin concept of *ordo*.

[9]See, for example, Alexander Rüstow, "Diktatur innerhalb der Grenzen der Demokratie," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 7 (1929), 87–111; Walter Eucken, "Staatliche Strukturwandlungen und die Krisis des Kapitalismus," *Weltwirtschaftliches Archiv* 36 (1932), 297–321; Eucken, *This Unsuccessful Age* (Edinburgh, London, and Glasgow, 1951).

[10]Walter Eucken, *Nationalökonomie—wozu?* (Stuttgart, 1938); Eucken, "Der Wettbewerb als Grundprinzip der Wirtschaftsverfassung," in Günter Schmölders, ed., *Der Wettbewerb als Mittel volkswirtschaftlicher Leistungssteigerung und Leistungsauslese* (Berlin, 1942), 1–29.

[11]Thomas Biebricher, Peter Nedergaard, and Werner Bonefeld, "Introduction: Why a Handbook on Ordoliberalism?", in Biebricher, Nedergaard, and Bonefeld, *Handbook of Ordoliberalism*, xix–xxiv, at xxi.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Helge Peukert, "Wilhelm Röpke als Pionier einer ökologischen Ökonomik," in Heinz Rieter and Joachim Zweynert, eds., *"Wort und Wirkung": Wilhelm Röpkes Bedeutung für die Gegenwart* (Marburg, 2009), 163–203, at 176.

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to reconstruct their approach to environmental questions. Although previous scholarship has explored the conservative and biopolitical aspects of their thought, this article reexamines the material through an environmental lens and brings forward new and previously underexamined sources that engage explicitly with environmental themes.[14] This article will first situate ordoliberal thought within the broader intellectual milieu shaped by *Lebensphilosophie* and the Conservative Revolution, in which debates about nature, vitality, and the relationship between humans and the environment were intensely contested. This contextualization provides the basis for analyzing the ordoliberals' environmentally inflected, vitalist cultural critique of Enlightenment rationality. The article then delineates the contours of their environmental critique, including its aesthetic dimensions and its treatment of nature—and its destruction—as a normative benchmark. It then explores their critique of the "Cult of the Colossal" and the normative value they attributed to "smallness." Finally, it demonstrates how their conception of social hierarchy derived legitimacy from a corresponding vision of natural order.

Lebensphilosophie and the vitalist foundations of ordoliberalism

Ordoliberals grounded their understanding of nature in *Lebensphilosophie*, a tradition that Rudolf Eucken, Walter Eucken's father, helped shape as one of its leading figures in Germany.[15] Rudolf won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1908 for "proclaim[ing] the failure of materialism," as a Belgian newspaper detailed.[16] He advocated *schöpferischer Aktivismus*, according to which philosophy was to awaken and activate the spiritual life force of humanity.[17] He argued that the nineteenth century's turn toward empiricism marked a decisive shift in humanity's orientation: modern culture turned away from an "invisible" world of metaphysical and religious meaning and toward the "visible" world of empirical, material existence.[18] He believed that scientific rationalism, industrial expansion, and social utilitarianism increasingly directed attention to what could be observed, measured, and mastered.[19] Thus he claimed that meaning came to be sought within worldly reality itself, above all in work and productivity, rather than in transcendent or spiritual ideals.[20] The ordoliberals also emphatically engaged with

[14]Kenneth Dyson, *Conservative Liberalism, Ordo-liberalism, and the State* (Oxford, 2021); Thomas Biebricher, "The Biopolitics of Ordoliberalism," *Foucault Studies* 12 (2011), 171–91; Biebricher, "Ordoliberalism and Conservatism," in Biebricher, Nedergaard, and Bonefeld, *Handbook of Ordoliberalism*, 76–88; Werner Bonefeld, "German Ordo-liberalism and the Politics of Vitality," *Renewal* 20/4 (2013), 35–9; Bonefeld, "Human Economy and Social Policy: On Ordo-liberalism and Political Authority," *History of the Human Sciences* 26/2 (2013), 106–25; Patricia Commun and Stefan Kolev, eds., *Wilhelm Röpke (1899–1966): A Liberal Political Economist and Conservative Social Philosopher* (Cham, 2018).

[15]Rudolf Eucken, *Geschichte und Kritik der Grundbegriffe der Gegenwart* (Leipzig, 1878).

[16]Quoted in Gilles Campagnolo, "Three Influential Western Thinkers during the 'Break-Up' Period in China: Eucken, Bergson, and Dewey," in Hans-Michael Trautwein and Ma Ying, eds., *Thoughts on Economic Development in China* (London, 2013), 101–35, at 112.

[17]Rudolf Eucken, *Grundlinien einer neuen Lebensanschauung* (Leipzig, 1907)

[18]Rudolf Eucken, *Der Sinn und Wert des Lebens* (Leipzig, 1908).

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid.

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Lebensphilosopher outside the German sphere, like Henri Bergson and José Ortega y Gasset, especially in relation to their fears of overpopulation and "the masses."[21]

Eucken stated, "My father recognized the danger to the modern world. He grasped that his time had lost sight of the fundamental standards." He continued that his father sought "in the ever-changing nature of time something solid," values "which are unshakable and provide a sound footing."[22] Present-day ordoliberals Uwe Dathe and Nils Goldschmidt outlined how "Walter Eucken admired and loved his father. He valued Rudolf Eucken's central ideas throughout his life, and his own scholarly work, both in method and in ethical orientation, can only be properly understood on this basis."[23]

This *Lebensphilosophie* served as a precursor to Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, which was also integral to the ordoliberal worldview and their relation to nature.[24] Husserl was a close friend of both Rudolf and Walter and godfather to Walter's daughter Irene.[25] Husserl stated that the nineteenth-century focus on positivist science led to a neglect of deeper human questions, arguing that a science confined to objective facts risked overlooking the meaningful aspects of existence and history's spiritual and moral dimensions.[26]

Inspired by Husserl and Rudolf Eucken, the ordoliberals also identified a significant spiritual and material rupture between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The ordoliberals believed that the eighteenth century was defined by its "warm humanness," its preference for socializing in small circles, its gardening and idealization of rural

[21]Citing Bergson: Wilhelm Röpke, *International Economic Disintegration* (London, 1942), 149; see also Röpke, "A Value Judgment on Value Judgments" (1941), *Journal of Markets and Morality* 18/2 (2015), 497–514. The personal connection between Eucken and Ortega was made by Husserl himself. Röpke met Ortega during a trip to Spain in March 1950 and Eucken corresponded with him frequently, offering to invite him to the 1949 Mont Pèlerin Society conference in Seelisberg, Switzerland. See Wilhelm Röpke, "'End of an Era,' Lecture, Frankfurt am Main (1933)," in Röpke, *Against the Tide*, trans. Elizabeth Henderson (Chicago, 1969), 79–100; Edith Eucken-Erdsiek, "Sinn und Sinnverkehrung in der modernen Technik: Zu Ortega y Gassets 'Betrachtungen über die Technik'," *ORDO: Jahrbuch für die Ordnung von Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* 3 (1950), 333–9; see also Alec Dinnin, "Ortega y Gasset: The Fear of Mass Society," in Biebricher, Nedergaard, and Bonefeld, *Handbook of Ordoliberalism*, 230–42.

[22]Eucken quoted in Nils Goldschmidt, "Walter Eucken's Place in the History of Ideas," *Review of Austrian Economics* 26/2 (2013), 127–47, at 142.

[23]Uwe Dathe and Nils Goldschmidt, "Wie der Vater, so der Sohn? Neuere Erkenntnisse zu Walter Euckens Leben und Werk anhand des Nachlasses von Rudolf Eucken in Jena," *Freiburg Discussion Papers on Constitutional Economics* 3/8 (2003), 9, at www.eucken.de/app/uploads/03_8bw.pdf.

