

Werner Sombart and “modern capitalism”. A working hypothesis.

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1. Introduction

When, in 1913, Werner Sombart published *Der Bourgeois*, he was universally known and admired as “der rote Professor”, because of his explicit scientific reference to K. Marx, and his original contribution to the history of the socialist movement. *Sozialismus und soziale Bewegung im 19. Jahrhundert (1896)* had had great success not only in Germany, but in the entire world (Epstein 1909, p. V) and *Der moderne Kapitalismus* was considered an innovative work, able to open new fields of inquiry in economic history and in sociology (Brocke 1996, esp. pp. 59 – 68, Lenger 2012, esp. pp. 115 – 135, Cavalli 1978, esp. pp. 26 – 41, Sapori 1944, Sapori 1955, I, esp. p. XII ff)

Der Bourgeois surprises scholars and readers of Sombart with significant changes in his methodological approach, analytical perspectives and, of course, scientific outcomes. These changes led Sombart’s interpreters to ask how and why the follower and admirer of Karl Marx, the theoretician of the socialist movement, the scholar who exalted the role of Trade Unions on the building of a fairer society through the spread of reformist policies, became a social-conservative theoretician, showing in 1934 (*Deutscher Sozialismus*) explicit sympathy for Nazism.

Many attempts have been made to explain the origin of these contradictions. Some authors explicitly mention Sombart’s opportunistic attitude, extending to his entire life his attempt in the Thirties to gain credit with the major representatives of the Nazi party (Reheis 1996, I, Rieß 1996, I), others mention his character and some of his peculiar psychological motives (Mitzman 1973), yet others, the way in which he lived the changes in the political and cultural climate during the first quarter of the Twentieth century. In this paper we do not want to return to the impressive amount of literature on Sombart devoted to these aspects, because we are convinced that they cannot explain the changes in his analytical approach. They might, if anything, be considered as adding aspects on the emergence of new scientific attitudes in Sombart. In our opinion, Sombart’s scientific contradictions have their roots - as Schmoller and Max Weber pointed out - in his methodology and his inadequate epistemological vision.

The interpretative key that we are adopting is the following:

Sombart organized within a unitary interpretative canon his enormous quantity of research materials and the outcomes of his remarkable scientific curiosity as long as he adopted a basic Marxian view – even though revisited. Of course, the scientific results of this phase of Sombart’s work can be questioned, as well as his peculiar way of interpreting Marx, but the unitary character of his analytical perspectives is fully recognizable. This continuity on the epistemological and methodological plane stopped when he wrote *Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben (1911)* with the task of accentuating – on the basis of the Weberian stimulus – the meaning of spiritual factors in the genesis and explanation of economic and social phenomena. From then on, we can see a true scientific disorientation. Sombart’s analysis became more and more ideological and, as a result, over-determined by the cultural and political changes of the German context. As we will see, this

epistemological uncertainty implied negative effects about the inquiry on the role of subjective factors in the historical evolution.

In this reading of Sombart it is useful to start from *Der Bourgeois* because in it the changes in the analytical perspectives of three significant aspects are evident :

1. the shift from trusting the industrial economy to an anti-industrialist and anti-capitalist vision;
2. Sombart's anti-socialism, after a long period of exaltation of the progressive role of Socialism and the worker movement;
3. the emerging of a strong anti-liberal and anti-democratic vein in Sombart's work.

2. Sombart: Capitalism, Socialism, and Social Progress.

In Sombart's opinion, the progressive function of capitalism was manifested above all in its ability to free mankind from the ties of the medieval world. Modern individualism, the market, the diffusion of new institutional systems, the spread of science and technology were the constitutive elements of this process of emancipation. The birth and predominance of the two modern classes - bourgeoisie and proletariat (Sombart 1909, p.2)¹ - and the dynamics of their conflict represents the key of the accelerated development of a new social system. Besides, the evolution of the structural features of the systems of production, the evolution of the political and institutional context, in cooperation with the growing awareness of the proletarian class as a political subject, were realistically enabling the building of an economy and society grounded on different principles. In other words, the progressive function played in the previous centuries from bourgeoisie was now passing to the proletariat (Sombart 1909, p.279 ss).

