

**WERNER SOMBART AND NOOSOCIOLOGY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE
CAPITALIST ECONOMIC SPIRIT**

***WERNER SOMBART E A NOOSOCIOLOGIA: UMA ANÁLISE DO ESPÍRITO
ECONÔMICO CAPITALISTA***

***WERNER SOMBART Y LA NOOSOCIOLOGÍA: UN ANÁLISIS DEL ESPÍRITU
ECONÓMICO CAPITALISTA***



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ABSTRACT: The concept of spirit in Werner Sombart departs from the economic logic in analyzing the capitalist economic system. Through a sociological interpretation of history, the German thinker emphasizes subjectivities capable of shaping behavioral arrangements, giving rise to a financial system closely related to individuals' mental attitudes. Therefore, this paper aims to present the main concepts and the significance of Werner Sombart based on his texts and commentary. It seeks to analyze the development of capitalism within a framework that considers studies of economics, society, and history as endogenous, grounded in the notion of spirit. This approach avoids reducing capitalism to economics and instead incorporates it to explain the prevailing mindset of an era. Thus, it endeavors to provide a historical insight into one of the critical concepts in sociology, as seen through the perspective of one of the foremost sociologists of the 20th century.

KEYWORDS: Capitalist spirit. Sombart. Business mentality.

RESUMO: *O conceito de espírito em Werner Sombart foge à lógica economicista na análise do sistema econômico capitalista, pois, a partir de uma interpretação sociológica da história, o pensador alemão enfatiza as subjetividades capazes de se verter em arranjos comportamentais, ocasionando um sistema econômico que se relaciona às atitudes mentais dos indivíduos. Desse modo, o presente trabalho busca apresentar os principais conceitos e a importância de Werner Sombart a partir de seus próprios textos e comentadores, visando analisar o desenvolvimento do capitalismo dentro de um quadro de referência que coloca como endógeno os estudos sobre economia, sociedade e história a partir da noção de espírito, não reduzindo o capitalismo à economia, mas incorporando-a para explicar a mentalidade de uma época. Dessa forma, faz o resgate histórico de um dos conceitos-chave da sociologia a partir de um dos principais sociólogos do século XX.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Espírito capitalista. Sombart. Mentalidade econômica.*

RESUMEN: *El concepto de espíritu de Werner Sombart escapa a la lógica economista para el análisis del sistema económico capitalista, porque, a partir de una interpretación sociológica de la historia, el pensador enfatiza las subjetividades susceptibles de traducirse en disposiciones comportamentales, provocando un sistema económico que se relaciona con las actitudes mentales de los individuos. Así, el presente trabajo busca presentar los principales conceptos e importancia de Werner Sombart a partir de sus propios textos y comentaristas, con el objetivo de analizar el desarrollo del capitalismo dentro de un marco de referencia que sitúa los estudios sobre economía, sociedad e historia como endógenos. la noción de espíritu, no reduciendo el capitalismo a la economía, sino incorporándolo para explicar la mentalidad de una época. De esta manera, proporcionamos un análisis histórico de uno de los conceptos clave de la sociología de la mano de uno de los principales sociólogos del siglo XX.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Espíritu capitalista. Sombart. Mentalidad económica.*

Introduction

Werner Sombart, over his 78 years of life, produced an extensive body of work, including numerous publications during his lifetime and even posthumously. He was arguably Germany's most influential and relevant social scientist during his era. Alongside Max Weber, he contributed to and refined the notion of spirit in sociological terms, enabling a theoretical and methodological reflection on capitalist development within the context of a complex system of social interactions.

This paper aims to elucidate the fundamental concepts and theories of Werner Sombart and his understanding of modernity and the capitalist economic system. It is a qualitative study grounded in analyzing the author's texts to deepen the comprehension of the concept of the capitalist spirit, as expounded by Werner Sombart. Subsequently, the identified concepts and ideas are analyzed and contextualized, facilitating the construction of an argument that presents the concept, highlighting its most relevant characteristics and implications.

However, it's essential to mention some limitations of this article, such as its exclusive focus on Werner Sombart's thinking, without considering other perspectives on the capitalist spirit. Additionally, the analysis centered on his texts, which may limit the understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of the concept of the capitalist spirit. In summary, despite these limitations, the article represents a significant contribution to understanding the concept conceived by Werner Sombart, providing a meticulous analysis of the author's texts and emphasizing the main features and implications of his thinking.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first part presents what Sombart understands as the task of sociology, its object of investigation, and the pathways leading to it. The second part will expound on the necessary components for forming an economic system. Finally, in the third part, a summary of the most fertile aspect of Sombart's thought is presented, which pertains to applying historical and theoretical knowledge to analyze the cultural significance of the capitalist system.