[24]The personal and ideological relationship between Eucken and Husserl has been extensively researched. See, for example, Rainer Klump and Manuel Wörsdörfer, "On the Affiliation of Phenomenology and Ordoliberalism: Links between Edmund Husserl, Rudolf and Walter Eucken," *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 18/ 4 (2011), 551–78; Hans-Helmuth Gander, Nils Goldschmidt, and Uwe Dathe, *Phänomenologie und die Ordnung der Wirtschaft* (Würzburg, 2009); Timo Miettinen, "Phenomenology and Political Idealism," *Continental Philosophy Review* 48/2 (2015), 237–53; Johanna Oksala, "Foucault, Husserl and the Philosophical Roots of German Neoliberalism," *Continental Philosophy Review* 49/1 (2016), 115–26.

[25]Dathe and Goldschmidt, "Vater," 19.

[26]Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (1936), trans. David Carr (Evanston, 1970), 6.

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life[27] Röpke opined that the nineteenth century, on the other hand, "Abandons itself to the intoxication of sheer numbers, brutal strength, restless busyness, sterile excitement, enormous dimensions, reverence of strength, legitimization through sheer quantitative size, boundlessness, mechanical organization and centralization, aimless development, which is determined by factors outside and above man, the massive, overloaded and elephantine."[28] The ordoliberals believed that, while the nineteenth century successfully universalized the ideals of freedom and equal rights, it also severed individuals from their religious and community bonds, filling the resulting inner void with an overvaluation of material concerns.[29]

Müller-Armack argued that the onslaught of secular, rationalist-domineering ideas saw interactions move away from social obligation to rational desires for acquisition and categorization.[30] The *esprit géométrique* fostered by Enlightenment thought had transcended the scientific domain, which, to the ordoliberals, had become increasingly inflated in society, to influence social and economic action as well.[31] Echoing his father, Eucken claimed that "the belief in gods, giants and spirits, which used to dominate man's relationship, with nature was replaced by the rationality of science, a belief that has taken root and expanded into the realms of society and the economy as well."[32]

The ordoliberals argued that this instrumental rationality came to dominate the human relationship with nature as well. Rüstow decried how the "mastery of nature is still considered a justified, self-evident good," warning that the irreparable and irreversible consequences of this will be detrimental not only to nature but also to humanity.[33] He claimed that "the secrets of nature are no longer marveled at in a reverent way but rather, are cunningly stalked; to overpower them man behaves like a hunter, almost like a burglar."[34] Such statements reflect a vitalist conception of nature, which rejected its reduction to a mere object of domination and regarded it as indispensable to both human flourishing and social stability.

[27]Wilhelm Röpke, *Die Gesellschaftskrisis der Gegenwart* (Zurich, 1942), 109.

[28]Ibid.

[29]Hermann Priebe, *Wer wird die Scheunen fuellen? Sozialprobleme der deutschen Landwirtschaft* (Düsseldorf, 1954), 22.

[30]Alfred Müller-Armack, "Die heutige Gesellschaft nach evalgelischem Verständnis" (1950), in Müller-Armack, *Genealogie der sozialen Marktwirtschaft: Frühschriften und weiterführende Konzepte* (Bern, 1981), 113–23, at 117.

[31]Wilhelm Röpke, *Civitas Humana: A Humane Order of Society*, trans. Cyril Spencer Fox (London, 1948), 53.

[32]Walter Eucken, *Grundsätze der Wirtschaftspolitik* (Tübingen, 1952), 18.

[33]Alexander Rüstow, *Freedom and Domination: A Historical Critique of Civilization*, trans. Salvator Attanasio (Princeton, 1980), 390. This is an English translation of his three-volume magnum opus *Ortsbestimmung der Gegenwart*.

[34]Alexander Rüstow, "Kritik des technischen Fortschritts," *ORDO: Jahrbuch für die Ordnung von Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* 4 (1951), 373–407, at 380.

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The influence of the Conservative Revolution

This conception of nature was also influenced by the "Conservative Revolutionaries" of the Weimar period.[35] The ordoliberals, most notably Röpke, engaged with these new ideas and selectively appropriated certain elements, while explicitly criticizing and distancing themselves from the movement itself.[36] The "Conservative Revolutionaries" articulated a rightist environmental response to the debates on modernity, particularly highlighting the civilizational crisis brought about by technological progress. In *Man and Technics* (1931) Oswald Spengler described technology as "unnatural" and blamed it for the widening rift between humanity and the universe, warning against deforestation, climate change, and extinction.[37]

Similarly, Friedrich Georg Jünger's *Failure of Technology* (1946) condemned the detrimental impact of technology on nature: "The machine invades the landscape with destruction and transformation … Technology darkens the air with smoke, poisons the water, destroys the plants and animals … [it is] the most complete and the most intensive exploitation on a planetary scale."[38] Müller-Armack expressly concurred with Jünger's criticism of technology and maintained that "in the advance of technology … humankind has crossed a boundary."[39] Spengler and Jünger idealized a return to a preindustrial past, expressing a pessimism about Western civilization's future, and endorsed nationalist and antidemocratic ideas as preferable to liberalism. It is therefore evident that, while echoing similar social critiques of technology and modernity, the Conservative Revolutionaries envisioned remedies quite different from those proposed by the ordoliberals.

Spengler and Jünger significantly influenced Martin Heidegger, who argued that modern technology reduces nature and living beings, including humans, to a calculable resource to be exploited, thereby obscuring their intrinsic worth and leading to ecological and existential danger.[40] Though later echoing Heidegger's views on nature, Eucken positioned himself strongly against Heidegger throughout their time at the

[35]Klemens von Klemperer, *Germany's New Conservatism: Its History and Dilemma in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 2015); Larry Eugene Jones, *The German Right in the Weimar Republic: Studies in the History of German Conservatism, Nationalism, and Antisemitism* (New York, 2014).

[36]Röpke explicitly criticized the "Conservative Revolutionaries" as extremists and regarded them as expressions of the very "predilection for excess" and "tendency to go to extremes" that he associated with the spirit of the nineteenth century. Wilhelm Röpke, *Social Crisis of Our Time*, trans. Annette and Peter Schiffer Jacobsohn (Chicago, 1950), 81. For more on Röpke's relationship with the "Conservative Revolutionaries" without any reference to nature see Biebricher, "Ordoliberalism and Conservatism"; Jean Solchany, *Wilhelm Röpke, l'autre Hayek: Aux origines du néolibéralisme* (Paris, 2015).

[37]Oswald Spengler, *Der Mensch und die Technik: Beitrag zu einer Philosophie des Lebens* (Munich, 1931), 35, 94; Oswald Spengler, *Letters, 1913–1936* (London, 1966), 129–30; Peter Staudenmaier, *Ecology Contested: Environmental Politics between Left and Right* (Porsgrunn, 2021), 103.

[38]Friedrich Georg Jünger, *Die Perfektion der Technik* (Frankfurt am Main, 1946), 21, 182; Staudenmaier, *Ecology Contested*, 73.

[39]Alfred Müller-Armack, *Diagnose unserer Gegenwart: Zur Bestimmung unseres geistesgeschichtlichen Standort* (Bern and Stuttgart, 1949), 165; Kromka, "Grüne Denken," 265.

