

Werner Sombart and his reception in Italy

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Abstract

This article intends to focus on the difficulty encountered by Werner Sombart's works in gaining a hearing in various Italian intellectual circuits. As is well known, Sombart belonged to the German Historical School of economics, sharing with other scholars of that school the same problems in getting his work known in Italy. Our aim is to explain the reason for this hostile reception.

First of all, we will analyze the factors which generally hindered the spread of the German Historical School in Italy, recognizing in economists like Francesco Ferrara, Idealists like Benedetto Croce and Marxists like Antonio Labriola some of its strongest opponents. We will dwell on the cases of Gustav Schmoller and Max Weber, in order to give two representative examples of the slow and complicated Italian reception of methodological approaches and analytical perspectives which characterized the scientific experience of the German Historical School.

Secondly, we will try to show why Sombart was even less appreciated than other German social scientists, giving the reasons that attracted severe criticism from economists, economic historians and sociologists towards his interdisciplinary approach in the analysis of modern capitalism. Finally, we will show the reasons of the contemporary rediscovery of Sombart and of his works.

Keywords: Werner Sombart, German Historical School, Gustav von Schmoller, Max Weber, Methodology of Social Sciences, Italian economists

Introduction

The Italian reception of Werner Sombart's works was not easy, but in this it was not unique. The slow spread of Sombart's scientific contribution is shared by other authors of the German Historical School and was not confined to Italy. Schumpeter is probably right when he states that «the historical school cannot be said to have ever been dominant in any country» (Schumpeter 1986, p. 808), but a problem remains: why was the spread of these scientific contributions so difficult in many countries and in Italy? Why did such difficulty also arise regarding innovative works that, apart from their limits, seemed able to open new fields of research for the social sciences? Why did the obstacles to the scientific contributions of important scholars of the German Historical School of economics derive not only from economics, but also from other social sciences of different orientations (Idealism, Positivism, Marxism)?

This article has a twofold purpose: firstly, we will see the general factors that in the Italian social sciences hindered or slowed the spread of the works of the German Historical School economists or sociologists. Secondly, we will attempt to show that, for many reasons, in Italy Sombart's works faced further obstacles compared to those of other scholars of the German Historical School (henceforth GHS).

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In relation to the first point, we will deal with the opposition to the GHS manifested by some Italian economists based on Francesco Ferrara's critiques. We will also see that the opposition to the GHS was shared, for different reasons, by the Italian representatives of Idealism (starting with Benedetto Croce) and Marxism (Antonio Labriola and others) (see § 1).

We obviously cannot make a systematic, exhaustive analysis on this issue, but for the purposes of this research it will be useful to examine the spread in Italy of the works of Gustav Schmoller and Max Weber (see § 2), considering it as a good example of the fitful Italian interest in the scientific analyses of the GHS.

Finally, we will look at Werner Sombart, who was perhaps the most criticized German scholar of that period, for various reasons: his membership of the GHS, the outcomes of his scientific analyses, some features of his character and, last but not least, his problematic relationships with Nazism. In section 3 we will consider the way Italian economists and economic historians have evaluated his works (above all *Der moderne Kapitalismus*). In section 4 we will reconstruct the Italian sociologists' reception of Sombart's work. On this aspect we will distinguish three different periods, passing from a phase characterized by a general lack of interest (until after World War II), to a phase of rediscovery of Sombart's thought (1960-1990), and to a more recent phase in which we find the recovery of some significant topics of his analysis.

1. Italian Social Sciences and the GHS: a difficult relationship

In the 1850s and '60s there was a degree of openness on the part of Italian economists towards Roscher¹, Knies and Hildebrand² (the representatives of the "old historical school of economics") within an increasing interest towards their theories and historical reconstructions of the evolution of modern capitalism. However, in the mid-1870s a fierce polemic started against the GHS authors, especially on the part of Francesco Ferrara, «doctrinaire of almost unbelievable inflexibility. [...] He never seems to have so much as tried to understand any standpoint but his own. *Sozialpolitik* simply roused his wrath» (Schumpeter 1986, p. 513).