Sombart's Noosociology

Noosociology is central and permeates all of Sombart's sociology, as it expresses what is human in the "human animal." In other words, humans differ from other animals because the latter act and are guided by instincts encoded in their genetic makeup. On the other hand, humans stand out in the animal taxonomy, not merely acting instinctively but performing

actions with preconceived objectives. In summary, humans possess intellect, which enables them to think and guide their actions through thought, distancing themselves from dependence on their biological nature where needs are found, thereby providing greater freedom to act according to their values.

In this way, when guiding their actions according to values, humans end up feeling the need to create forms of language and ideas that help them understand what their biological senses perceive. This capture and creation of meaning are strictly human tasks and present in forming a particular era's spirit. However, the spirit is not an individual concept but a social one; therefore, sociology studies it as a science of the essence. Sociology does not seek to explain the energy in an immutable and natural manner, as sociology, according to Sombart, aims to understand and explain the sense and meaning of human thought and action based on the combination of motivations, needs, desires, and expectations, in other words, the values that guide human activity.

However, the spirit cannot be understood individually; rather, it must be understood socially. Therefore, the study of the spirit falls under the domain of sociology in the sense of being a science of the soul. Sociology does not seek to explain the spirit as unchanging and natural (Sombart, 1962, p. 8). As a science, Sombart's sociology aims to understand and explain the meaning and significance of human thought and action based on the combination of motivations, needs, desires, and expectations—in other words, the values that guide human action.

Consequently, sociology, as the study and knowledge of everything related to the social life of humans, excludes purposes related to the realm of "ought to be," proposing to explain what is and where social actions are projected. In this context, sociology distinguishes itself from the natural sciences regarding the approach to its subject matter. While the cultural sciences rely on the concept of interpreting (*verstehen*) to explain, the natural sciences rely on the concept of understanding (*begreifen*) to explain (POVINÃ, 1943, p. 339). Whereas natural sciences seek the root causes through observation, the social sciences of the spirit need to interpret the values of a given historical period.

This happens due to the historical nature of the human spirit. As mentioned earlier, what sets humans apart from animals is their capacity to act according to their motivations, needs, desires, and expectations. However, the set of values that form from this is not inexorable but shaped by how humans exist in the world, as it possesses its logic in each historical period and

space. Thus, since the spirit differs in each era and social formation, it is impossible to create general laws about the human spirit.

Therefore, understanding the human spirit can be achieved through its objectification, namely culture, making it possible to grasp the essence of humanity through its actions. According to Sombart, *noological* sociology aims to investigate the internal regularity of meaning in each culture or domain of the spirit, verifying the meaning of its actions in history. Its legitimacy presents itself as a rational character that seeks to empirically and causally explain the set of cultural relations and manifestations. By capturing this human spirit, one is grasping what is human in humans, making it possible to understand the motives behind their actions.

However, creating culture through action is only possible for Sombart because humans live in society and bond with each other. This gregarious attitude is familiar to many species. This happens because humans are unable to subsist in isolation. By living in groups and sharing social relations, people can perform functions that satisfy the needs of everyone in the group. Additionally, they are united by a spirit, meaning they are connected by a sense of purpose, forming a unity, a spiritual essence that guides their conduct. Thus, objectifying the spirit is only possible within a social formation, creating bonds that can unite individuals, enabling achieving goals while generating contradictions that will lead to new social constructions.

Technique plays an essential role in all these forms of culture and sociability to come into effect. As Gallino (2005, p. 615, our translation) defines it, technique represents "[...] the result of a long and intricate process of adaptation to specific conditions of the natural and social environment to meet the most diverse needs or 'functional imperatives'". Thus, it is through a technique that humans can survive and alter nature, creating something new that nature alone does not produce.

Therefore, a relationship can be established between the human ability to create new techniques and use them as technology, that is, the conscious exercise of technique with a goal. Also, due to their intellectual capacity, humans can distance themselves from what causes insecurity and fear. Having understood death, they act upon nature, seeking to eliminate the elements that threaten their biological bodies, extending their life expectancy. With this intention, they develop remedies, weapons against more vigorous opponents, and provisions for their subsistence. All these activities are grouped under the term "economics": "the human activity that aims to seek the means of subsistence" (SOMBART, 2014, p. 103, our translation)².

² Original text: *l'attività umana volta alla ricerca dei mezzi di sussistenza*.