[40]Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays* (1954), trans. William Lovitt (New York, 1977). Especially the first essay, "The Question Concerning Technology," found at 3–35. See also Michael E. Zimmerman, "Rethinking the Heidegger–Deep Ecology Relationship," *Environmental Ethics* 15/3 (1993), 195–224; Magdalena Holy-Luczaj, "Heidegger's Support for Deep Ecology Reexamined Once Again:

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University of Freiburg in the 1930s and 1940s. Eucken, who was professor at Freiburg from 1927 until his death in 1950, was a vocal opponent of Heidegger, who was rector of the university from 1933 to 1934.[41] Nevertheless, Heidegger and the ordoliberals articulated similar critiques of technology, with Röpke criticizing what he saw as the "pseudo-religious belief in technology as the pacemaker and indictor of progress."[42] Rüstow dedicated an entire essay in the 1951 publication of *ORDO* to *Kritik des technischen Fortschritts*, finding that "knowledge is power, and this power is wrestled from nature and is exercised and proven through technical application."[43] Müller-Armack also firmly believed that it is "necessary to avoid succumbing to a form of technological advancement that distorts life."[44]

The ordoliberals observed how technological progress was causing irreparable damage to nature, with Röpke noting how "we abuse nature at every turn, even to the total disappearance of the countryside."[45] He deplored how we "rob nature of her mysteries" and how every shrub or "excessive" tree is wiped out.[46] He continued, "we have no regard for tree or beast and treat them like materials or machines … one valley after another is submerged under the reservoirs of power stations so that more men can shave with electric razors or kill time in front of television screens."[47] He decried the destruction of "Africa's magnificent wildlife" and how "one species of birds after another, except the very commonest, capitulates before man," warning that "the day may not be far off when we shall be able to show animals to our grandsons only in picture books or in the zoo."[48]

Edith Eucken-Erdsiek cited Spengler's warnings that humans will be "overthrown" and "dragged to death" by the might and speed of technological innovation.[49] However, she echoed the general ordoliberal sentiment against determinism, calling Spengler's

Ontological Egalitarianism, or Farewell to the Great Chain of Being," *Ethics and the Environment* 20/1 (2015), 45–66.

[41] Nils Goldschmidt and Hermann Rauchenschwandtner, "The Philosophy of Social Market Economy: Michel Foucault's Analysis of Ordoliberalism," *Journal of Contextual Economics—Schmollers Jahrbuch* 138/2 (2018), 157–84. For more on the relationship between the ordoliberals and Heidegger (offering a very biased account of ordoliberals opposition to the Nazis) see Walter Oswalt, "Liberale Opposition gegen den NS-Staat zur Entwicklung von Walter Euckens Sozialtheorie," in Nils Goldschmidt, ed., *Wirtschaft, Politik und Freiheit: Freiburger Wirtschaftswissenschaftler und der Widerstand* (Tübingen, 2005), 315–54; Nils Goldschmidt, "Die Entstehung der Freiburger Kreise," *Historisch-Politische Mitteilungen* 4 (1997), 1–7; Bernd Martin, "Die Universität Freiburg im Breisgau im Jahre 1933 eine Nachlese zu Heideggers Rektorat," *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins* 136 (1988), 445–77.

[42] Wilhelm Röpke, *Mass und Mitte* (Zurich, 1950), 219.

[43] Rüstow, "Kritik des technischen Fortschritts," 380.

[44] Alfred Müller-Armack, "Rationalisierung und Wirtschaftspolitik," talk given at exhibition titled Alle sollen besser leben (1953), Carton 01-236, Alfred Müller-Armack Papers, Archive for Christian Democratic Policy, Sankt Augustin.

[45] Röpke, *Jenseits*, 124.

[46] Ibid., 110.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid, 124.

[49] Eucken-Erdsiek, "Ortega y Gasset," 337.

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"proud skepticism" of technology and the outright refusal to find a solution "snobbery."[50] She also described Jünger's "absolute rejection of technology, which escalates almost to hatred," as "unrealistic romanticism."[51] Though at times harboring romantic views of the past, the ordoliberals did not reject technology outright. It was the prioritization of technological progress and economic efficiency over traditional social values that the ordoliberals took issue with. They maintained that technological development must remain confined within clearly defined social limits—*à la taille de l'homme*—and unfold at a steady pace.[52]

Eucken and his ordoliberal contemporaries, much like Husserl, warned against Spengler's fatalistic view of history, regarding this as inclined towards nihilism and as embodying the point of view that it was "foolish to pit oneself against the relentless course of events or to stand up for an idea."[53] Röpke went as far as saying that the representatives of the Conservative Revolution, like Spengler, were predecessors of National Socialism.[54] Furthermore, Spengler's advocacy for a "Prussian state socialism" was starkly different to the ordoliberal framework that emerged a decade later.[55] Spengler advocated for an authoritarian state grounded in Prussian traditions, emphasizing duty, order, and justice over "Western ideals" like freedom and equality.[56]

In contrast, although the ordoliberals also exhibited authoritarian tendencies, their vision of the "strong state" was intended, amongst other things, to prevent the centralization of economic power. While the ordoliberals also rejected the pursuit of equality as a "leftist" political objective, they upheld freedom as paramount, advocating the competitive free market as its highest manifestation.[57] For the ordoliberals, freedom stood above all other political values. In their view, attempts to realize material equality first would require coercive state power, while a competitive market order, though never fully egalitarian, would produce the greatest prosperity and an allegedly socially acceptable degree of justice.[58] While they shared with the Conservative Revolutionaries broader anxieties about civilizational decline and its effects on the human relationship with nature, the ordoliberals articulated a distinct response rooted in liberal principles.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid.

[52]Röpke, *Disintegration,* 228.

[53]Walter Eucken, Franz Böhm, and Hans Grossmann-Doerth, "The Ordo Manifesto of 1936," in Alan T. Peacock and Hans Willgerodt, eds., *Germany's Social Market Economy: Origins and Evolution* (Basingstoke, 1989), 15–26, at 19.

[54]Solchany, *Wilhelm Röpke,* 125.

[55]Frans Willem Lantink, "Cultural Pessimism and Liberal Regeneration? Wilhelm Röpke as an Ideological In-Between in German Social Philosophy," in Commun and Kolev, *Wilhelm Röpke*, 187–200, at 193.

[56]Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (Munich, 1932); Spengler, *Preussentum und Sozialismus* (Munich, 1920).

[57]See Arne Käthner's exploration of the 1950 Mont Pèlerin Society meeting on equality. Franz Böhm argued that attempting to achieve material equality would necessitate totalitarianism and should therefore not be sought after. Arne Käthner, *German Neoliberalism from 1924 to 1963: The Semantic Counter-revolution of Transnational Elite Networks* (Cham, 2024), 197. See also Leonhard Miksch, "Die Sittliche Bedeutung der inneren Koordination," *ORDO* 3 (1950), 29–73.

[58]Käthner, *German Neoliberalism*, 197; Franz Böhm, "Zerfällt die freie Welt oder Zerfällt der Kommunismus?", in *Hat der Westen eine Idee? Vorträge auf d. 7. Tagung d. Aktionsgemeinsch. Soziale Marktwirtschaft am 8. Mai 1957 in Bad Godesberg* (Ludwigsburg, 1957), 43.

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Vitalpolitik

Central to the ordoliberal agenda was the social policy of *Vitalpolitik*, which complemented their free-market order. *Vitalpolitik*, primarily developed by Rüstow, aimed to cultivate human vitality through education, community, and closeness to nature, and to imbue both individual lives and the broader social fabric with cohesion and purpose.[59] *Vitalpolitik* was a "politics of life" that aimed to address everything beyond the market and counteract the disruptive moral forces of capitalism.[60] The ordoliberals recognized that the market was an amoral mechanism. Although they believed competition to be conducive to morality, pushing everyone to be the best version of themselves, and that competitive markets ensured fair starting conditions and equal opportunities for individuals, they also thought that other initiatives needed to be put in place to ensure the "vital situation" of the population.