Ferrara did not share the approach of "economic Germanism" for a supposed anti-theoretical and anti-liberal attitude. As is well known, Ferrara harshly opposed the GHS approach, which viewed the historicity of economic phenomena as analytically relevant. In this way, according to Ferrara, German economists did not respect the spirit of economic science, promoting an unacceptable epistemological relativism and refusing the existence of the "natural laws" in the economy. But, as has been recently shown, Ferrara's critiques show strong ideological features and are

¹ See *The Status of the Jews in the Middle Ages considered from the Standpoint of commercial policy*, original edition, 1875; see "Giornale degli economisti" printed in Padua, I, p. 87 ff., 1875, which in its first series was very close to the representatives of the GHS; finally, see Francesco Ferrara's judgment in "Biblioteca dell'Economista", I series.

² Useful distinctions amongst the several phases of the GHS' evolution, in Griziotti Kretschmann 1949, p. 270 and Schumpeter 1986, p. 808.

determined above all by his strong opposition to state intervention in the process of Italian industrialization (Gioia 2003, pp. 273-306; Barucci 2003, p. 25 ff.).

On the other hand, the German economists did not introduce radical changes in the evolution of economics, as some contemporary economists pointed out (see Rabbeno and Jannaccone). From this point of view, the considerations of Achille Loria about the relationship between the classical school and GHS are representative of the position of a large part of Italian economists. In an article published in the “Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik” (1904), *Die Enwickelung der italienischen Nationalökonomie in jüngster Zeit*, Loria stated: «We... have [...] authors who choose historical research (like the famous Cagnetti de Martiis and Toniolo); they do not want to separate theory and history, but they try to renew the English classical school’s doctrines through the use of historical research» (Loria 1904, p. 680; *my translation*³). Moreover, he adds that even those who more closely follow the view of the representatives of the *Kathedersozialismus* do not share the extreme consequences (“den extremen Forderungen”) of Adolph Wagner and the so-called “State socialism” (*Staatsozialismus*).

Nevertheless, in a phase in which pure economics was spreading in Italy, through the significant contribution of scholars such as Vilfredo Pareto and Maffeo Pantaleoni, analysing the historical features of economic phenomena was considered useless and harmful for economic theory (Gioia 2003, p. 273; Faucci 2000, p. 717). So, Pareto and Pantaleoni concluded the Ferrarian struggle against “economic Germanism”: «the pure economist ... does not deal with the history of economy or with problems related to historical aspects; the history of economy was devoid of any theoretical aspect...» (Sestan 1983⁴, p. 14).

Apart from economics, there were other obstacles to the spread of the GHS theories. They had a more general character and were represented by the criticisms of Croce and those of Italian Marxism. Croce’s struggle against German historicism is a part of the general critique that he addressed to the sociology, considered as a “sick science” (“inferma scienza”), because of its empirical approach: positivist sociology is exclusively devoted to the mere collection of facts, without a theoretical vision in the analysis of the social evolution. In this regard, we can remember the controversy with Vilfredo Pareto, who did not consider it acceptable to explain facts through a “purely philosophical” view, because also in social science (as in the natural sciences) it is essential to isolate representative samples of facts and of causal relationships, whose regularity would enable consequences to be identified and acceptable explanations to be constructed. Conversely, Croce could not imagine the analysis of a fact without an aprioristic theoretical organization of the scientific discourse and he opposed Pareto, considered an «overly experimental positivist and a monistic theoretician from a methodological point of view», an idealistic vision with strong anti-scientific content (Burgalassi 1996, p. 181).

“La Critica”, a scientific journal founded by Croce, was explicitly conceived in order to contrast «idealism [...] or... realistic, or even... metaphysical realism [...] to the (naturalists and scholars, or pseudo-naturalists and pseudo-scholars)»,

³ All the quotations from the Italian editions have been translated by the author of this paper.

followers of Positivism. The task that Croce attributes to “La Critica” was that of exalting the role of “philosophical thought” and of the theoretical approach in human sciences (Croce 1903, pp. 3-4). Against the GHS scholars Croce makes the same critiques as those he addressed towards Positivists and sociologists, blaming the German historicists for their preference for an inductive approach without a theoretical basis. Specifically, the GHS approach produces “unintelligibility” when it «claims to replace deduction» and a speculative view «with the historical scrutiny of the facts and of the economic institutions». In this way, «the reason and the strength» of historical science is seriously impoverished (Croce 1965, p. 72).

