Talcott Parsons’ Early Essay on Capitalism. An American Interpretation of Werner Sombart and Max Weber

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Abstract
The paper analyzes Talcott Parsons’ early essay published in two issues of The Journal of Political Economy in 1928 and 1929. “‘Capitalism’ in recent German Literature: Sombart and Weber”, which introduces both Sombart and Weber to the American public. It represents a relevant moment in the development of Parsons as a sociologist. After discussing Parsons’ interpretation of both Sombart’s and Weber’s theories about the origin of Capitalism, the paper gives an interpretation of Parsons’ role in the establishment of Weber as a founding father of sociology and the relative irrelevance of Sombart as a sociological classic.

Keywords: Werner Sombart, Max Weber, Capitalism, Modernity, Sociological canon

I

In a recent paper published in a relevant international journal on the history of sociological thought, Grundmann and Stehr (2013) wonder about the intellectual destiny of Werner Sombart: renowned during his lifetime, acclaimed as a brilliant intellectual and a breathtaking lecturer, well known abroad and widely translated, he gradually lost ground and was never able to acquire the status of a founding father of sociology. His present position within the social sciences is even more puzzling if we compare it with the renown of another contemporary intellectual, Max Weber, who shared the same scientific interests as Sombart (the well-known investigation on the origin of Capitalism, the less taken-for-granted analyses on the methodology of human and social sciences), friends and acquaintances (Grundmann and Steher, 2013), as well as professional and political experiences (Loader, 2001). Although during their lifetime Max Weber was the one who received less public approval and esteem, his thought is now universally renowned as foundational in the development of sociological theory and method.

Grundmann and Stehr ask themselves about the intellectual destiny of two men who shared topics and life-style, one of whom has never been able to acquire sociological relevance and classic status. The question is to be dealt with by making reference to the construction of a sociological canon. The term canon designates the
whole of the texts acknowledged as relevant within a given disciplinary field. A
canon is the output of a cumulative and selective process. A selection is made among
topics, questions, works, authors that eventually contribute to the construction of a
tradition, hence of a disciplinary identity. The process is always open as it constantly
produces memory and oblivion, by singling out what is to be reputed as classical and
what has to be expunged as inappropriate, what is central to the debate and what is to
be marginalized, what is foundational and what can be, at the most, an old fashioned
intellectual curiosity. In the complex process of canon construction, full memory
came Weber’s way, Sombart’s only a faint recollection.

Obviously, the selection process does not happen randomly, yet it may not be
imputed only to the intellectual quality of what has been selected. Connell (2007) has
shown how one of the exclusion criteria is the geographical location of the author, so
that peripheral authors find it harder to be selected as part of the canon. According
to the Australian sociologist, peripheral is geographically connoted. One may think also
of a marginality of themes, questions, methodological approaches which are not part
of the mainstream paradigm. The selecting process is concealed so that what has
been included in the canon is legitimized as the “natural” product in the evolution of a
specific field of investigation. In the case of sociology, by naturalizing the process,
the discipline has ascribed to its Western roots universal qualities, so that a peculiar
perspective from which to observe social reality (the metropole perspective according
to Connell) is assumed as able to describe and explain social reality as such (Connell:
2007, 22 ff.). What has been assumed within the canon is what had to be assumed.
And what has been excluded up until now, can be included only after undergoing
complex appropriation procedures (which happened for example in the case of the
increasing sociological relevance of Georg Simmel). Assuming this selecting process
as an interpretative frame of Sombart’s and Weber’s sociological destiny, I will refer
to an early essay Talcott Parsons devotes to the origins of capitalism in German
literature. Despite the fact that this early paper is a balanced review of both Sombart’s
and Weber’s reading of capitalism as an economic and social phenomenon, Weber
keeps his relevance in Parsons’ thought throughout his theoretical production,
Sombart does not. This marginalization of Sombart within Parsons’ production may
be considered as one of the exogenous reasons (there are endogenous motives too,
such as the quality of his works and its ideological connotation) which contribute to
explain the irrelevant role Sombart plays within the sociological canon.