For Rüstow, this would primarily be realized through a settlement policy (*Siedlungspolitik*) that enabled families to acquire homesteads with small gardens, promoting self-sufficiency.[61] This offered an alternative to state social-security provisions, which the ordoliberals believed created large, impersonal bureaucracies that disempowered individuals. They argued that individual well-being depended on factors beyond wages or state support, advocating for a shift in state policies away from redistributive measures.[62] The ordoliberal desire to "embed" individuals, particularly those from lower social classes, in a specific societal and environmental framework also aimed to maintain social stability and control while preventing any sympathies for "socialist" policies.[63] From their perspective, direct social provision distorted the market by replacing the price mechanism with centralized bureaucratic decision making, allowing organized interests to shape outcomes. The outcome they feared was a welfare system that stifled competition and fostered dependency, discouraging people from working. According to the ordoliberals a nonpartisan and transparent market order that enabled individuals to compete on equal terms and advance through their own initiative represented the most efficient and equitable solution to the problem of income and wealth distribution.

Ordoliberals conceived *Vitalpolitik* as a remedy to the persistent threat that industrial society posed to the integrity of the "human personality."[64] As Eucken's student Leonard Miksch claimed, while the technological revolution had vastly expanded

[59] Alexander Rüstow, "Vitalpolitik gegen Vermassung," in Albert Hunold, ed., *Masse und Demokratie* (Erlenbach and Zurich, 1957), 215–38. See also Bonefeld, "German Ordo-liberalism and the Politics of Vitality"; Bonefeld, "Human Economy and Social Policy."

[60] Alexander Rüstow, "Ortsbestimmung der Gegenwart," talk held for RadioBern on 26th October 1952, in Walter Hoch, ed., *Rede und Antwort: Reden und viele Diskussionsbeiträge aus den Jahren 1932 bis 1962* (Ludwigsburg, 1963), 259–74, at 268.

[61] Rüstow, "Vitalpolitik gegen Vermassung," 230; See also Käthner, *German Neoliberalism*, 254.

[62] Käthner, *German Neoliberalism*, 257.

[63] Alexander Rüstow, "Weltpolitische Forderungen," in *Hat der Westen eine Idee?*, 97.

[64] Walter Eucken, "Religion–Wirtschaft–Staat," *Die Tatwelt* 8/7 (1932), 82–89; Leonhard Miksch, "Die Wirtschaftspolitik des Als-Ob," *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft/Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics* 105/2 (1948), 310–38; Raphaël Fèvre, *A Political Economy of Power: Ordoliberalism in Context, 1932–1950* (New York, 2021), 152.

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humanity's material resources, it had also "damaged its soul."[65] This resulted in "the dissolution of organically developed social structures," leading individuals to experience their environment as "shaped by the impersonal forces of technology."[66] This "estrangement from nature" resulted in a "highly dangerous sociological and anthropological state … in short, by a general devitalization and loss of personality."[67] The detachment from nature was central to the cultural crisis they identified, underscoring the ordoliberals' awareness of the need to preserve nature while also revealing that the focus of their environmental critique was the value it served to humanity. In this sense, their concern for the environment functioned less as an ecological ethic than as an extension of their broader cultural critique of modernity, in which the degradation of nature was symptomatic of a deeper moral and spiritual decline.

Furthermore, their vision of a green, decentralized utopia lacked a clear mechanism for reconciling its communitarian aspirations with the structural imperatives of an increasingly integrated world economy. It remained unclear how this parochial social vision would coexist with the structural demands of a rapidly growing economy and expanding international trade that they simultaneously promoted. Ordoliberals conceived *Vitalpolitik* as a moral and social buffer against what they perceived as the irrationalities of modern capitalism. Yet beyond settlement policy, reconnection with nature, and modest educational reforms, *Vitalpolitik* offered little in the way of concrete transformation. It functioned primarily as a cultural corrective, addressing local and individual practices rather than the structural conditions of society.

Nature as an aesthetic ideal and moral reference

Beyond the practical limitations of *Vitalpolitik*, ordoliberal environmental critique relied heavily on aesthetic framing and thereby carried distinctly elitist undertones. Röpke in particular lamented the disintegration of modern urban life and the emergence of ugly and large concrete buildings to accommodate an expanding population. He recounted how,

> In Europe, the traffic columns are becoming denser, and even the queues at ski lifts are getting longer; the stony ranges of our cities grow upwards and sideways; the very mountain peaks, which Providence seems to have preserved as a last refuge of solitude, are drawn into mass civilization by chairlifts. In Europe, the power shovels of the world of steel and concrete are advancing steadily.[68]

He attributed to modern urban civilization an uncanny power to "destroy all beauty, dignity, harmony, and poetry in its path," invoking agrarian theorist Ralph Borsodi's

[65] Miksch, "Die Wirtschaftspolitik des Als-Ob", 338.

[66] Alfred Müller-Armack, "Die Wirtschaft als determinierender Faktor im Kulturprozess," talk given on the RIAS-Sender Berlin radio station, 1950, Carton 01-236, Alfred Müller-Armack Papers, Archive for Christian Democratic Policy, Sankt Augustin.

[67] Wilhelm Röpke, *The Moral Foundation of Civil Society* (1948), trans. Cyril Spencer Fox (New Brunswick, 1996), 140.

[68] Röpke, *Jenseits*, 69.

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phrase "Ugly Civilization" to capture its essence.[69] For Röpke, the world of "concrete, gasoline, and advertising" was depriving the human spirit of its "essential vitamins of life."[70] He concluded that "our disregard of nature is matched by our disregard of historical beauty and harmony."[71] Modern urban living consisted of a "rootlessness" and "nomadism," the complete opposite of romantic ideals of connections to the "homeland" and the soil.[72]

Röpke's appeal to notions of beauty, dignity, harmony, and poetry reflects a cultural register historically associated with educated elites, for whom the cultivation of aesthetic ideals was attainable, in contrast to the lived realities of working-class urban populations. In framing urban life in terms of "rootlessness" and "nomadism," Röpke cast modern mass society as culturally and morally deficient, setting up a dichotomy between rooted, tradition-bound communities and the alienation of metropolitan existence. Rüstow also supported this perspective, claiming,

> The modern city dweller … no longer knows what homeland [*Heimat*] is, what a landscape is, what a piece of earth is, how it feels to have a home that has existed for generations and is rooted within them, to be born and to die in this home, how it feels to sit under trees planted by their grandfather or great-grandfather, and to plant trees that will give their grandchildren and great-grandchildren fruit and shade.[73]

Aspects of their aesthetic environmental critique operated at a deeper level, functioning as a normative benchmark against which their social and cultural critiques were articulated. When Rüstow or Röpke spoke about the nightmarish traffic jams in modern cities, these phenomena were not mere inconveniences but emblematic of a deeper loss of autonomy. This illustrated how mass urbanization imposed systemic constraints on individual freedom, a trajectory that Röpke likened to Hayek's "road to serfdom."[74] Eucken outlined how these developments were affecting the emergence of a new type of human being, a "mass product whose existence depends on the state."[75] This development was understood as a process of *Vermassung*, massification, which Röpke described as the process in which individuals "are wafted haphazard and mechanically into heaps … devoid of any real inner solidarity and any roots or connection with social standing and milieu, without a genuine sense of community and without leadership on the part of a real and responsible authority standing above the mass."[76]

[69]Ibid., 123.

[70]Ibid.

[71]Ibid., 124.

[72]Wilhelm Röpke, *A Humane Economy: The Social Framework of the Free Market* (Chicago, 1960), 154, 73.