This theoretical weakness emerges as a gap between theory and practice, as well as a subordination to the *Realpolitik*: «historicist thought was celebrated in Germany in the minds of men, devoted servants of the king and of the state, careful to keep well separated and apart, as best they could, speculation and politics, in order to avoid drawing practical conclusions from the first, useful for the second» (Croce 1965, p. 69).⁴

As a result, Crocian critiques have played a decisive role in both the spread of sociology in Italy⁵, and that of the GHS. In fact, for the first part of the twentieth century, Italian sociology was not part of the European epistemological debate (Scaglia 1991, p. 161) and, as highlighted by Robert Michels in his article *Elemente zur Soziologie in Italien*⁶, his relations with German sociology turned out to be extraordinarily limited (Michels 1930, pp. 37-39). For these reasons, the episodic interest towards thinkers like Simmel, Weber, Tönnies, etc., rarely went beyond superficial analyses and the same occurred concerning the participation of Italian sociologists in the *Methodenstreit*⁷.

The other obstacle, as we said above, was represented by Marxist scholars. Of course, they refused the GHS critiques of historical materialism and did not accept its emphasis on the role of cultural, political, and religious factors in the explanation of economic and social phenomena. The opposition between GHS thinking and that of the Marxists is broadly documented, apart from a certain convergence towards criticism of the Idealistic approach.

For instance, Schmoller appreciated some aspects of the materialistic conception of history, because it helped to build a rigorous scientific analysis of the evolution of social phenomena, highlighting the differential characters of the patterns of socio-economic organizations (Gioia 1990, p. 67 ff.). In his opinion, «the historical materialism» was successful as «a legitimate protest against the excesses of the idealistic approach» (Schmoller 1904, v. I, p. 147), but unfortunately Marx’s “followers” have exaggerated the interpretation of his thought, with paradoxical conclusions.

⁴ On this, see also Gozzi, who writes that «the theoretical positions of the *Kathedersozialismus* must be considered more as a form of ideological legitimation of the political solutions adopted, than for their “scientificity”» (Gozzi 1989, p. 181).

⁵ On this, see Rossi 2007, pp. 332-333.

⁶ This article by Michels was published for the first time in “*Kölner Vierteljahrshefte für Soziologie*”, in 1924. Here we refer to the version published in 1930 in the American magazine, “*Social Forces*”.

⁷ As is well known, from 1903 on, M. Weber made a growing contribution to the methodological debate, as director of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft*.

In his essay *In memoria del manifesto dei comunisti*, Antonio Labriola – defined by Engels as an «authentic marxist» (Michels 1934, vol. 9, p. XIX) – expresses a convergent approach with Schmoller on this specific topic: «we must not [...] extend the so-called economic factor, abstractly isolated, to all the rest [...]; but think, above all, of the economy in a historical way, explaining other historical changes through economic ones» (Labriola 1934, p. 41). Even if Schmoller and Labriola share the critique of the negative effects of “vulgar materialism” on the analytical plane, there is an undeniable difference in their approach. As is well known, Labriola regarded many GHS authors as «geniuses of mediocrity». He gives a harsh evaluation, for instance, of Wilhelm Roscher as «a famous editor of scholarly notes and drafts, gradually added to paragraphs full of nominalistic and often nonsensical definitions» (Labriola 1968², pp. 189-190). Another aspect must be added, concerning the overall Marxist intolerance towards sociology. The Marxist theoreticians regarded their approach as the only ones that could carry out the general analysis of the economy and society in a historical perspective. Sociology was simply seen as a sort of bourgeois challenge to scientific socialism, «a bourgeois science» (Triggiano 2008, p. 190).