In the contemporary society there were visible aspects and movements "brought about by the proletariat", which could be properly interpreted only in the perspective of the transition from Capitalism to Socialism (Sombart 1909, p. 15). For this, - Sombart writes in his *Sozialismus und soziale Bewegung in 19. Jahrhundert* - his purpose was "to show the growth of this two-sided phenomenon from its very beginning, and to discover the so-called laws of its development" (Sombart 1909, p. 14). In this sense, Sombart recalled many analytical aspects which were largely present in the literature of his time (from Marx to the representatives of the German economic school), emphasizing the speed of economic and social changes, and the way they affected the behavior of the social agents.

As we will see, Sombart's insistence on these features of modern capitalism are recurrent in his work: we find them in his interventions in the meetings of *Verein für Sozialpolitik*, in *Sozialismus und soziale Bewegung in 19. Jahrhundert*, in *Der moderne Kapitalismus* and in many of his other studies. However, these recurrent components of his analysis assume a different scientific meaning according to the various theoretical contexts in which they are found, leading to radically different diagnoses of capitalism and its future. So, if in the first long phase of his scientific activity (until

¹ I generally quote from the English translation by Epstein of the sixth German edition of *Sozialismus und soziale Bewegung*, Gustav Fischer, Jena 1909 .

1910), these aspects were interpreted as a sign of the overcoming of the old economic structures, the traditional lifestyle and the inadequate social relationships, emphasizing the historical necessity of a new social organization, grounded on a communitarian spirit; from 1911 Sombart organized the materials and sociological observations which surfaced in his work in other analytical perspectives. As a result, the acquisitive spirit, the speed of economic changes, the breaking up of the traditional social relationships, and even science and its technological applications were interpreted as negative phenomena, able to produce the corruption of human soul, the spread of an immoral individualism and an irreversible dissolution of the communitarian spirit.

In the first edition of *Der moderne Kapitalismus* Sombart outlines not only the intensity and speed characterizing “the new style of economic life (*der neue Stil der Wirtschaftsleben*)”, but also the positive effects of the “new technology”, the “new juridical context”, etc.; all those components that he considers as decisive for the development of the entrepreneurial spirit of the modern economic system.

We find the same view in all the editions of *Sozialismus und soziale Bewegung* (with the exception of the tenth edition, *Der proletarische Sozialismus*, published in 1924²³). In the sixth edition, for example, Sombart focuses, in his lively style, on the features of the modern age “characterized ... by an intensity of life such that I cannot conceive of any other age”. It is “accompanied by what may be called the nervousness of our time – the restlessness, the haste, the uncertainty of all forms of life. ... the age of free competition has brought competition into all walks of life ...” (Sombart 1909, p. 12). Worldwide competition is accelerated by the new means of communication, the spread of science, the application of technological innovations in all fields of social life, the increase of the level of productivity and consumption, and – finally – by a higher development of the general level of knowledge. The continuous interaction between material growth and spiritual development, at the heart of the new social order, speaks the language of historical necessity: it is the spread of a “revolutionary spirit”, leading to the realistic possibility of a Socialist organization of society:

“ Everything is in flux – economic activity, science, art, morals, religion; all conceptions are in such an unsettled state that we are beginning to believe there is nothing fixed and everlasting. ... This critical state of mind was already developed in the bourgeoisie; it has been applied to politics, morals, religion and art. The proletariat is only adopting it and applying to the economic and social institutions. In this way the revolutionary present becomes the feeder of the social Utopia of the future. Edison and Siemens are the spiritual fathers of Bellamy and Bebel” (Sombart 1909, pp. 12-3)

It is evident that “the conditions necessary to bring about the organization of society on a communist basis are being developed within the frame-work of the capitalist economic system; that this system is itself producing the means whereby it will be abolished” (Sombart 1909, p. 82) . On this specific aspect, he points out, the theory of Marx and Engels, concerning the necessary transition from capitalism to socialism is “quite correct”. Their prediction of the inevitable tendency toward a planned economy is also correct (Sombart 1909, p. 82), given the level of socialization of production, induced by the economic dynamics of capitalism; the “universal tendency for the process of production to become automatic”, because of the extraordinary development of