[73]Alexander Rüstow, "Zwischen Kapitalismus und Kommunismus," *ORDO* 2 (1949), 100–69, at 144.

[74]Jamie Peck, "Neoliberalism's Urban Fringe: On the Trail of Actually Imagined Free-Market Cities," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 115/7 (2025), 1674–95, at 1676.

[75]Walter Eucken, "Die Soziale Frage 1948," in Horst Friedrich Wünsche and Derek Rutter, eds., *Standard Texts on the Social Market Economy: Two Centuries of Discussion* (Stuttgart, 1982), 267–76, at 269.

[76]Röpke, *Civitas Humana*, 132–3.

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This fear, closely intertwined with their broader anxiety about "the masses," formed a central theme in the social criticism of international intellectuals during this period and was widely shared among many neoliberals.[77] The image of the broad "masses" as culturally and intellectually deficient was often entangled with a deep skepticism of their tastes and judgment, giving rise to a profound mistrust of their seemingly increasing political influence.[78] *Vitalpolitik* thus did not aim at empowering "the masses" but at restoring the spiritual and existential conditions of the individual—implicitly a morally disciplined bourgeois individual embedded in small-scale communities.

For Röpke, societal "recovery" from *Vermassung* depended upon the reassertion of traditional virtues by elites.[79] He called for a "small but influential group" of leaders, "aristocrats of the common good," or a *nobilitas naturalis*, who would uphold inviolable norms and values on behalf of society.[80] Such figures were to embody a "willingly acknowledged authority," deriving legitimacy from moral example, and an allegedly natural dignity.[81] Participation in the moral and political core of society was thus reserved for a cultivated minority, while broader social strata appeared as objects of guidance rather than agents of self-government. The ordoliberal social order thus fostered a highly selective form of community: one grounded in traditional values, implicit class distinctions, and a constrained conception of freedom. Röpke's green parochial ideal thus offered a normative image of order that failed to engage with the structural complexities of modern mass society and, in doing so, revealed the elitist assumptions embedded in his social vision.

The Cult of the Colossal

Röpke launched an extensive critique against what he termed the "Cult of the Colossal"—a quasi-religious faith in scale and magnitude as intrinsic goods. He characterized this mind-set as a form of worship of the "Great," the assumption that what is largest is necessarily best and most valuable.[82] This also meant contempt for what is outwardly small but inwardly great, the cult of power and homogeneity, the predilection for the superlative in all spheres of cultural life, even in language.[83] This materialized in "population increases, imperialism, socialism, mammoth industries, monopolism, statism, monumental architecture, technical dynamism, mass armies, the concentration of state power, giant cities, massification and even Wagner's operas."[84] Rüstow similarly lamented that in modern society beauty and success could only be measured by its size: the tallest house is the most beautiful and the biggest industrial plant the best, "even if the house comes tumbling down or the plant goes bankrupt the next one

[77] See Käthner, *German Neoliberalism*, 39.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Fèvre, *Political Economy*, 181.

[80] Röpke, *Jenseits*, 193; Stefan Kolev and Nils Goldschmidt, "Kulturpessimismus als Provokation: Wilhelm Röpkes Ringen mit der Moderne," *Zeitschrift für Politik* 67 (2020), 214–34, at 226.

[81] Röpke, *Jenseits*, 192.

[82] Röpke, *Die Gesellschaftskrisis der Gegenwart*, 110.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Ibid.

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will be still taller, the next bigger than ever."[85] Müller-Armack also criticized modern society's obsession with speed, epitomized in the ever-increasing desire for fast cars and planes.[86]

Their criticism of the "Cult of the Colossal" also shaped their opposition to monopolies and large corporations, which they viewed as institutional expressions of excessive scale and concentrated power. Writing as early as 1929, Röpke observed that the wasteful exploitation of resources largely occurs in the hands of monopolists.[87] With the increasing centralization of economic power, large industries and monopolies dictated market behavior often to the detriment of nature's resources. Rüstow detailed how large chemical monopolies contribute to excessive chemicalization of the earth.[88] In this process, he argued that industrial expansion neglected agriculture, soil preservation, and the use of natural fertilizers, thereby causing long-term damage to both farming and soil health.[89]

This also underscored their criticism of unbounded economic growth. Indeed, Ralph Ancil, a conservative American economist dedicated to preserving Röpke's legacy, described Röpke as a conservative de-growther who "would have had little patience for 'hysterical optimists' … praising the rising GDP figures and the growth of the global economy."[90] Although Röpke criticized society's "growth obsession," he did not advance an economic program designed to restrain growth; his intervention remained civilizational and cultural rather than programmatic.[91] Müller-Armack also emphasized how "economic growth leads to increased environmental pollution, expanding depletion of raw-material reserves, drying up of energy sources, and increasingly explosive population growth."[92] However, later he clarified that "total environmental design" in which "the performance and growth of the market economy are to be cut … is misguided and utopian."[93] Ordoliberal critiques of economic growth were not directed at growth as a structural feature of competitive markets, but at the cultural pathologies associated with elevating growth above all other social goals. What they rejected was not expansion within a functioning market order, but the treatment

[85] Rüstow, *Freedom and Domination*, 393.

[86] Alfred Müller-Armack, *Genealogie der Wirtschaftsstile: Die geistesgeschichtlichen Ursprünge der Staats- und Wirtschaftsformen bis zum Ausgang des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 1944), 124.

[87] Wilhelm Röpke, "Staatsinterventionismus," in Johannes Conrad, Ludwig Elster and Adolf Weber, eds., *Handwörterbuch der Staatswissenschaften* (Jena, 1929), 861–82, at 867.

[88] Rüstow, "Kritik des technischen Fortschritts," 395.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ralph Ancil, "The Romanticism of Wilhelm Roepke," *Modern Age* 41/3 (1999), 199–208, at 207. The concept of degrowth emerged in the early 1970s and only crystallized as a distinct academic and political movement in the early 2000s; applying the term retrospectively is thus analytically suggestive but historically anachronistic.

[91] Wilhelm Röpke, "Wir zornigen alten Männer" (1964), in Röpke, *Marktwirtschaft ist nicht genug: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. Hans Jörg Hennecke (Waltrop, 2009), 431–6, at 432.

[92] Alfred Müller-Armack, "Die Soziale Marktwirtschaft und ihre Widersacher" (1972), in Müller-Armack, *Genealogie der sozialen Marktwirtschaft*, 147–61, at 153.

[93] Alfred Müller-Armack, "Der Humane Gehalt der Sozialen Marktwirtschaft" (1973), in Müller-Armack, *Genealogie der sozialen Marktwirtschaft*, 167–76, at 171.

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of quantitative growth as a civilizational end in itself, detached from moral limits and social balance.[94]

For the ordoliberals, bigness was not merely a quantitative measure but a qualitative transformation that produced new social pathologies. Large-scale economic units, mass production, and centralized administrative systems were seen as generating anonymity, concentration of power, and moral irresponsibility, precisely because they exceeded the scale at which individual agency, ethical restraint, and social accountability could be maintained. Smallness, by contrast, was treated as a normative ideal: smaller firms, family-based production, and local communities were believed to preserve responsibility and social cohesion.

This moral economy of scale, where "big" signified domination and abstraction and "small" signified order and human measure, structured their broader social critique while also shaping their understanding of nature.[95] Rather than conceiving of the environment in planetary or systemic terms, ordoliberal thinkers tended to imagine nature as something small-scale, local, and immediately perceptible: farms, forests, villages, and landscapes that could serve as moral and social reference points. Their environmental sensibility thus mirrored their social vision: both were grounded in a preference for limited scale and decentralization and both struggled to engage with forms of environmental degradation or social organization that operated at larger, global levels. While conceptions of nature at the time remained largely local, and global environmental thinking only gained prominence in the 1970s, the ordoliberals advanced an especially parochial vision, grounded in a social ideal of small-scale, locally embedded communities that proved increasingly difficult to reconcile with the economic and political realities of the mid-twentieth century.