It is evident that what varies across different historical epochs is the human spirit, while the nature of humanity remains the same throughout human history: "The fundamental realities of human life: birth and death, love and hate, fidelity and betrayal, truth and falsehood, hunger and thirst, poverty and wealth, always remain constant" (SOMBART, 1972, p. 16, our translation)³. Likewise, the need to engage in activities that transcend nature and provide sustenance, in other words, economic activities, is always present. Therefore, history should capture what is different in each case, which gives each historical moment and each social formation a unique hegemonic spirit associated with a specific economic system.

This economic system, born of the human spirit, comprises a financial order, which is the organization governing all economic operations; a technique encompassing procedures used to achieve objectives; and an economic mindset that employs the economy for a purpose, established on specific principles. Thus, these three elements together form the entire financial system. The economic system is " a unitary mode of providing for material wants, animated by a definite spirit, regulated and organized according to a definite plan, and applying a definite technical knowledge " (SOMBART, 2017, p. 5, our translation).

Metaphorically, Sombart (1962, p. 1) treats characteristics related to material production as the "economic body," encompassing external conditions, and complements this with the "economic spirit," which includes internal conditions such as faculties and psychic activities that impact economic life, in other words, the values regulating human behavior. Hence, the various economic periods are characterized by the specific spirit that prevailed. Therefore, to fully characterize an economic era, it is necessary to consider both the external structure of the historical period and the internal structure of that era. We can only gain a comprehensive view of a specific economic system through the causal relationship between the former and the latter.

As Bevilacqua and Borrelli (2015, p. 15) emphasize, one of the most fruitful aspects of Sombart's analysis for understanding capitalism comes into play. Through a sociological interpretation of history, he places mentality at the core of a socio-cultural construction process of capitalism, emphasizing the subjectivities capable of translating into behavioral arrangements, giving rise to an economic system closely related to individuals' mental attitudes.

The central idea here is that the origin of capitalism is intrinsically linked to psychological factors and the analysis of the actions of economic agents. In this context, a "comprehensive" approach to social dynamics considers the meanings that people attribute to

³ Original text: *Las realidades fundamentales de la vida humana: nacimiento y muerte, amor y odio, fidelidad y traición, mentira y verdad, hambre y sed, pobreza y riqueza permanecen siempre invariables.*

their actions, thus incorporating a psychological dimension into economic understanding. This approach is seen as a correction and a complement to traditional Marxist ideas, as noted by Lenger (1997, p. 156). This approach, which combines "Verstehen" or understanding with the Marxist perspective of thinking in terms of an economic system, has resulted in an experience that goes beyond mere material economic determinism, taking into account cultural factors of individuals to comprehend their social actions.

Sombart and the Capitalist Spirit

Sombart investigated capitalism in its historical and social context, viewing it as an economic way of life that emerged from tensions created by a new economic spirit within the old system. Over time, these contradictions led to the decline of the old system, making way for the emergence of the unknown. In other words, a new economic system arises when a new historical subjectivity becomes self-aware, with the capacity for action, putting its will in opposition to the conditions of existence of the obsolete economic system. This conflict aims to produce a new system, and it is through this conflict that a new one replaces the old economic system.

The emergence of the spirit of the contemporary era is linked to the spirit of capitalism. Sombart used the historical investigation to give meaning and significance to actions, social relations, cultures, organizations, and institutions that would reveal where the phenomenon of capitalism originated historically.

In his book "The Bourgeois," Sombart (1972, p. 33, our translation) ⁴ begins with a proposition loaded with meaning: "If not all of European history, at least that of the capitalist spirit, had its beginning in the struggle between gods and men for the possession of the disastrous gold." This statement reveals the struggle and passion for wealth and one of the main characteristics of the new spirit that would dominate Europe and, later, the world: the fantastic capacity for dissociation. Sombart's statement also expresses the transition of an era in which humans, with their power, stood up against the "gods," creating a form of intellect significantly more potent than a way of living based on the substantial will and religious, metaphysical certainties.

⁴ Original text: *Si no toda la Historia europea, al menos la del espíritu capitalista tuvo su principio en la lucha de dioses y hombres por la posesión del oro nefasto.*

However, in the 17th century, when philosophy detached itself from theology, it did not entail the denial of God or a new conception of human creation. Instead, the themes of God and creation were temporarily set aside, neither contested nor incorporated. This had epistemological implications as it opened the possibility of scientifically examining the body, the soul, and even the human spirit. Initially, this was done through dualism, which assigned the body to the realm of natural sciences and the soul to the realm of human sciences. Subsequently, efforts were made to reconcile body and soul, seeking an interconnectedness that more accurately reflected the uniqueness of the human being compared to other creatures. Roberta Iannone (2015, p. 117), in her contemporary study of Werner Sombart, emphasized that the German thinker sought to explore this interconnection between academic disciplines and spirit, soul, and body to understand human nature better.

