

**Werner Sombart**

**Economic Life in the Modern Age**

**Edited and with an introduction by Nico Stehr and Reiner Grundmann**

New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Transaction Publishers, 2001, lxii+328 pp.

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Apart from his essay on the failure of socialism in the United States, Werner Sombart is virtually forgotten today. Few sociology undergraduate students in North America will have ever come across his name, and even graduate students might hear his name mentioned only in the context of political sociology or the *Protestant Ethic* debates. With three recent biographical-historical accounts and an edited volume on Sombart's arguably best work, *Modern Capitalism*, German social scientists (Brocke 1987; Appel 1992; Lenger, 1994; Backhaus, 1996) have been more accommodating, but overall the picture is not that different. *Economic Life in the Modern Age*, a compilation of parts of Sombart's oeuvre from different periods and with different topics, might not succeed in changing that, but it gives readers easy access to a variety of Sombart's writings in the English language. Editors Nico Stehr and Reiner Grundmann sort them into four thematic sections, which they entitle "the nature of the economic system" (i.e., capitalism), "the diversity of economic actors and motives," "the culture of economic phenomena and the economy of cultural processes," and "the interactions of economy, technology, and politics." Hence, the editors mean to include Sombart's views on not just societal spheres and macro-sociological issues, but also micro-sociological aspects of society and cultural processes that tie individuals to institutions. They do not offer an explanation for what guided their selections, but Sombart's major writings are covered, though to various degrees. Three of them, including a part from *Modern Capitalism*, had previously not been translated into English. This task, as the acknowledgements reveal, was carried out by Gordon Gamlin and Paul Malone; editorial changes and amendments to the existing translations included here appear minimal. An excellent essay by the editors introduces the collection. It covers Sombart's biography and his main works, methodological perspective and relationship to Max Weber, and intellectual stance toward fascism at the end of his life, together with an explanation why Sombart quickly fell out of favor in the post-World-War-II period.

In the remainder of this review, I wish to address a little further the contents of the included selections from Sombart's writing, not all of which are introduced by the editors. Since I share the view of those scholars who believe that Sombart did his best work earlier rather than later in his career, I present them here roughly in the chronological order they were published. In doing so, I will also supplement the sparse information the editors provide on the (German) originals from which the selections were translated.

Early in his career, Sombart had a Marxist leaning and was supportive of the socialist movement. He wrote a splendid dissertation on the rural proletariat's impoverishment and exploitation in the Roman campagna under the guidance of Gustav Schmoller, the leader of the younger Historical School of political economy. Unfortunately, while an Italian translation is available, an English one is still not. The first English translation of any of Sombart's writings is of a book he published in 1896 under the title *Socialism and the Social Movement*. Based on earlier lectures and immensely successful, it ran through many editions and sold in the ten thousands, not even including the translations of this work into English, Finnish, French, Japanese, Italian, and Russian. In the introduction and conclusion

of this writing included in *Economic Life and the Modern Age*, which is based on the 6th German edition published in 1908, Sombart discusses the issue of social class from a materialist perspective. As a member of the delegation of German scholars, Sombart addressed a similar topic in his lecture at the Congress of Arts and Science at the World's Fair in St. Louis in 1904, which was translated and published as part of the official proceedings in 1906. In the included selection he describes the modern proletariat's existence in the context of the destruction of the traditional household, estrangement from nature, routinization of work, and urban atomization of individuals. Both these selections give a good flavor of Sombart's thinking early in his career, and the latter one relates structural changes in the capitalist economy to individual aspects of modern existence.

From this period stem also the 1905 essay "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?," of which, unfortunately, the book provides only the opening section, and two hitherto untranslated writings. "The Emergence of Fashion" is a selection from *The Economy and Fashion: A Contribution to the Theory of the Modern Creation of Demand*, published in 1902. This is perhaps not a topic one would expect Sombart to have been interested in, but in this case he once more explains a familiar phenomenon by reference to societal changes. Sombart relates an increasing demand for fashionable objects to the emergence of a mobile urban society that has less need for durable consumption goods. For consumers, fashion becomes a means of distinction, whereas producers, too, can gain an edge over competitors by focusing on a good's novelty rather than its price or quality. The other essay, "Travel in Germany in 1800," is from *The German Economy in the Nineteenth Century*, first published in 1903 and taken here from the 1912 edition. In an essayistic form, it introduces the reader to the vagaries of travel in the past that must have seemed remote even to Sombart's contemporaries in the early twentieth century.

The remainder of the book is dominated by parts of Sombart's writings on capitalism. This topic is presumably what most readers are interested in, but the selection of these parts is a bit problematic. In 1902 Sombart published what many consider his *magnum opus*, *Modern Capitalism*, in its first edition, which provided a major reference point for Weber's *Protestant Ethic*. A grand attempt to explain the genesis and expansion of the modern capitalist economy, the book included an inquiry into its "spirit," which Sombart saw as having been brought about by the multiplication of opportunities for trading and making money during the Middle Ages. After Weber proposed a different, religious explanation of the emergence of this spirit in his *Protestant Ethic* essays in 1904-05, Sombart responded, first by linking Jewish economic ideas and practices to Puritanism in *The Jews and Modern Capitalism* in 1911, and then by publishing *The Bourgeois* in 1913 (translated into English under the curious title *The Quintessence of Capitalism*), which provided additional explanations of the "intellectual history of modern economic man" (so its subtitle). *Luxury and Capitalism*, published in the same year, expanded the focus further by including luxury consumption's contribution to the rise of capitalism, as did the subsequent second and third editions of *Modern Capitalism*, published in 1916 and 1927, respectively, which provided an ever-increasing hodgepodge of explanations and approaches. From these writings, *Economic Life in the Modern Age* includes but one selection from *Modern Capitalism*, taken from the last (third) edition, in which Sombart reflects on the possible future of the economic system. *The Jews and Modern Capitalism* is represented by one selection, in which Sombart draws the aforementioned parallels between Judaism and Puritanism. The editors present selections from *Luxury and Capitalism* in two chapters, which include a class analysis of urban dwellers in the early modern age and a short reflection on changing notions of love and

courtship that reminds one of the later work by Norbert Elias. *The Bourgeois*, finally, is the best-represented writing in this collection, with three separate chapters. Located in different parts of this collection, the chapters on the capitalist spirit and modern business speak to Sombart's views regarding the necessity of the bourgeois businessman to be of an entrepreneurial, "middle-class" (i.e., duty-bound rather than luxury-oriented) nature, the influence of national traits (which became increasingly important in his thinking), and the focus of the modern bourgeois on a thriving business, acquisition, and expansion of the enterprise. Advances in technology, addressed in another chapter, not only increase opportunities for capitalist enterprise, but also change capitalists' mental outlook by refocusing their attention on material products as the outcome of technology. Sombart's contribution to the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* in 1930, which summarizes his thought in the later stages of his career nicely and may serve as a good introduction to his work, rounds out the book.

Let me add a wish-list at the end. Readers would welcome, I believe, reading a selection from Sombart's dissertation and longer parts of his *Modern Capitalism* (in its first, unadulterated edition, please!). It would also be advisable to provide a much more detailed subject index. In all, however, this book is a valuable and accessible addition to the Anglo-American literature on Werner Sombart.

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