II

Werner Sombart is the topic of the first of the two papers that Talcott Parsons (1928)
devoted to capitalism and to the analysis of some trends of the contemporary
development of German sociological and economic culture. The paper was published
in two issues, in the Journal of Political Economy, the second of which (Parsons:
1929) focusing on Weber. Parsons’ interest in both authors is the result of a series of
circumstances, in part linked to his early academic researches, in part occasioned by
his stay at the University of Heidelberg, thanks to a scholarship within an exchange
programme between Germany and the United States. In 1920 Parsons entered Amherst, a New England college which was then acquiring a new role as a nationally well-established and recognized academic institution. During the presidency of Alexander Meiklejohn, who advocated an innovative educational reform policy, teaching programs underwent a radical change. By rejecting fragmentation of knowledge in separated disciplinary fields, Meiklejohn aimed at fostering interdisciplinarity, in order to give students the most appropriate intellectual tools to understand the complex phenomena which characterized contemporary society. (Camic, 1991, xii). At Amherst, Parsons came in contact with heterodox scholars (such as the economist Walton Hamilton, the philosopher Clarence Ayres) who gave him access to an articulated understanding of human affairs, with a particular focus on economic processes.

Against an exemplified version of economic processes as proposed by orthodox neoclassical economics which was then taking root, Hamilton intended to offer his students an analysis of economic phenomena based on an understanding of social institutions, hence of an articulated combination of elements (which besides the market, contract, property included usages, codes of the ethic, rules of the game, essential in order to contextualize the economic order and economic transactions – ibid.: xv). Moreover, Hamilton underlined the relevance of the historical dimension (by applying what he called “genetic method”) which allowed to observe the development of a phenomenon, particularly relevant when the evolution of the industrial society was to be put under scrutiny. In order to understand contemporary economy – as well as its values, institutions and activities – one had to analyse the historical processes through which it came to the present stage of evolution (ibid.: xv). While attending Amherst, Parsons acquired intellectual knowledge and competences, which enabled him to historically analyse economic phenomena. He seemed by now aware that, in order to understand economic action, it was not enough to make theoretical reference to an abstractly rational actor, who acted pursuing ahistorical objectives, in an aseptic, de-socialized environment. In order to understand modern economy one had, on the contrary, to investigate the historical and social dimension of such evolutionary processes as industrialization and capitalism. It is not difficult to notice in the complexity of his early academic education, an interest in social issues which would later affect his intellectual production. It is also possible to single out themes such as capitalism, economy and historical contextualization which would be Parsons’ chief interest in his year in Heidelberg and the topic of his two papers on Sombart and Weber.

In 1924 Talcott Parsons graduated at Amherst and, taking advantage of the benevolence of one of his uncles, he traveled to London where he spent a year at the London School of Economics. There he deepened his economic knowledge (he attended Edwin Cannan’s classes on the history of the economic thought – ibid.: xvii), got acquainted with the anthropological version of functionalism as proposed by Malinowski (Hamilton, 1983:32); got in touch with sociology, which was then taught at the London School of Economics by L. T. Hobhouse. He completed his education in the broad field of social sciences and, after getting a yearly scholarship to Germany, moved to Heidelberg where he stayed during the academic year 1925-26.
(Camic, 1991:xix). In Heidelberg he found himself involved in a particularly stimulating milieu, where the gigantic figure of Max Weber (who had been professor in the city university and who had died five years earlier) still lingered. Parsons got in touch with relevant intellectuals, including Karl Mannheim, Karl Jasper, Weber’s brother Alfred, who was himself a political sociologist. Moreover, he attended the classes of Edgar Salin, an historian of the economic thought who clearly distinguished between a rationalistic economic school, whose approach was linked to Anglo-Saxon individualism and atomism, and a holistic approach, of German origins, which tended to analyse economic phenomena as organically connected to the culture and the society which had produced it. It is plausible that Parsons found Salin’s teaching compatible with what he had learn at Amherst. Anyway, Parsons asked Salin to be his Doktorvater; and Salin addressed the young American scholar towards a systematic analysis of German literature on the topic of capitalism. Capitalism would eventually be the subject-matter of Parsons’ dissertation (ibid: xxi). The last chapter (the first two have probably been lost) would be eventually published in the *Journal of Political Economy* in the two issues which will be the object of my further analysis.