2. The reception of the works of Gustav Schmoller and Max Weber in Italy

After an early phase of attention towards the Schmollerian approach from the Italian economic culture, a period of indifference or rejection followed. In the first phase, Vito Cusumano (1875) and Luigi Cossa (1876) appreciate Schmoller’s work, emphasizing the relevance of his analysis of economic phenomena and his economic policy proposals. Luigi Cossa⁸, for instance, praises the multidisciplinary orientation of Schmoller, whose research covered a wide range of scientific fields (ethics, politics, economics, law, history, statistics), providing useful elements for the building of a composite and shared cultural heritage in the social sciences (Cardini 1988, p. 131). Schmoller was appreciated especially for his methodological approach, which provided a useful pattern for the economists known as “economisti funzionari” (“civil servant economists”), who played a significant role in the process of construction of the capitalist economy in Germany. In the opinion of these Italian interpreters, they could carry out the same role in the challenging task of the building of a dynamic capitalist economy in Italy. Of course, this link between economic theories and economic policies – as developed by Schmoller, Wagner and other German economists – found the strong opposition of the marginalist economists (Pantaleoni, Pareto, etc.), who considered the direct link between theories and economic policy unacceptable (Cardini 1988, p. 140 ff.).

In the last decade of the century, some of Schmoller’s essays were published in Italy: “La Riforma sociale”⁹ published *L’economia politica, la sua teoria e il suo metodo* (1894) and *Teorie vaganti e verità stabili nel campo delle scienze sociali*

⁸ Many of the scholars who worked with Luigi Cossa willingly accepted the name of socialists of the chair. Many of them studied in Germany with Schmoller and Wagner and, with them, began to appreciate the idea of a «social mission of the State» (Schiera 1989, p. 12).

(1898), the Rectoral speech delivered by Schmoller at the University of Berlin, a year earlier. *Lineamenti di economia nazionale generale*, Schmoller's main work, was published in the first volume of the forth series of the "Biblioteca dell'economista" in 1904.

These Italian publications of Schmoller's works came when Italian interest in the GHS was rapidly declining. Not by chance, the "Giornale degli economisti" – which from its birth (1875) had represented the principal instrument for the diffusion of the "Germanist" approach in Italy – started its second series with a radical change of direction, becoming, from 1890, an authoritative «tribune of pure economics» (Faucci 1989, p. 80).

A revival of interest in Schmoller and his contribution to the development of the social sciences in Germany and Italy, occurred between the 1980s and '90s. In 1987-88, the journal "Quaderni di storia dell'economia politica" collected the proceedings of the conference organized in Pisa by D. Cavalieri about *Causalità e interdipendenza nella storia dell'analisi economica*, in which we find a paper devoted to Schmoller by V. Gioia (*Causalità e analisi economica nella concezione di Gustav Schmoller*). In 1988, J. Backhaus organized a conference on Schmoller in his hometown, Heilbronn, and, one year later, dedicated an issue of the journal "History of Economic Ideas" to *Gustav Schmoller and the Problems of Today*. In the same year, the proceedings of two conferences organized by the Italian-Germanic historical Institute of Trento were published with the titles *Gustav Schmoller e il suo tempo: la nascita delle scienze sociali in Germania e in Italia* (Trento) and *Gustav Schmoller oggi: lo sviluppo delle scienze sociali in Germania e in Italia* (Tübingen). In 1990, V. Gioia published *Gustav Schmoller: la scienza economica e la storia* and in 1993 (with E. Zagari and B. Schefold), *Gustav Schmoller: metodi e analisi nella scienza economica*.

Renewed interest in Schmoller (with some significant effects also in Italy) can be appreciated in Germany, France and Japan¹⁰.

Max Weber's work had the same difficulties spreading in Italy. Weber not only partially shared the scientific approach of the GHS, but expressed an analytical peculiarity in the inquiry into the causes of economic phenomena: the study of the relationships between religion and economy and, in particular, those between Puritanism and capitalism. This aroused some suspicion amongst Italian social scientists and certainly delayed the acceptance of his work. As Michels noted: «Max Weber's scientific investigations on the genesis of religion and its link with economics [...] only entered Italian intellectual circles later. The causes of the delay lie in the neglect which met this kind of studies in Italy where they therefore did not find anyone directly interested in them with full knowledge of the facts» (Michels 1943, v. XII, p. XXXI). When *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (1904-1905) was published in issues XX and XXI of the "Archiv für

⁹ "La Riforma Sociale" was a journal founded by Francesco Saverio Nitti in 1894. It published Schmoller's article in its first issue.