³ In this edition Sombart was “ a bitter critic of Marx and of the socialist experiment in Russia, about which his language was often vitriolic. A change seemed to have come over the foremost philosopher of Socialism; he appeared to be moving to the extreme Right, and when, in 1934, the final edition of the book appeared, it was called *Deutscher Sozialismus*, and was a plea for the Nazi political system!” (Epstein 1941, p. 525)

machinery (Sombart 1909, p. 80), the way the “capitalist system develops” production processes where “it becomes easier to replace individual direction ... by communist direction” (Sombart 1909, p. 81, see also p. 82)

Marx’s analysis is “correct” not only because he focuses on the material conditions preparing the transition to socialism, but also because he focuses on the role played by the subjective and voluntary activities carried out by the proletariat (Sombart-Epstein 1909, p. 63). The “extreme importance” of the Marxian theoretical system “did not lie in the fact that it was ‘scientific’, but rather in that he showed how the social movement was the result of historic development ...” (Sombart 1909, p. 88). In short, with Marx Socialism ceases to be a problem of knowledge and begins to become a problem of will (Sombart 1909, p. 40).

From this point of view, the idea expressed by many Marxists of a self-destruction of capitalism for economic reasons is incorrect and the Marxian expression: “Capitalism is digging its own grave” is not fully convincing. It “would be more correct to say that it was preparing its sickbed” (Sombart 1909, p. 87). In Sombart’s opinion, the problem of contemporary capitalism cannot be seen as the occurrence of a sudden collapse of its economy, but as a future characterized by a long phase of stagnation: “what the capitalist economic system produces are rather chronic periods of depressions, like those we had from the middle of the eighteen-seventies to the end of the eighteen-eighties” (Sombart 1909, p. 86).

However, if we look at the political and social changes of the present society, we will see the emerging of social experiences which we can regard as a useful model for the building of a new communitarian organization: “New communities (*Gemeinschaften*) are formed. Through close combination in narrow factory and living rooms, a uniform feeling grows in these masses, class consciousness. And this is precisely what the socialist movement makes its goal” (Sombart 1900, p. 88 ff)

In this perspective we have to consider the progressive function of England (a model “of our own future development”) and of the Trade Unions: “Today, England still predominates over all other nations as a colossus in the external development of civilization; today, its economic prosperity has still not been even approached by any other land” (Sombart 1900, p. 14) At the same time, trade unions are showing their ability to overcome the ideas of utopian socialism, opening a continuous and successful confrontation with the driving forces of the capitalist system (Sombart 1900, p. 16 ff, Sombart 1909, p. 186 ff), developing “the positive sides of Capitalism” (“*sie entfaltet die guten Seiten des Kapitalismus dadurch*”), and carrying out “the great historical mission of capitalism; to develop the forces of production”. (Sombart 1900, p. 86). As a matter of fact, the Trade Unions on the one hand attenuated the severity of economic crises, increasing the level of wages and obtaining a better standard of living for the workers; on the other hand, they contributed to leading “the capitalist economic system in organic transformation to higher social forms (*das kapitalistische Wirtschaftssystem in organischer Umbildung in höhere Gesellschaftsformen überzuführen*)” (Sombart 1900, pp. 86-7): “The innermost core of the conflict around the union problem is the struggle for industrial constitutionalism against industrial absolutism or feudalism (*der Kampf um industriellen Konstitutionalismus gegen industriellen Absolutismus oder Feudalismus*)” (Sombart 1900, p. 88, Sombart Italics)

Considering the “point of view of general development (*der Standpunkt der Gesamtentwicklung*)”, the Trade Unions are leading the capitalist system toward a higher social order: “I think of the participation (*Mitwirkung*) of the Unions in the solution of the great problem

of modern states, which we can summarize in the term Democracy (*das man in das Schlagwort der Democratie zusammenfassen pflegt*)” (Sombart 1900, p. 89-90)

3. Die Juden and Der Bourgeois: Sombart’s turning point.

As we know, Sombart published *Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben* (Jews and Economic Life) in 1911, as a response to Max Weber’s *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism) (Weber 1904-05). In the *Preface* Sombart writes that he came across this issue “really by chance”, after reading the Weberian essay and when he was on the point of revising *Der moderne Kapitalismus*⁴ (1902). In *Die Juden* Sombart opposes the Weberian theory of the influence of Puritanism on capitalism, with his “conviction” that the Jews have had “in the making of the modern economy a far greater role than has been acknowledged” (Sombart 1918, p. V).