Switzerland epitomized this ideal, with Röpke citing Bavarian economist Joseph Hofmiller's claim that it is "no coincidence that the Swiss write such beautiful children's stories: they aren't large city dwellers."[96] Switzerland played a crucial role in

[94]This position contained a latent tension: while warning against the cultural excesses of growth, their competitive economic framework structurally depended on the dynamism and expansion that such growth entails. Furthermore, little of the ordoliberals' *Vitalpolitik* was actually implemented during the apex of their influence in the 1950s and 1960s, as the *Wirtschaftswunder*, which they helped bring about, undermined their vision of a small-scale, decentralized social order. This tension is explored in greater depth in my Ph.D. thesis and in an upcoming article for *Contemporary European History*.

[95]A conceptual comparison of E. F. Schumacher's, *Small Is Beautiful* (1973) to the interwar ordoliberals has also been touched on by scholars. See Andrea Franc, "Wilhelm Röpke's Utopia and Swiss Reality: From Neoliberalism to Neoconservatism," in Commun and Kolev, *Wilhelm Röpke*, 31–40, at 37; Kolev and Goldschmidt, "Kulturpessimismus als Provokation," 227; Charles Rose, "Book Review: Wilhelm Röpke (1899–1966) a Liberal Political Economist and Conservative Social Philosopher: Edited by Patricia Commun and Stefan Kolev," *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 27/2 (2020), 337–9. There are some parallels in Schumacher and Röpke's joint emphasis on manageable structures, "smallness," and responsible stewardship of nature. However, Schumacher adopted a more progressive position, offering a normative critique of market rationality. The parallels therefore largely end with Röpke and Schumacher's shared romantic vision of small-scale, decentralized communities rooted in nature, valuing human-scale economies over bureaucratic control. Furthermore, there was no engagement between Schumacher and the ordoliberals, at least none that is traceable in their published writings.

[96]Röpke, *Jenseits*, 117.

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Röpke's civilizational critique, serving as a tangible example that crystallized his theoretical concepts. Röpke argued that liberalism in Switzerland was not imposed but had naturally evolved from the country's history, culture, and traditions.[97] By framing liberalism as an organic part of Swiss society, he reconciled his rejection of modernity with his embrace of liberalism, viewing it as a natural expression of local values rather than a product of abstract Enlightenment ideals. Röpke idealized the political and economic system developed in Switzerland, with its "strong, independent and well-educated peasantry, its stock of highly trained artisans and small merchants, [and] its decentralized industry."[98] There was also a pronounced admiration for Swiss culture and ways of life, shaped in part by Röpke's own experience of living in Switzerland and reinforced by the practice of hosting conferences and societies there, most notably the Mont Pèlerin Society.

This admiration was accompanied by an idealized image of Switzerland, exemplified in Röpke's glowing portrayal of the Swiss worker who could prepare lunch from his garden, catch his supper from Lake Zurich, and earn a supply of potatoes for the autumn by helping to clear a neighbor's land.[99] He nostalgically described a small village near Bern, home to about three thousand inhabitants, where he enjoyed spending time in an "enchanting 500 year old inn."[100] Röpke fawned over the farms, small industries, and "high cultural standards," praising its "respectable and highly tasteful book shop" and its overall cleanliness and beauty.[101] He went on to declare that "this village is our ideal translated into a highly concrete reality."[102] Röpke's romantic detachment from reality is evident in his idealized conception of Switzerland, which was significantly removed from the complexities of its economic structure. As was noted by Swiss commentators themselves, Röpke's portrayal failed to acknowledge that Switzerland was not merely composed of picturesque mountain communities but included a more nuanced and diverse economic landscape.[103]

A framework of hierarchy

For Röpke, Switzerland symbolized tradition and cultural stability, a society where people still knew one another, family farms were preserved, and communal life was not overwhelmed by the anonymous concrete metropolis. He believed that the optimal city contained around fifty thousand to sixty thousand inhabitants, while the ideal farm should not "exceed the working capacity of one family together with … a few additional and often temporary agricultural laborers."[104] He warned about the dangers if this was to be exceeded and believed that a structural policy was necessary to distribute the "size of businesses, the distribution of population between town and country and between

[97] Franc, "Utopia."

[98] Ibid.

[99] Röpke, *Die Gesellschaftskrisis der Gegenwart*, 362.

[100] Röpke, *Moral Foundation*, 31.

[101] Ibid.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Andrea Franc, "Röpke ohne Ende," *Schweizer Monat: Die Autorenzeitschrift für Politik, Wirtschaft und Kultur* 96/1034 (2016), 8.

[104] Röpke, *Civitas Humana*, 161; Röpke, *Die Gesellschaftskrisis der Gegenwart*, 202.

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industry and agriculture, and also the distinctions between classes."[105] In this respect, the ordoliberals set themselves apart from other neoliberal strands of thought, which did not call for such extensive structural state intervention in organizing social and economic life.

The ordoliberals also envisioned an active state role in managing population growth, which they treated as a symptom of the "Cult of the Colossal."[106] Röpke warned that if we do not take action soon the world will transform into an "anthill," societal hell, with the consequence of complete devastation of nature.[107] Rüstow similarly warned that the continuously growing population was transforming the planet into a "rabbit hutch."[108] To him, the solution was to be found in managing humans rather than managing nature—he believed that stopping population growth was the only way to avert social and environmental collapse. He was therefore a strong advocate for birth control, which, while relatively progressive for the 1950s, carried questionable eugenic implications.[109]

Röpke made the eugenic dimension explicit, targeting those at the bottom of the social pyramid: "more often than not, it is the drunkards and the feeble-minded who have the most children … Clearly, the qualitative and eugenic aspects of population movements must be taken into consideration as well as the merely quantitative aspects."[110] A hierarchical mind-set underlay his social views, stating that a "healthy society" exhibits a "necessarily hierarchical composition" where "each individual has the good fortune of knowing his position."[111] Similarly, in a letter to Eucken, Rüstow lamented society's "lack of organic hierarchical structure," a concern that Eucken had also highlighted in his own work.[112] This biopolitical focus on population control, especially targeting those considered socially and biologically inferior, constituted the biological radicalization of the elitist logic embedded in their broader social vision.

As Quinn Slobodian has documented, Röpke's hierarchical social order also extended into his views on race.[113] Röpke regarded people from the global South as lazy at best, and as barbarians at worst.[114] In his essay *South Africa: An Attempt at Positive*

[105]Röpke, *Moral Foundation*, 30.

[106]Rüstow, "Kritik des technischen Fortschritts," 389; Eucken, *Grundsätze der Wirtschaftspolitik*, 181.

[107]Röpke, *Jenseits*, 73.

[108]Rüstow, "Kritik des technischen Fortschritts," 389.

[109]Biebricher, "Biopolitics," 184.

[110]Wilhelm Röpke, *Die Lehre von der Wirtschaft* (Vienna, 1937), 84.

[111]Röpke, *Die Gesellschaftskrisis der Gegenwart*; Biebricher, "Ordoliberalism and Conservatism," 80.

[112]Letter from Alexander Rüstow to Walter Eucken, 25 Jan. 1933, Korrespondenz 20, Walter Eucken Papers, Archive of the Thuringian University and State Library, Jena.