Therefore, Werner Sombart analyzes the characteristic spirit of each historical period, with a particular focus on our time, namely the era of capitalism. He begins his investigation by considering what precedes the capitalist spirit, as he believes this spirit is shaped by previous influences, adopting a dialectical perspective. Sombart identifies this initial phase as the 'spirit of adventure.' This spirit is emphasized in figures driven by impulses of the human psyche, who undertook new actions, thus capable of breaking with tradition and creating something new in history. Such actions, often risking the lives of these figures, were motivated by a desire for enrichment to achieve recognition and power in a strictly rigid social order. The spirit of adventure is evident in figures such as pirates, privateers, soldiers, etc.

All these presented figures have a common characteristic: they perform their actions in groups and have a unitary desire: enrichment (SOMBART, 1972, p. 64). Furthermore, Sombart summarizes the spirit of adventure, once again metaphorically, as 'hot' in contrast to the 'cold' spirit of the bourgeois. Both spirits contributed to the formation of the spirit of capitalism; however, unlike the 'hot' figures who act on impulses, the bourgeois is the first to employ a technique to control their emotions, beginning to act coldly, methodically, and rationally. The bourgeois changes the way of being in the world, not aiming to satisfy immediate needs but sacrificing the present in favor of the future. They act by anticipating what will happen, using calculation and logic, and selecting the means to achieve their goals faster, more efficiently, and more productively.

In the spirit of the bourgeois, a calculating mentality prevails because the capitalist economy is based on agreements for the exchange of services and goods. This reduces everything to figures organized within a complex system of expenses and revenues

(SOMBART, 1972, p. 137). This calculating mentality, present in the spirit of the bourgeois, will become a fundamental element of the capitalist spirit.

Therefore, the modern capitalist spirit can be understood as a product of the succession of the spirits exposed above: the spirit of adventure and that of the bourgeois. The capitalist spirit incorporates the former's acquisitive drive with the latter's economic rationalism. However, the capitalist spirit has freed itself to develop its motivation for profit freely, objectifying itself within a financial system with techniques and orders guided by a mentality that aims at profit as an end in itself.

This mentality has changed the pleasures and sufferings of the modern economic subject, shifting them from reality to abstractions of profit in business. This has brought about a drastic change compared to the earlier stages of capitalism, where man ceased to be the standard to give way to the only possible desire: the prosperity of his enterprise. This, according to Sombart (1972, p. 182), will lead to a complete simplification of the psychic phenomena of the modern economic subject, bringing such notions of values closer to childlike ideas: quantitative valuation, an increase in the speed of events, an attraction to the new, and an emphasis on the feeling of power.

Final consideration

In this work, we aimed to present the main concepts and the importance of Werner Sombart in analyzing the development of the capitalist economic system within a framework that considers studies of economics, society, and history as endogenous, based on the notion of spirit. This implies not reducing capitalism to economics but incorporating it to explain the mentality of an era.

The work aimed to expose the fundamental concepts and theories of Werner Sombart, along with his understanding of modernity and the capitalist economic system. Through an analysis of the author's texts, it was possible to identify that Sombart views sociology as a science of the spirit and the meaning of human thought and action based on the combination of motivations, needs, desires, and expectations, in other words, the values that guide human action.

For Sombart, the human spirit is historical and manifests differently in each era and social formation. Thus, sociology should focus on the analysis of culture, which is the

objectification of the human spirit, to understand the essence of humanity and the reasons for its actions.

As the economic system characterizes a social, historical period, this product of the human spirit consists of three elements for Sombart: a financial order, a technique, and an economic mentality. The economic order is the organization to which all economic operations are subject; the method is the set of procedures used to achieve goals, and the economic mentality is how humans relate to the economy. Sombart understands that capitalism is an economic system based on the spirit of profit, characterized by the relentless pursuit of gains, rationality in conducting business, and capital accumulation.

Sombart's work has enduring relevance in understanding contemporary capitalism. The spirit of profit, essential to capitalism, remains present in today's society, albeit with modifications compared to Sombart's time. Even in contemporary capitalism, the spirit of profit is fueled by globalization, which has given rise to a highly competitive global market. This pressures companies to explore new markets and optimize costs to maximize their profits. Technological advancements also drive the spirit of profit, opening up new business opportunities. This compels companies to adapt to new technologies constantly; otherwise, they risk falling behind the competition.

In summary, despite its limitations, the work represents a significant contribution to the understanding of the concept of the capitalist spirit, as conceived by Werner Sombart, who, in various aspects, remains contemporary.

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