In Sombart’s opinion, the “Jewish question” is a decisive factor in understanding and explaining capitalist rationalization and the spread of the “capitalistic spirit”: “I find in the Jewish Religion the same leading ideas (*dieselben leitenden Ideen*) which characterize capitalism: I see the first full of the same spirit (*von demselben Geiste erfüllt*) as the second” (Sombart 1918, p. 242). Capitalist rationalization is closely linked to the Jewish religion as an eminently rational religion; a religion “extraneous to magic” (Sombart 1918, p. 74; on this see also Weber 1997, p. 251-2), because it is based on a sort of contractual system between Jahvè and the elected people, in order to calculate rigorously the advantages and disadvantages of human activities (Sombart 1918, p. 75) In this sense, “the Jewish are capitalistic” and capitalism “is in many respects a manifestation of the Jewish spirit”, which dominates “our entire era”.

Not by chance, the Jew is presented with the features of a “pure business man”, complying with the “authentic spirit of capitalism” and proclaiming “the predominance of gain, profit, and interest against all natural ends” (Sombart 1918, p. 155). Of course, the spread of the rationalization process, centred on accountability and on the predominance of profit, was not exclusively due to the Jews, but they had had a decisive role for the spread of the capitalist spirit, the dissolution of the old economic structures, and the building of the new social order: “the peculiar and decisive importance of the Jews ... has to be sought in the fact that their activities are responsible for the acceleration of the transition of the economic forms of early capitalism to the economic forms of late capitalism” (Sombart 1916-17, p. 896; Sombart 1918, p.187). As is well known, this is a widely shared opinion (see also Simmel 1989, p. 580-1; Horowitz 1986, p. 14).

It was important to consider that the Jews’ contribution to the dissolution of the old community was brought from the “outside”, given their particular social position. Their talent for trade and their position as outsiders were two aspects of the same phenomenon:

“They derive their profit *from war*, murder, or assassination; while other people seek to derive it *by means of war*, murder, or assassination. Without a navy, without an army, the Jews work their way up to the position of being the mighty ones on the earth, using as their weapons those of the Florentines: money, treaties (i.e., contracts) and knowledge” (Sombart 1913d, pp.100-1)

⁴ *Der moderne Kapitalismus* was published in 1902. Sombart later revised his work, publishing the first two volumes in 1916-17, and the last volume in 1927.

At the same time, their explicit task is not to build a new community spirit or a system of values able to create new social relationships, but to enlarge the business circuits regardless of its effects on the social organization. So, Jews are decisive in the revolutionary changes of the old system, but they are ruled by anti-communitarian values, favoring the spread of the materialistic and individualistic motives typical of late capitalism.

If we consider the business man of late capitalism, we find all the features outlined by Sombart with reference to the Jew as pure business man: the indifference toward mankind and the exclusive interest in his economic activity, as an activity “projected into infinity” (Sombart 1915, p. 173). Of course, the decisive aspect is linked to the split between economic activity and human needs: capitalist enterprise, having lost the natural ties of the traditional system, is only oriented by the needs of indefinitely increasing the value of capital. Its ends “are abstract and therefore endless” (“*Die Zwecke der kapitalistischen Unternehmung sind abstract und darum unbegrenzt*”) (Sombart 1921 [1903], p. 68).