[113]Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); Slobodian, "The World Economy and the Color Line: Wilhelm Röpke, Apartheid and the White Atlantic," *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute Supplement* 10 (2014), 61–87. See also Phillip Becher, Katrin Becker, Kevin Rösch, and Laura Seelig, "Ordoliberal White Democracy, Elitism, and the Demos: The Case of Wilhelm Röpke," *Democratic Theory* 8/2 (2021), 70–96.

[114]Wilhelm Röpke, "Unentwickelte Länder," *ORDO: Jahrbuch für die Ordnung von Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* 5 (1953), 63–113; Röpke, "Die unentwickelten Länder als wirtschaftliches, soziales und gesellschaftliches Problem," in Albert Hunold, ed., *Entwicklungsländer: Wahn und Wirklichkeit* (Zurich, 1961), 11–82.

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Appraisal (1964), he supported apartheid and made blatantly racist claims about the supposed differences between "Westerners" and "backward" peoples from Africa and South Asia.[115] Slobodian interprets Röpke's racial hierarchy as a formal strategy of rule; "some populations, he [Röpke] argued, had the traits required for success in a system of global capitalism, others did not—and little could change this fact."[116] This biological essentialism was woven into Röpke's vitalist ideas about life forces and natural order, reinforcing the notion that certain groups were inherently suited to thrive within specific ecological and economic contexts. It echoed the perspectives of racist eugenic conservationist who framed twentieth-century decline as a dual threat: "race suicide on the cultural level and an environmental wasteland on the other."[117]

Rüstow also engaged with racial theorists and regarded race theory—when presented as "scientifically" grounded—as a legitimate source of anthropological knowledge.[118] Racist and colonial-apologist contributions continued to appear in *ORDO* well into the 1970s.[119] Some advanced a colonial-apologist interpretation of global economic relations, portraying Western companies' extraction of natural resources in the global South as a stabilizing force that generated employment and fostered trust.[120] Others advocated birth control measures in the global South, framing demographic regulation as a prerequisite for economic development, while others still advocated state-led initiatives to raise birth rates in the global North.[121] More broadly, many ordoliberals emphasized the primacy of "Western" and European civilization, treating it as the normative benchmark against which other societies were implicitly measured.[122] This reflected not merely an organicist social imaginary, but a hierarchical social framework which sought to naturalize civilizational and demographic inequalities.

[115]Wilhelm Röpke, "South Africa: An Attempt at a Positive Appraisal," *Schweizer Monatshefte* 44/2 (1964), 97–112.

[116]Slobodian, *Globalists*, 149.

[117]Garland E. Allen, "'Culling the Herd': Eugenics and the Conservation Movement in the United States, 1900–1940," *Journal of the History of Biology* 46/1 (2013), 31–72, at 62.

[118]Lars Cornelissen, "Post-war Ordoliberalism, Race and the Politics of Development," in Biebricher, Nedergaard, and Bonefeld, *Handbook of Ordoliberalism*, 461–70, at 463.

[119]P. T. Bauer, "Auslandshilfe: Ein Instrument für den Fortschritt?", *ORDO: Jahrbuch für die Ordnung von Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* 18 (1967), 173–205; Peter Cramer, "Gunnar Myrdal und die Entwicklungsländer," *ORDO: Jahrbuch für die Ordnung von Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* 19 (1968), 335–87.

[120]Thomas Molnar, "Unterentwicklung und Auslandshilfe: Beobachtungen und Anmerkungen," *ORDO: Jahrbuch für die Ordnung von Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* 22 (1971), 255–71.

[121]Manfred Feldsieper, "Wirtschaftswachstum und Wirtschaftsordnung: Grundsätzliche Bemerkungen zur wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung in Indien," *ORDO: Jahrbuch für die Ordnung von Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* 25 (1974), 213–31; Edmund Winterhoff, "Die Interdependenz der Entwicklung von Bevölkerung, Wirtschaft und Technik," *ORDO: Jahrbuch für die Ordnung von Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* 15–16 (1965), 519–59.

[122]Wilhelm Röpke, "Westliche und Unentwickelte Welt," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 2758 (1952), 19; Röpke, "Die unentwickelten Länder"; Alfred Müller-Armack, "Fragen der Europäischen Integration," in Erwin von Beckerath, Fritz W. Meyer, and Alfred Müller-Armack, eds., *Wirtschaftsfragen der freien Welt* (Frankfurt am Main, 1957), 531–40.

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This hierarchical framework likewise structured their understanding of women's role within their social order.[123] Rüstow described gardening as "without a doubt a female invention," using it as an analogy to cast women as the natural custodians of both cultivated landscapes and the domestic sphere.[124] Ordoliberals treated the patriarchal family as the center of their social framework, and thus vital to the maintenance of a civilized liberal order.[125] Rüstow outlined how the "well-ordered" house was the foundation of a civilized and happy society; it was "the natural sphere of the woman" and young women should be educated on how to be good "spouses, housewives and mothers."[126] The ordoliberal opposition to the welfare state was thus articulated not only as an economic and social critique of collectivism, but also as one infused with conservative and gendered assumptions about the proper ordering of family and society. In this view, the expansion of the welfare state threatened to displace forms of care that were understood as women's natural responsibility within the household.[127]

"Mais il faut cultiver notre jardin"

Röpke envisioned domestic life unfolding largely in the garden and argued that children living in cities should attend school only in the mornings, leaving their afternoons free to spend time outdoors, appreciate nature, and cultivate family life.[128] Rüstow outlined how the garden was one of the most important foci of *Vitalpolitik*.[129] For the ordoliberals, gardens also played an important role as a spiritual retreat from the dangers of modern civilization. Rüstow explored how industrial workers of Western Europe, "driven by instinctive self-help, managed to have a suburban garden, however small and mean," which to him was "nothing more than the attempt, undertaken at a small cost, to return, at least to some extent, to the 'vital situation' of the peasant."[130] Röpke frequently cited Voltaire's phrase "mais il faut cultiver notre jardin," as well as Francis Bacon's statement that the garden is "the purest of human pleasures," to express his fondness for them.[131] In a similar vein, Müller-Armack argued for a new

[123] A similar and very convincing argument is made in Callison and Söding, "A Climate Fit for Capitalism."

[124] Alexander Rüstow, "Garten und Familie," in Hoch, *Rede und Antwort*, 275–95, at 276.

[125] Röpke, *Die Gesellschaftskrisis der Gegenwart*; Röpke, *Civitas Humana*, 111.

[126] Rüstow quoted in Biebricher, "Ordoliberalism and Conservatism," 82.

[127] As the seminal literature on neoliberalism and the welfare state has shown, the welfare state was perceived as a political threat to a social order founded on the nuclear family and racial hierarchy, and as a moral threat to values of self-reliance, independence, responsibility, and human dignity. See Wendy Brown, "American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-democratization," *Political Theory* 34/6 (2006), 690–714; Melinda Cooper, *Family Values between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York, 2019); Jessica Whyte, *The Morals of the Market: Human Rights and the Rise of Neoliberalism* (London, 2019), 82.

[128] Röpke, *Civitas Humana*, 163; Callison and Söding also make this argument; see Callison and Söding, "A Climate Fit for Capitalism."

[129] Rüstow, "Garten und Familie."

[130] Alexander Rüstow, "Appendix: General Sociological Causes of the Economic Disintegration and Possibilities of Reconstruction," in Röpke, *International Economic Disintegration*, 267–83, at 279.

[131] Wilhelm Röpke, *Die deutsche Frage* (Zurich, 1945), 20; Röpke, *Die Gesellschaftskrisis der Gegenwart*, 108; Röpke, *Civitas Humana*, 284.

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Bodenverbundenheit in modern society through an uptake in gardening.[132] Rüstow also frequently mentioned the importance of the garden in modern society, imploring that "this beautiful earth could be a garden for all mankind."[133] The significance they attributed to gardens further underscores the vitalist dimension of their thought: gardens represented a model of mediated harmony between human intervention and natural vitality, balancing order with organic growth.