III

The publication of the two papers on Sombart and Weber belongs to his early years at Harvard, as non-faculty instructor at the Department of Economics, which was then the main centre of propagation of orthodox neo-liberal economic thought in the United States. Although the academic environment was not one fostering institutional approaches to economic analysis, Parsons kept on being intellectually attracted by heterodox alternatives, which might enable him to understand economic processes and their development within a wider socio-cultural context. As a matter of fact, in the first papers Parsons devoted to the contemporary German literature on capitalism, when writing about the radical historicism of Sombart, the young scholar made a formal *en pass* declaration showing that he did not share the German economist’s rejection of orthodox economic theory. Yet he mitigated his assertion when writing that he found of great interest “the positive task of economic science in the historical presentation and modes of life and analysis of concrete economic system”(Parsons, 1928: 643).

There are two elements which are to be taken into account. As a young scholar in an intellectually hostile environment, Parsons tended to tone down his institutionalism as a strategy to be better accepted by the host academic community. On the other hand, as Brick (2000: 494) writes, at Harvard Parsons found an intellectual milieu where “he would accept what the institutionalists denied, namely that within certain limits formal, neoclassic economic theory had scientific validity”. Yet, some elements of the old teaching still continued to influence Talcott Parsons, and the papers on Sombart and Weber are particularly revealing in this respect. What emerges is a conception according to which the Anglo-Saxon economic thought “failed to recognize the historical specificity of capitalism and the social structure that
made it an integral whole exceeding the sum of individuals within it” (Brick 2000, p. 494). Indeed, by choosing capitalism and its evolution as a thematic unit, Parsons was able to single out a topic which was half-way between sociology and economic analysis, a strategy that gave him alternatives for the future development of his career.

Parsons clarifies as a premise the theoretical background of his essay by underlining two main influences. The first is the historical school in economics, with its emphasis on the specific characteristics of each historically located economic system rather than on the search for general economic laws. The second is a conception of capitalism as an epoch in the historical process of social and economic development. Such a conception has Marxian roots and may be found, although with substantial differences as compared to Marx, in both Werner Sombart and Max Weber (Parsons, 1928: 642). Parsons came in touch with the question of capitalism and its development during his year in Germany, where it was one of the most discussed topics within the intellectual debate (Hamilton, 1983, p. 56). In that period, Sombart and Weber represented, regardless of the relevant differences which connoted their explication of capitalism and its evolution, two attempts to explain its development within an explanation frame that, as compared to Marx’, did not ignore the cultural component co-determining the evolution of free market economy (an ethic, according to Weber, a mentality, or Geist, according to Sombart).

Indeed, capitalism analysed as a specific phase in the socio-economic development is a relevant topic in itself, but it also shows how abstract neo-classical economic theories are, even if they claim universal validity. Economic universalism “has perforce tended to neglect the economic problems connected with the growth and development of types of economic society, and in particular with the working out of the differences between, and the specific characteristics of different cultural epochs.” (Parsons, 1928: 641). The alternative is to locate economic (and latu sensu social) phenomena within the broadest cultural and historical context which has, as its two main influences, both the German Historical School and Marx, as well as the discussion following to the spread of Marxian ideas.

This early Parsons, who criticises processes of generalization and abstract rationalism in favour of a careful contextualization of social and economic phenomena may be puzzling for those used to associate him with the sociological grand theorist. Yet, the logic which his analysis implies (contextualising economic phenomena in the normative, cultural and institutional background in which they have emerged) anticipates the conceptual framework within which, just a few years later, Parsons would locate his sociological analysis of action: not an abstract act of a de-contextualized rational individual (such as the one we are acquainted with in classical and neo-classical economic analysis), but rather a subjectively motivated action, deeply influenced by the normative and structural context in which the meaningful human behaviour takes place. Yet, it would be wrong to associate Parsons’ intellectual development leading towards The Structure of Social Action (Parsons, 1937) with a permanent rejection of neo-classical economic thought.