In *Der Bourgeois* Sombart recalls such a statement: “Man the flesh-and-blood man, with his joys and sorrows, with his needs and demands, has been forced from his place as the centre round which all economic activities rotate; his throne is now occupied by a few abstractions, such as Acquisitiveness and Business” (Sombart 1913d, p. 172, Epstein transl; see also Sombart 1918 [1911], p. 156 ff)

The indifference towards mankind is an internal aspect of economic activity, and a natural consequence of the way it is carried on:

“the expenditure of human energy in modern economic activities, extensively and intensively, is strained to the uttermost. Every minute of the day, of the year, nay, of life itself, is devoted to work; and during this working period every power is occupied at highest pressure ... Whether employer and employed, he is constantly on the verge of a breakdown owing to overwork ... Speed and yet more speed – such is the cry of the age. It rushes onward in one mad race” (Sombart 1913d, p. 181 Epstein translation)

It would be interesting to compare these statements with those, of the same kind, expressed by Sombart in *Die Juden* on the way Jews had broken up the “general atmosphere” of calm, respect and tranquility of early capitalism, imposing speed, pressure and frantic intensity in the business world (Sombart 1918 [1911], see esp.: chapter VII, pp. 136 – 180). Sombart concludes his reflection saying that Jews had “attacked a stable and static world” and its “organization and economic spirit” (*diese festgefügte Welt nur rannten die Juden Sturm*) and broken up “the natural orientation” (“*die naturale Orientierung*”) of the old economic system (Sombart 1918 [1911], p. 147), beyond the protests of Christians (*den Klagen der christlichen Geschäftsleute*), imposing a new kind of man “an individual who in businesses is only a business man (*in Geschäften Nur- Geschäftsmann*), exclusively considering the primacy of profit (*den Primat des Erwerbszwecks*)” (Sombart 1918 [1911], p. 155)

In the new social context, Sombart writes in *Der Bourgeois*, entrepreneurs consider men only as a function of the need for profit. They require freedom of action simply to achieve their economic ends, “liberty to enter upon or abstain from any course” as it seems convenient for them:

“It means emancipation from the trammels of law and morality ... it means that you object to interference either from the state or from working men’s organization in making your contracts. You want none of the restraints of an earlier age. The free exercise of your powers shall alone determine economic success and failure” (Sombart 1913d, p. 184 Epstein transl.)

In short, the entrepreneurs have lost their progressive function because they no longer have the sense of making a new community and of building more harmonious social relationships. At this point the question is the following: is there a subject or a class able to embody and carry out the progressive ideals inherited from the Enlightenment? Might the workers, in such a new situation, continue to carry the flag of human emancipation and fight for this goal?

In *Der Bourgeois* Sombart not only modifies his judgment about the progressive role of the entrepreneurs as protagonists of a process of economic growth able to develop (in Marxian terms) the level of productive forces, but he also radically modifies his judgment on the proletariat and its capability to transform capitalist society. He is convinced that capitalism has deeply changed human nature both in the figure of the entrepreneurs and in that of the workers. On the other hand, as he writes in *Der moderne Kapitalismus* the hardness and the intensity of capitalist production processes require a rigorous discipline which in the long run radically changes human nature. So, the capitalist system as a whole destroys the sense of the centrality of mankind, having lost the “natural orientation” of the old economic organization and its communitarian values. At the same time, individuals (both the entrepreneurs, and the workers) necessarily introject the values of the new order. In late capitalism, individuals “internalize a particular attitude towards work”, because they feel “obligated from their work”, as Max Weber pointed out, by conceiving “the work as an end in itself, as a 'vocation' ... (Sombart 1927, I, p.424-5):

“Capitalism needed a ‘new mankind’ in order to reach its ends. Men able to insert themselves in a big system, a capitalist firm ... in one of those relations systems of superiority, inferiority, adjacency , this artificial structure() composed by men’s fragments. The new economic structure required these human segments: beings without soul, depersonalized, able to be components, or better little wheels of an intricate mechanisms” (Sombart 1927, I, p.424).

So, while for entrepreneurs profit represents the sole priority of their business, for workers the increase in material wellbeing is the new priority, disregarding the idea to reform or change the capitalist system. In Sombart’s opinion, the workers “are completely conquered by the capitalist system of labor only when they have directly tasted the fruit of capitalism, when, as capitalism does, they orient all their thoughts toward gain, money, the enlargement of their own material existence”; i.e., the increase of their level of consumption (Sombart 1927, I, p.425).