This idealization of the garden further reinforced the elitist dimensions of their thought, particularly in light of the European tradition of the landscape garden as a cultural form that staged and legitimized aristocratic authority.[134] The metaphor of the garden establishes a stark dichotomy between the well-ordered "garden of European civilization" and, in Röpke's words, a "rank jungle of thought and style run wild."[135] Such imagery not only reveals a civilizational hierarchy but also encodes a vision of social order grounded in exclusion and control. Röpke's discussion of the garden can thus be read as an allegory for his social utopia, one that envisaged a perfectly cultivated, homogeneous population rooted in traditional Western values and organized within tightly regulated small communities.[136] In this sense, the garden metaphor operated as both aesthetic ideal and political program, naturalizing hierarchy and legitimizing cultural uniformity in the guise of organic order.

The garden metaphor functioned not only within their social framework but also in their conception of economic order, linking the two and expressing their view of the market as a cultivated and carefully ordered system. Rüstow used the garden metaphor to demonstrate the importance of private property, citing a folk song which claims, "what good is a beautiful garden if others can walk in it."[137] Röpke made similar claims that "even the largest public park cannot take the place of the smallest privately possessed garden."[138] He continued that growing food in your garden was a "happy and purposeful activity without the string of money grubbing and recreation" for which one would otherwise have "to dip" into one's "pocket."[139] He observed how "peasant holdings … bring men and nature together … proximity to nature, moderation and tranquility, a natural and full existence near the sources of life, and a humble integration into the chain of birth and death."[140] Röpke argued that "the masses" had been "torn away from the anchor of property," leading property to lose its normative significance as a valued and stabilizing institution.[141]

[132] Alfred Müller-Armack, "Die Wirtschaftsordnungen Sozial Gesehen," *ORDO: Jahrbuch für die Ordnung von Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* 1 (1948), 125–54, at 153.

[133] Alexander Rüstow, *Freiheit und Herrschaft: Eine Kritik der Zivilisation. Gekürzte Fassung der Ortsbestimmung der Gegenwart* (Münster, 1957), 525.

[134] Becher *et al.*, "Ordoliberal White Democracy," 83.

[135] Wilhelm Röpke, "End of an Era," lecture, Frankfurt am Main, 8 Feb. 1933, in Röpke, *Against the Tide*, trans. Elizabeth Henderson (London, Edinburgh and Glasgow, 1969), 79–97, at 88, 97.

[136] A similar and very convincing argument is made in Callison and Söding, "A Climate Fit for Capitalism."

[137] Rüstow, "Zwischen Kapitalismus und Kommunismus," 159.

[138] Röpke, *Civitas Humana*, 267.

[139] Ibid., 286.

[140] Röpke, *Die Gesellschaftskrisis der Gegenwart*, 325.

[141] Röpke, *Civitas Humana*, 139.

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For the ordoliberals, small-scale property was a vector of independence, freedom, and individuality, because it offered everyone the means to exercise their potential as well as a degree of independence essential to cope with the negative effects of the market economy.[142] Therefore, as Müller-Armack put it, ordoliberal social policy did not aim to "redistribute wealth" but to establish a connection between the "human beings and private property."[143] Rather than necessitating a welfare state, society would be equipped with the tools to organize and sustain itself. In this sense, property ownership was not merely an economic arrangement but a civilizational one, a means of anchoring individuals within a stable social order and cultivating the very qualities that *Vitalpolitik* sought to foster. The smallholder, the craftsman, the homeowner: these were not incidental figures but the normative ideal around which ordoliberal social thought was organized, and against which the anonymous mass of the wage-dependent proletariat appeared as a pathology to be corrected.

Conclusion

An evident environmental sensibility emerges in the works of the interwar ordoliberals, especially Röpke and Rüstow, one that served to bolster their opposition to industrial modernity. Their environmentally imbued cultural critique often reflected a conservative aversion to the perceived loss of traditional rural and family life and of individual autonomy, and the rise of mass society. Their critique of urbanization, technological exploitation of nature, and the degradation of natural resources was largely an expression of aesthetic and elitist sensibilities. At the core of ordoliberal social and environmental critique lay a deep aversion to scale. Large-scale economic organization, mass production, and centralized administration were not seen as neutral expansions but as transformations that eroded responsibility, social control, and moral restraint. Smallness, by contrast, was invested with normative value: family-run firms and local communities were imagined as more socially cohesive. This parochial preference also shaped their views on nature. Rather than thinking in planetary or systemic terms, ordoliberals tended to imagine the environment as local and tangible: farms, forests, and landscapes that could serve as moral reference points. In this sense, their environmental sensibility mirrored their social vision: both were grounded in decentralization and human scale, and both struggled to grapple with systemic problems that unfolded on larger or even global levels.

Their environmentally inflected *Vitalpolitik* remained confined to this small, idealized, and largely abstract scale, with Rüstow and Röpke offering limited concrete proposals for how such a vision might be implemented. *Vitalpolitik* was rather intended to offer a theoretical alternative to state social-security provisions, which the ordoliberals believed created large, impersonal bureaucracies that disempower individuals. The ordoliberal desire to "embed" individuals, particularly those from lower social classes,

[142] Eucken, *Grundsätze der Wirtschaftspolitik*, 275.

[143] Alfred Müller-Armack quoted in Volker Berghahn and Brigitte Young, "Reflections on Werner Bonefeld's 'Freedom and the Strong State'," *New Political Economy* 18 (2013), 768–78, at 772.

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in a specific societal and environmental framework also aimed to maintain social stability and control while preventing any sympathies for socialist policies. It is thus doubtful that their environmental ideas ever amounted to genuine policy objectives; they functioned rather as ideological tools to critique both state overreach and monopolies. This was further reinforced by ordoliberal support for Ludwig Erhard's export-oriented postwar policies, which contributed to the expansive *Wirtschaftswunder* in West Germany. Moreover, most ordoliberals remained skeptical of, and in many cases openly opposed, the global environmental movement that emerged in the 1970s.

The opening evocation of a child playing "amidst grass and trees and birds and butterflies" under an "endless canopy of a blue sky" captures the emotional language of ordoliberal social imagination. The carefully preserved landscape it invokes mirrors a broader societal ideal: a meticulously ordered, tradition-bound space insulated from disruption. Conceived in an era of profound political and economic instability, this vision offered reassurance through images of order and rootedness. But, in doing so, it also froze social order into an aestheticized ideal, insufficiently responsive to the dynamism and structural pressures of modern capitalism. The result was less a program for navigating modernity than a consoling image of a world held still against it.

Acknowledgments. First and foremost, I would like to thank the coeditor of this forum, Troy Vettese, who read many drafts of this article and without whom this forum would not have been possible. I would also like to thank my PhD supervisors, Ben Jackson and Patricia Clavin, who helped shape the ideas behind this article and read many drafts. Thank you to the generous sponsors, co-organizers and participants of the workshops at the MPIWG in Berlin in 2022 and University College, Oxford, in 2023, out of which this forum emerged. These included the Institute for New Economic Thinking, the Independent Social Research Foundation, *Past and Present*, and the European Society for Environmental History. Special thanks to John O'Neill and Dieter Plehwe for their comments on my article. I am also grateful to Ellen Paterson and Daunish Negargar for proofreading the final draft. Finally, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers whose comments greatly improved the article.

Cite this article: Isabel Oakes, "'Idyllischer Gartenzwergkapitalismus': A Distinct Ordoliberal Environmental Framework?," *Modern Intellectual History* (2026), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244326100638

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