Indeed, as Charles Camic (1987) has clearly shown, Parsons’ shift from economics to sociology overlaps with a gradual acceptance of neo-classical thought, which had academic, intellectual as well as practical reason. Economic
institutionalism, by promoting a unified social science, including economics, psychology, history, anthropology and sociology, proposed itself as a synthetic super social science, and would hardly give sociology the due chances to develop as an autonomous academic field of investigation (Camic, 1987: 429). In Harvard, Parsons found the appropriate intellectual milieu where to develop an idea of sociology as an autonomous discipline, able to assume, as its proper object, what classical economics considered as inessential or irrelevant. Sociology could propose itself as a discipline whose proper task was to analyse social values and institutions, therefore not a field competing with orthodox economic thought. Moreover, it could represent an external support for economic sciences, by giving neo-classical approaches the opportunity to integrate those social elements which according to the institutionalists were lacking, yet keeping the disciplinary identities of the two social sciences well distinguished. (Camic, 1987:430). On the practical level, by gradually converting himself into a sociologist, Parsons accomplish another relevant task. He could distinguish himself from the great number of young graduated economists working at Harvard with little prospects, thus trying to make a career in a less prestigious yet less competitive academic field.

When Parsons wrote his dissertation, a part of which would converge in his two papers on Sombart and Weber, all this was yet to come and the influence of his old American and German mentors was still strongly evident. Parsons’ analysis of Sombart and Weber was accurate, in places even aseptic, the critical presentation to the American reading public of two relevant intellectuals proposed by a young scholar, who tried to summarize their complex thought and to contextualise their theories on capitalism within the cultural and social milieu of contemporary Germany.

The interest Parsons showed in Sombart’s thought, which is analysed chiefly by making reference to Modern Capitalism, was first of all methodological and had to be located in Sombart’s typical combination of historical and theoretical analysis. Sombart was capable of mastering an incredible bulk of historical data which converged in an exhaustive representation of “European economic life as a whole, in its great common trends, and in getting at the laws of its development”(Parsons, 1928: 643). So in Parsons’ analysis, Sombart approach is theoretical rather than historical, since at its core Parsons sees an attempt to detect the laws explaining the evolution of capitalism as a social system. The word theory, as Parsons uses it by referring to Sombart, is compatible with the meaning that social scientists in general, rather than economists, attribute to the term. Indeed, by theory is to be meant “not merely a system of equilibrium, but any consistent and unified system of concepts to be used in the analysis of social phenomena” (Parsons, 1928: 643-644).

In Sombart’s view, the economic system combines all the features taken on by the economic life in a given historical epoch. The system is historically locatable and characterized by three elements: a form of organization, a technique and, last but not least, a Geist, a spirit which in the exemplification proposed by Talcott Parsons is translated as the mental attitude of an epoch. In Parsons’ interpretation of Sombart, the Geist is the most relevant of the three elements indispensable in order to specify the historical properties of the economic system. And that because, according to the
young American scholar, German philosophy after Kant may be depicted as a pendulum-like movement between idealism and materialism, “tending to exaggerate first one and then the other of the two great elements of the compromise.” (Parsons, 1928: 646). If Hegel and Marx may be intended as the opposite extremes of the pendulum-like movement and Kant as a mediation, with Sombart German philosophy seems, according to Parsons, to swing again in the direction of idealism1.

According to Sombart, capitalism as an economic system may be defined by singling out its fundamental task: the acquisition of a profit. In pre-capitalistic societies, economic activities were finalized to the satisfaction of human needs which were defined according to the social status in which an individual happened to be born. Such economic systems, in which needs and social positions were strictly connected (Bedarfsdeckungsprinzip) are radically different from capitalism, where stably defined social needs are replaced by the acquisition principle (Erwerbsprinzip) as an organization instrument of economic activities. What is relevant is that while in traditional societies boundaries were set, also in connection to the strict differentiation of society in social statuses, in capitalistic societies resources are constantly activated and reactivated. From a social point of view, this overlaps with a greater fluidity of the social organization allowed by capitalism: the new labour organization, based on a modern enterprise where the capital meets formally free labour power has, as one of its consequences, a rationalization of production processes and, as an unexpected output, the evolution of modern socialist and labour movements (Parsons, 1928:647). As far as economic exchanges are concerned, money (and here Sombart reminds a reader with a sociological background of Georg Simmel) becomes the common denominator of every transaction and a further element in the direction of a more dynamic society. It is acquisition, personified in the figure of the entrepreneur, which makes capitalism an active evolutionary force. Let us read Parsons commenting on Sombart:

