

Review of: "Werner Sombart's Longue Durée"

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"Why Should We Read Werner Sombart?" A Response to João Carlos Graça

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In late October of 1910, a group of about twenty scholars gathered in Frankfurt for the first conference of the newly formed Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie (German Society for Sociology). Among them were many of the best-known thinkers who were writing on sociology, including Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, Georg Simmel, Ernst Troeltsch, and Werner Sombart (Adair-Toteff 2005). Weber, Tönnies, Simmel, and Troeltsch have each been the subject of considerable interest. This interest is indicated by numerous books and articles devoted to their writings and that each of them have collected works. The collected works of Weber and Simmel are complete; those of Tönnies and Troeltsch are still ongoing. In contrast, very few books and articles have been written on Sombart during the past fifty years and no one is working on his collected writings. There are several theories for this neglect: Sombart's late enthusiasm for Nazism, his alleged anti-Semitism, and his reputation being over shadowed by Weber. It is to João Carlos Graça's credit that he intends to draw attention to Sombart's thinking with the article "Werner Sombart's Longue Durée" (Graça 2023). While Graça is to be commended for his efforts, his article is less than what he has promised because he does not provide a sufficient answer to "Why should we read Werner Sombart?"

"Werner Sombart's Longue Durée" has six sections. The first introduces Sombart and provides some of the justifications offered for Sombart's neglect. Graça is absolutely correct to note that Sombart had a fairly good and extensive reputation early in the twentieth century. In fact, when Talcott Parsons was thinking about the topic for his dissertation at Heidelberg, it was going to be primarily on Sombart. It was only with the prodding of his advisor that he included Max Weber. Graça is also correct to suggest that it was Parsons who emphasized Weber's importance and as a result, Sombart's fame began to recede. The second section is on war and luxury and here Graça focuses on two books that Sombart published in 1913. The first one was *Luxus und Kapitalismus* and Sombart's main point was to argue that rich people living in cities indulged in luxuries which contributed to the rise of modern capitalism (Sombart 1913a). The second book was *Krieg und Kapitalismus* and here the focus was on how much the requirements of an army and navy can be met only with capitalistic enterprises (Sombart 1913b). Both books are part of the series that Sombart entitled *Studien zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des modernen Kapitalismus* (*Studies on the Developmental History of Modern Capitalism*). The third section is on the "Janus-faced" development of capitalism and here the concern is with Sombart's preoccupation with the historical roots of capitalism. The fourth and fifth sections take up the issues of Sombart's views of religion and race and the claims that Sombart was not only anti-Semitic but was anti-Catholic. Graça tries to address these claims from the point of view of the

early twentieth century when many Germans were anti-Jewish and anti-Catholic. It is unfortunate that he did not mention the lingering consequences of Bismarck's "Kulturkampf" (1872-1878) or how entrenched anti-Semitism was in Europe during Sombart's life. The sixth section is a return to capitalism but here the focus is on one direction—the future and the dynamics of capitalism. The seventh and final section is more than a brief summary of the essay's main points: it is a request that we reconsider our neglect of Sombart's thinking and that we should consider his writings on luxury, war, and religious factors. If that had been Graça's sole purpose in writing his essay, then I would have little reason to quarrel. He does make a convincing case for Sombart; however, he claimed to have provided a "critical examination" of Sombart's thinking and this is where there are problems.

Graça begins with some comments about Sombart's relationship with his mentor Gustav Schmoller. Although these comments are oversimplifications, they are fundamentally correct. But then Graça turns to Sombart's books from 1913, thereby basically ignoring Sombart's most famous and most influential book *Der moderne Kapitalismus*. Sombart published the first two-volume edition in 1902 and then revised it several more times with a final six-volume edition appearing in 1927. It is in this work that Sombart developed his concept of the "spirit" of modern capitalism. Yet this work is mostly ignored by Graça. Sombart published hundreds of articles so one cannot fault Graça for ignoring most of these. However, by passing over some of the most notable ones, Graça misses the opportunity to show how widely respected Sombart was during the twenties and early thirties. To give three examples: Sombart wrote the first essay on capitalism in the volume of Weber's *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik* (Sombart 1925), he contributed two essays to Bernhard Härm's two volume *Kapital und Kapitalismus* (Sombart 1931a and 1931b), and he wrote six articles in Alfred Vierkandt's *Handwörterbuch der Soziologie* (Vierkandt 1931). There are also several other books that could have been addressed; but the main problem is that Graça tells us much about Thorstein Veblen, Joseph Schumpeter, Max Weber, and others. We learn what others thought about Sombart, but not much about what Sombart wrote.¹ So why should we bother to read Sombart's books and articles? There is no denying that Weber's *Protestant Ethic* is one of the classics in sociology, but that was Weber's main contribution to the debate regarding modern capitalism. But it was Werner Sombart who devoted much of his entire scholarly life to trying to establish why capitalism exists. That is why we should read Werner Sombart.

Footnotes

¹ Of the almost one hundred references, only nine of them are to Sombart's writings and none are to the German originals.

References

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