As a result, neither the employers, nor the workers aspire to change the social relationships in which they live. Nobody seems really interested in building a more equitable society or pursuing the goal of “human perfection”. The proletariat struggle is exclusively confined to the field of the distribution of social wealth. There is no aspiration towards an alternative system of production and towards an alternative use of wealth. In the epoch of late capitalism, society now seems incapable of expressing from within the idea of a change which might make it possible to build a new community. In the sixth edition of *Sozialismus und soziale Bewegung* Sombart wrote:

“In the very first page of this book we defined the Social Movement as ‘the conception of all the attempts at the emancipation on the part of the proletariat as a social class’. I should like now to limit this definition somewhat, and to add ‘in so far as these attempts at emancipation are characterized by the proletarian spirit’ “(Sombart 1909, p. 131 Epstein transl.)

In late capitalism, the “proletarian spirit” aiming at creating a new social system, no longer exists. Socialism, as a planned economy, will be the outcome of the technical exigencies of the

capitalist production and not the achievement of a social organization able to bring man and his needs back to the centre of human activities.

Not by chance, in the conclusion of *Der Bourgeois*, Sombart gets back to the impossibility of reforming capitalism:

“Some people ... expected to overcome it by appealing to ethical principles; I, for my part, can see that such attempts are doomed to utter failure. When we remember... that capitalism has snapped the iron chains of the oldest religions, it seems to me hardly that it will allow itself to be bound by the silken threads of the wisdom that hails from Weimar and Koenigsberg”. (Sombart 1913d, p. 358, Epstein transl.)

Certainly, capitalism won't have in the future the same level of vitality as the past for different reasons: the increase of the bureaucratic aspect of the economic activity, the diminishing of the spirit of enterprise, change in demographic dynamics, etc.: “Possibly the blind giant may be condemned to draw the wagon of a democratic civilization ...” (Sombart 1913d, p. 359)

On this conclusion Sombart bases his anti-liberal view. England (and its institutional framework) which in the *Sozialismus un soziale Bewegung in 19. Jahrhundert* was considered as a positive model in the building of a more equitable society, after 1910 becomes a negative model. Sombart is now convinced that the sole way to overcome the problems of today's society might be found in the attempt of freeing contemporary politics from the “British merchant spirit”, which dominated the last centuries (Sombart 2012a, p. 103). It had contributed to base the “doctrine of the State” on the “theory of the contract”, a “gigantic contract that all stipulate with all” (Sombart 2012a, p. 57), but Sombart opposes, recalling Fichte and A. Müller, the State cannot be conceived on the basis of a commercial contract, because the State is “neither founded nor constituted by individuals” (Sombart 2012a, p. 106 M-E). It is not “an aggregation of individuals” and it cannot be conceived as an organ able to promote “individual interests” (Sombart 2012a, p. 106), but to secure, through the inner awareness of its being, the harmony of the whole. In this sense, only an authoritarian state can drive the society towards an organization able to assure a sound connection between collective and individual exigencies, guaranteeing the prevalence of the community as a whole, over individual needs. Of course, Sombart does not explain how the authoritarian state can solve the many problems of contemporary society. He simply adopts a simplifying approach, which seems to be unacceptable for a social analyst like him, which eliminates one side of the problem (the citizens and the autonomous aspects of their activities), proposing a tautological solution grounded on a metaphysical definition of the State. In his view, “the State is *a deus ex machina* that cuts short most serious and scientific problems”, starting from the problem of assessing the role of science and technology in contemporary society (Hanel 1996, p. 116). The mission of the State, as a “superior living being”, is to safeguard culture, custom, traditions constituting national identity, assuring the active role of the country on the international plane: “the state is the powerful armour worn by the nation in order to defend itself from its enemies” (Sombart 2012a, p. 109). In this perspective, the “shopkeepers’ representation of a dead balance between states” (Sombart 2012a, p. 109), typical of liberal thought, and the bloodless ideology of the internationalism of the socialist tradition are completely overcome. It is only within the boundaries of a nation, guaranteed by a strong state, that it is possible to plan a solution of the economic and social problems, starting with the dramatic “social question” (“*soziale frage*”) of contemporary German society. At the same time, in Sombart's opinion, “economic planning” (*Planwirtschaft*) is the way to solve the economic problem of Germany, consolidating the relationship between economic growth and national