«Thus it appears that Sombart sees capitalism as an objective system the end of which comes to be the acquisition of profit. It is the compulsion on the individual business man to seek this end which Sombart, following Marx, calls the “necessity of capital to reproduce itself” (Verwertungsstreben des Kapitals)». (Ibidem)

By making reference to the individual actor, Parsons writes, Sombart (and that holds for Weber too) does not intend to propose any psychological explanation of capitalism and its development. When referring to the individual and his action, both authors are interested in the differences of mental attitudes determined by geographical and historical diversity: therefore the individual and his action are products of their location in time and space, which brings the analysis of capitalism as

1 Only by over-exemplifying, Parsons is here reducing the complex intellectual figure of Sombart to an idealist, regardless of the deep intellectual debts which he owned to Marx and his analysis of capitalism and its evolution (for an introduction to the complexity of Sombart’s thought see Peukert, 2012: 527-564).
proposed by both Sombart and Weber within the domain of social rather than psychological sciences.

According to Sombart, the entrepreneur spirit, which is the individual manifestation of the spirit of capitalism, may take on two distinct aspects: the spirit of enterprise and the bourgeois spirit. The former is not specific to capitalism as such (it is the spirit which allows the constitution of the modern state, of new religions, of technical innovations), although it finds a particularly suitable field of application in the typical endless strive for acquisition, so typical of capitalism. When applied to capitalism, writes Parsons commenting on Sombart, the spirit of enterprise splits into two principles: acquisition and competition. The acquisition principle objectifies single identities and desires, and addresses them towards the making of profit “an end which dominates the whole system.” (Parsons, 1928: 649). Competition strengthens the acquisition tendency, makes the system more dynamic, the rhythm of modern economic activity faster and more intense, yet it transforms the economic sphere from a means into an object in itself, regardless of the individuals involved, who become part of a reification process, in which the economic activity converts itself into a sort of modern lay religion: “Economic activity, which is originally purely a means to an end, becomes an absolute end in itself, the expression of a religion.”(Parsons, 1928: 650).

The second component of capitalism is the bourgeois spirit: if the former component is linked to the competitive struggle for acquisition, the bourgeois spirit refers to all those processes of non-conflicting rationalization, based upon the assessment and management of profits, hence upon the ethic of reliability, frugality, industry and thrift. This second aspect is essential to the evolution of modern large-scale industry, which may not evolve without a rationalization of the production and management processes. The two components are related with two different phases in the evolution of capitalism, by which the spirit of enterprise is stiffened within the solid, bureaucratic structures of the capitalistic system (Parsons, 1928:650). Sombart, in this respect resembling Weber’s analysis of rationalization on a smaller scale, imputes a process of reification to the bourgeois spirit: the capitalistic enterprise is converted into a “monster” with an autonomous will, by now independent of the will of individual and collective actors:

«Sombart sees at the end of capitalistic development the creation of a “monster”, the capitalistic enterprise, possessed of a purpose, an understanding, and a set of virtues all its own, going its own way independently of human will». (651)

How does Parsons react to Sombart’s analysis of capitalism, an analysis which gives a gloomy presentation of some of the more negative consequences of the modern market economy? The question is relevant, especially if one thinks that Talcott Parsons is to be counted among the sociologists of the 20th century who more firmly exalted modernity and such typically western processes as democratization, inclusion, welfare state, acquisition, universalism etc. As a young scholar, Talcott Parsons found Sombart’s sharp critical position against modernity anachronistic. Sombart is to be placed within the tradition of romantic conservatism which saw
capitalism and modernization in general “as a destructive force tearing down the social ties of an older and more “organic” civilization.” (Ibidem) Sombart, Parsons writes, advocates a return to the state of nature, yet his conception of the state of nature has nothing to share with the progressive and egalitarian meaning to which Enlightenment thinkers in the 18th century referred by using the same expression. By state of nature he means the pre-capitalistic society, seen as a model against which to evaluate all the faults of present-day society. It was a hierarchical and aristocratic society, utterly different from the state of unlimited freedom and equality which characterized the representation of the state of nature in Western political philosophy, and which assumed a potentially progressive function in the liberal political thought from the 18th century onwards.

Moreover, Sombart rejects any idea of linear progress, hence any optimistic vision of the future. A consequence of this negative stance is the political denial of contemporary versions of socialism which, due to their acceptance of the economic, technical and social development brought about by capitalism, are, according to Sombart, unable to elide its essential defects. Furthermore, the enthusiasm for progress is motivated by the increasing capacity of man to control natural forces. Yet Sombart underlines, as Parsons writes, that “man in emancipating himself from slavery to nature has subordinated himself to a system of his own making whose tyranny over his life is worse”, (Ibid.: 654). Technique, which is one of the elements of the economic system, is one of the greatest force of man’s subordination. Sombart shows how technical progress is to be intended as one of the elements triggering the spirit of capitalism. Nonetheless, the strong link between science and technology has, as one of its consequences, the creation of an artificial world, which will eventually turn against the individuals instead of emancipating them. (Ibid.: 655).

The imagine of Sombart we receive by reading Parsons’ essay is ambivalent. Parsons is fascinated by the complexity of Sombart’s methodological approach, the impressing bulk of historical data he uses in his analyses, his ability to give them logical consistency within a unitary theoretical representation. Nonetheless, he does not agree with the idea according to which history should be a series of autonomous epochs independently following one another. This idea, although justifiable within Sombart’s general attempt to reject the naïve optimism of the evolutionary theory of progress, seems to Parsons unable to account for the constant contamination among historical, cultural and social figurations (ibid.: 652-3). By denying the evolutionary component in history, Sombart expunges from his perspective the optimistic elements in Marxism, which considers socialism as a synthesis of the positive elements of capitalism. In this regard, Parsons quotes Sombart: “We can no longer believe in the creative power of capitalism as Marx did [...] We know that in spite of all the noise nothing of any cultural importance has come of it, and nothing ever will [...] Salvation can only be sought in turning away from it.” (Sombart quoted in Parsons, 1928: 661)

Yet, notwithstanding the marked differences between Marx and Sombart, they both elaborated deterministic approaches, which Parsons does not endorse. Although substituting cultural to economic conditions, in Sombart’s view the social actor is
limited in his possibility of action: the modern individual is not free but can, at the most, express with his thoughts and actions the spirit of his age.

IV

As for Weber, Parsons took on the task to introduce in the United States one of the most influential among the German sociologists, still little read in the American universities. In fact, whereas Sombart had already had a certain circulation within academic networks, the name of Weber was known only in more restricted circles. That is probably the reason why the part of the paper that Parsons devoted to Max Weber is first of all a methodological introduction on the concept of ideal type. As compared to Sombart, whose method is genetic, Weber’s used the comparative-analytical instrument of the ideal type. Parsons introduced the American reader to the concept, by showing its fundamental features: its being a fictitious instrument, in which specific aspects are accentuated for analytic purposes.

In particular, Parsons writes, an ideal type is defined on the base of a simulation: “It is a special construction in the mind of the investigator of what social action would be if it were directed with perfect rationality” (Parsons, 1929:31-32). As an instrument of analysis, the ideal type may give the investigator the opportunity to verify which concrete individual events or phenomena approximate or deviate more from the ideal type as constructed by the investigator. One question which Parsons stresses is that the concept of ideal type has at least a double meaning in Weber: it does not only hint at an analytical abstraction, but it can also indicate a historical individuality. In that case, the ideal type is no longer a comparative instrument, but the construction of an historical representation of a specific phenomenon (ibid.: 33). Whereas in the first case the constructed ideal type takes into account only partial aspects of the analysed phenomenon, which has been fictitiously reconstructed by the scientist in order to use it as a comparative instrument, in the second case, it is a determined historical phenomenon which is accurately analysed:

«Parsons argues that the Weberian ideal type includes two different concepts, a general one in which the concept of capitalism can be used as a widely applicable instrument for selecting and analysing certain specific historical events, and another that instead can be applied only to some particular historical objects such as modern capitalism». (Segre, 2012: 9-10)

Calling both ideal type may rise confusion since one never knows to which Weber is referring.