identity. German Socialism (as Sombart termed National-Socialism) was conceived as the overcoming of capitalism and liberalism. Its legitimacy is grounded on the generic idea of assuring “the welfare of the whole above the welfare of individuals”. This perspective can be carried out by means of the “absolute” delegation by individuals to the authoritarian state, represented - in the case of Germany - by the figure of the *Führer*, who embodies in an eminent way the “leadership principle” (*Führerprinzip*) (Harris 1942, p. 809-10, Cavalli 1978a, p. 48. On this see: Weber 1980, pp. 35-6).

4. Conclusions

As we have seen, these reflections lead Sombart to surprising results both as a historian (aiming at carrying out a theoretical approach) and as a sociologist (aiming at carrying out a historical research). Schumpeter, in his well-known 1927 review (*Sombarts Dritter Band*), points out that Sombart’s work moves in the context of the *Schmollerprogramm* (“*in der Richtung des Schmollerprogrammes*”), giving it a new impulse (“*und gab ihm einen neuen Impuls nach einer Richtung, die in ihm lag.*”), especially with regard to the overall interpretation of *Der moderne Kapitalismus* (Schumpeter 1927, p. 352). Certainly, Sombart, like Schmoller, has built his scientific construction using a rich quantity of detailed historical analyses, trying to give a “theoretical” slant to his analysis. In this attempt he aimed at safeguarding the historicity of the observed phenomena (Schumpeter 1927, pp. 352 - 53) within the coordinates of the theoretical system defined by the *Schmollerprogramm* (Schumpeter 1926, pp. 337 - 388; Backhaus 1993-94, pp. 3 - 25). It is also true that, on a general level, Sombart tried to reconsider – like Schmoller - the fundamental role of subjective factors in economic and social life through the emphasis placed on the category of “spirit of capitalism”: on the relationships between the dynamics of the economy and “the personal qualities inherent in the individual”.

However, if we consider Sombart’s analysis after 1910, we find a significant difference with () Schmoller’s view. In his entire work Schmoller confirms his insistence on the virtuous circularity between ideal motives and economic change, trying to build a representation of a historically and socially determined individualism. This view had been built through a rigorous critique to the naturalistic representation of the individual that in Germany was theorized by thinkers such as von Treitschke. This view insisted on the idea that the economy was to be considered as “the material sum of private economies” and society as the sum of individuals, their will and their private activities, within the context of a “natural order” indifferent to moral motives:

“Every determined economic organization has as its aim not only that of producing goods, but also that of being the receptacle (*Gefäss*), the productive cause (*die erzeugende Ursache*), the matrix of moral factors without which society could not live” (Schmoller 1898, p. I-403).

In Schmoller’s opinion, it is precisely this moral and ideal dimension that can explain the historical structure and dynamics of the economic system, allowing us to correct its defects in order to build an economic organization able to guarantee a fairer social balance (Schmoller 1998 [1872], pp. 67 - 74; Balabkins 1993-94, pp. 26 - 42; Bruch 2004):

“economic injustice, which manifests itself in the present social life, is not exclusively a remnant of the past; ... a large part of this injustice derives from what morality and law are not able to do in the presence of a new economic situation, thus leaving relatively more freedom of action to the superiority of the strongest from the economic point of view, to

willful shrewdness, to deception, to poverty" (Schmoller 1898, pp. 115-6; cf. 115-6; see also Schmoller 1978 [1900], spec. chapters 8 and 9, pp. 48 - 76).