In the case of capitalism, this confusion is reproduced. Weber constructs an analytic ideal type of capitalism, to be intended as an economic system in which the exchange of goods is aimed at securing a profit. This formal conception of capitalism would easily apply to different historically concretions of capitalism, regardless of their specific characters (Parsons, 1929: 34). The formal conception of capitalism, writes Parsons by referring to Max Weber, is more encompassing than one would
expect: some of the characters that Weber ascribes to capitalism as a general phenomenon (the rational tempering of the predatory instinct, the subordination of action to the requirements of the system) are features typical of capitalism as such, although they acquire a peculiar strength in a capitalistic order of society (e.g. a society where capitalistic enterprise has become the main form of economic organization, able “to dominate society as a whole”-ibid.: 36). Max Weber analyses also capitalism as an historical individuality, thus describing a set of characters which may be ascribed only to modern capitalism. These characters are compatible with some of the traits which, according to Sombart, are typical of modern capitalism, in particular its objectivity, that is the capacity of capitalism to influence or even determine individual action (ibid.). Yet most of Weber’s arguments stray away from Sombart’s. Weber stresses the relevance of organisational rationality as a typical trait of capitalistic enterprise, so undervaluing the role of the capitalist adventurer, which, according to Sombart, by personifying the entrepreneurial spirit, is essential for the development of capitalism, at least in its expanding phase (ibid.). For Weber, rationality is the key element of capitalism as it defines the institutional milieu wherein capitalism evolved. It is an institutional milieu characterized by a set of rational organizations or bureaucracies (both economic and non-economic), structured around a number of specifically modern characteristics: hierarchical division of tasks, specialization of functions, impersonality and legal authority. Rationality influences the enterprise as well, which is now endowed with a set of characters one of which is the rational organization of free work. Moreover, a stable mode of accumulation is made possible thanks to a rational system of bookkeeping which, in its turn, enables to separate the interests of businessman from those of the productive unit (ibid.:38). Rationality is the chief character of modern society, which shows the congeniality of modernity and capitalism. Yet even socialism is subdued to the same rationalizing bureaucratization process and, in so far as bureaucratic rationality represents the connecting element between the two systems, socialism does not represent an alternative but, if at all, a stage in the same direction of rationalization (ibid.:38-39).

According to Parsons, this gloomy view of modern capitalism depends on the not well-defined distinction between capitalism as an ideal type and as an historical individuality. Weber starts his analysis – Parsons writes– by constructing an ideal type of capitalism suitable as a comparative tool. The ideal type, constructed as a comparative instrument, comes eventually to be identified with the historical phenomena of modern capitalism. By making so, Weber applies the accentuated traits of his ideal types to historically detectable phenomena, hence his highly negative representation of the modern (ibid.:49). Parsons underlines the fact that, as capitalistic rationality imubes all the aspects of the everyday life of modern individuals, they have to adapt their behaviour to a complex set of norms and cultural values. Here Parsons, taking the task of introducing Max Weber to the American reader seriously, synthesizes the thesis of the relation between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism (ibid: 41 ff.). The output is an economic system able to free itself from the value system which contributed to its development (the Protestant ethic), containing in itself all the negative traits of modernity: an objective system, able to impose its
rationality on a social actor whose asceticism has converted itself into a search for profit *per se*, within a mechanic society where interchangeable individuals are relevant for their function much more than for their specificity (ibid.:43). Rationality is a destiny with no way out: it has weakened social creative forces and, once it assumes the character of bureaucratization is, according to Weber, an inescapable and irreversible process (ibid.:46). Parsons criticizes this pessimistic view from a methodological rather than ideological point of view: it is as if Weber applies to life as such the logic of bureaucratization. The final result is the iron cage, a metaphor of the everyday life in modern capitalism, one of the most powerful and enduring sociological image of modernity.