This approach is lacking in Sombart's analysis, especially after 1910: the economic system has become a fundamentally unchangeable mechanism and, as he wrote in 1913, it is indifferent to ethical or ideal motives (Sombart 1983 [1913], p. 286). The conclusion is surprising: if economic and social relationships are interpreted in a de-historicized way, the same occurs for the subjective factors (Ebner 2000, p. 367; Betz 1996, I, pp. 111 - 131). Paradoxically, while in the first part of his reflection he had apparently emphasized the innovative and creative role of human will, able to break out of the ties of the old social order, now what is called into question is precisely "the creativity and dynamism of the historical process" as effects of individual and collective activities (Bertolino 1964, p. 180). As a consequence, if there has been history in the past, implemented in a determined way by the free activities of individuals able to radically change the economic structure of society, in the future we can only foresee a change of the quantitative variables of the national wealth in the context of a more extensive rationalization within a substantially immutable economic organization of society. In short, as Bertolino already noted, Sombart arrived at a "mystical and transcendental vision" of the economy and society, that in their dynamism do not depend "on the will and industriousness of those who constitute them" (Bertolino 1979 [or.: 1936], p. 48).

What is finally to be noted is whether this attitude of Sombart is the result of a phase of his thought, or whether it can be found in all his work. After all, when *Der moderne Kapitalismus* appeared in 1902, economic historians, while appreciating his book and the importance of Sombart's research had already found the presence of an unacceptable gap between "theoretical vision" and all the "analyzed facts". In particular, they tried to show that the historical facts used by Sombart in order to corroborate his theoretical view, did not seem to be inserted organically and coherently in his explanatory framework. Sombart wanted to build a rigorously historical work, with strong synthetic and theoretical characters, but in his historical research he selected only the "facts" and "data", that were functional to his "vision", neglecting or considering irrelevant all the aspects of reality that seemed to go in different directions or to suggest other working hypotheses. Therefore, his generalizations were constructed as a "mix of theoretical and empirical-realistic assertions" not always adequately resolved on the theoretical level, which appeared to be the result of "pre-ordered" constructions (Sapori 1967, p. 399, Barbieri 1964, p. 154 ff; Luzzatto 1964, p. 187; Luzzatto 1966, p. 517; see, also: Pisanelli 2015). This epistemological approach was confirmed both in relation to the transition - it would have been better to speak of "transitions" - from the Middle Ages to capitalism (Sapori 1955, p. XI-XII; Wallerstein 1976, pp. 273-283), and in relation to the succession of the different "stages" of capitalism (from Early to *Spätkapitalismus*): the relations between the different economic systems and between the different stages of capitalism appeared abstractly built, lacking adequate historical evidences and internal logical coherences (see also Mitchell 1914, p. 36; Schneider 1996, p. 49; Hagemann-Landesmann 1996, II, pp. 179-80). Hence those radical contradictions present in his work. The idea of opposing organizational models of the "natural" economy in the pre-capitalist world or of early capitalism (characterized by harmony and human development), and an "unnatural model", typical of late capitalism (characterized by an alienated and inhuman lifestyle), seems deeply mistaken (Schumpeter 2008b, p. 123; Bertolino 1979, p. 479 ff).

So, while in the first phase of his scientific activity, the influence of K. Marx, the idea of an inevitable social progress grounded on endogenous economic changes gave to Sombart's research a unitary dimension (beyond some internal inconsistencies), in the second phase it seemed exposed to different and not homogeneous theoretical principles. Individuals and society were represented as de-historicized phenomena, linked by the unchangeable mechanism of the capitalist economy. His analysis, then, bowed to that "heavy pessimism" of Sombart, rooted in the exaltation of the past with its presumed "natural" organizational models (even though he is aware of the fact that it is a mistake to imagine a return of economic life to the model of early-capitalism) (Sombart 1978, p. 853; and or. Sombart 1927, II, p.1009 ff). Beyond these relevant contradictions of his analysis, his unconvincing overall picture of capitalistic society and his serious methodological limits, we cannot neglect the fact that Sombart offers us many original ideas for inquiring into the economy and society, providing us with many partial analyses of great interest and relevance (Chaloupek 1996, II, p. 177, Brocke 1996, I, p. 102; Ferrarotti 1978, pp.V-12). From this point of view, coming back to his analysis can still be useful in order to face many unsolved problems of contemporary capitalism (Mitchell 1914, p. 36).

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