V

A key to interpret Parsons’ essay on Sombart and Weber may be found in the passage quoted below, which synthesizes not only Parsons’ attitude towards the two German intellectuals, but also his future theoretical attitude towards modernization. When criticizing Sombart’s approach to social change as a discontinuous passage from a culture conceived as a unique entity to another, Parsons gives some hints about his personal position:

«There seems to be little reason to believe that it is not possible on the basis which we now have to build by a continuous process something more nearly approaching an ideal society [...] In the transition from capitalism to a different social system surely many elements of the present system would be built into the new order». (Parsons, 1928: 13)

This future society, which is not ideal but comes as close as possible to a realistic idealism, according to Parsons, may not be but the output of gradual reforms. That is why Parsons does not stress discontinuity but focuses his attention on the elements which, from the old order will be transferred into the new (Brick, 2000: 494). The way modernity is represented by both Sombart and Weber, is incompatible with the substantial optimism of Parsons’ approach. Although a stereotyped version of Talcott Parsons as a conservative sociologist is now unacceptable, his representation of modernity is based on a clearly optimistic understanding of the expansive phase of welfare policies (Gerhardt, 2002). Talcott Parsons’ sociology is to be understood within an intellectual and social milieu which looks optimistically to both the present and the future. Which does not mean that Parsons is not aware of the dark aspects of modernity (see for example his essays on Nazism – Parsons. 1948A; 1948b) yet they are analysed in a theoretical framework according to which modernity (including its turbulent aspects) will eventually produce more integration and inclusion (Sciortino, 2005).

When compared with this optimistic representation of modern society, the images of modernity that Parsons finds in Sombart’s and Weber’s writings are gloomy, more congenial to the development of critical sociology rather than
structural-functionalism. Yet, whereas Weber is one of Parsons’ constant references, Sombart is soon set aside. Max Weber will represent one of the founding references of Parsons’ theory of social action (Parsons, 1937) and in his first relevant monograph he will discuss Weber’s methodological approach as well as his analysis of capitalism. Parsons will translate Weber (both the *Protestant Etic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and partly *Economy and Society*) and his translation of Weber will set the American interpretation of Weber’s sociology for a long period (Baehr, 2002). In the hundredth anniversary of Weber’s death, he will devote an essay to his thought and relevance (Parsons, 1965).

In the process of construction of the sociological canon, Weber’s relevance within contemporary American sociology is largely to be ascribed to Talcott Parsons. His interpretation of Weber is certainly partial, and indeed his translation of Weber’s works is compatible with his theoretical approach (his theory of action and its further development). Significantly, the American sociology felt the necessity to de-parsonize Weber, giving an alternative reading of his work (Cohen, Hazzerligg, Pope, 1975). The canonizing process failed in the case of Sombart. Indeed, the status of classic is not the output of an objective evaluation of the quality of an author and his work. Rather, it is the result of complex institutional processes (academic and editorial interest, transmission and diffusion involving scientific institutions and influential individuals) (Silva e Vieira, 2014:357). Therefore, a plurality of concurrent causes are necessary in order to trigger off the process. Grundmann e Stehr underlines a number of the reasons (some of them ideological) which explain why Sombart never became full part of the sociological canon. Talcott Parsons (1964), by celebrating Max Weber in the centenary of his birth, stresses the multiplicity of themes dealt by the German intellectual, underlines the fact that these themes are often tentative in their treatment, open for further sociological elaboration. This tentativeness is, according to Parsons, one of the motives of Weber’s greatness and the main reason for the durable theoretic interest for his work. In a period when sociology identified largely with Parsons, his capacity to define the sociological canon was difficult to contest. The lack of interest in Sombart in the development of Parsons’ thought is one of the reasons, probably not the least important, why Sombart is not included in the roll-call of the founding fathers.

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