¹⁰ See Bruhns 2004, Campagnolo 2004, Shionoya 2005. For a general reflection on the international spread of GHS ideas, see Koslowski 1995 e 1997; Nau-Schefold 2002.

Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik”, only a dozen copies circulated in Italy and we can say that it was practically unknown in the Italian intellectual circuits¹¹. Even the death of Weber raised only a few brief comments in scientific magazines of culture, history and economics. Moreover, such reflections mainly concerned his political commitment¹².

We have to wait about two decades to read the first Italian translation of *Die protestantische Ethik*. According to Cantimori, the first translation, carried out by Piero Burresi in 1927, was published the following year. This edition was completed by Ernesto Sestan’s introduction, written in 1928 (Cantimori 1971³, p. XXXIV). In 1931-’32, *Die protestantische Ethik* was published in *Nuovi Studi di diritto, economia e politica*, edited by Ugo Spirito¹³. In 1933 and 1934, the same journal published Sestan’s introduction¹⁴. Michels gives us an erroneous version of the publication of the Weberian work¹⁵. According to him, *Die protestantische Ethik* was published in 1932-’33 in *Nuovi Studi di diritto, economia e politica*, with the introduction by Ernesto Sestan (Michels 1934, v. XII, p. XXXI). Michels is wrong both about the years of publication and because *Die protestantische Ethik* and Sestan’s introduction were published in the same journal, but separately.

However, in 1945, Weber’s work was again published in book form, with Sestan’s introduction. Sestan indicates two kinds of causes of this delayed Italian reception of *Die protestantische Ethik*. The first cause is probably to be attributed to the low presence of non-Catholics, which prevented Italians from “recognizing themselves” in the study presented by the German scholar. The second cause was the overall resistance toward the GHS on the part of Italian social scientists, as already mentioned. Certainly, the utilitarian approach in economics was not the most appropriate for understanding the link between religion and economy. The utilitarian economists might have thought – if anything – about the possible influence of the economy on religions. On top of this, we have to add the strong opposition by the Italian idealists, who – following Croce’s orientation – considered *Die protestantische Ethik* a work inspired by an empirical approach, sociological in

¹¹ It was only after World War II that Italian culture seemed ready to accept Weber’s work: on the one hand, his analysis of Germany’s organizational and political problems inspired «rightly or wrongly, instruments able to diagnose our malaise and to satisfy our alleged needs and lacks» (Sestan 1983⁴, p. 16); on the other hand, it aroused a religious feeling which attracted the attention of scholars (Sestan 1983⁴, pp. 16-17).

¹² On the difficulty of understanding Weberian thought due to the excessive attention to his political analyses, see Ferrarotti 1965, p. 30 ff.

¹³ *Die protestantische Ethik* was published in five issues of “Nuovi studi di diritto, economia e politica”: vol. 4, issues 3-4 (May-August 1931, pp. 176-233); vol. 4, issue 5 (September-October 1931, pp. 284-311); vol. 4, issue 6 (November-December 1931, pp. 369-396); vol. 5, issue 1 (January-February 1932, pp. 58-72); vol. 4, issues 3-4-5 (June-October 1932, pp. 179-231).

¹⁴ This introduction was published in “Nuovi studi di diritto, economia e politica”: vol. 6, issue 3 (May-August 1933, pp. 110-122); vol. 6, issues 4-5 (July-October 1933, pp. 234-241); vol. 7, issue 6 (November-December 1934, pp. 382-396).

¹⁵ Michels has contributed to the spread of Weber’s works in Italy. He edited “Nuova collana di economisti”, including selected parts of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, with the title *Carismatica e i tipi del potere (autorità)*. See Michels 1934, vol. XII, “Politica ad economia”, pp. 183-262.

nature, devoid of any general meaning. In short, Weber's view was unable to find fertile terrain for its growth in Italy (Sestan 1983³, pp. 14-15).

It seems interesting, in this regard, to see the unexpected involvement of Benedetto Croce in promoting the Italian translation of *Die protestantische Ethik*, edited by Piero Burresi for Laterza. As is well known, Croce had met Weber in Heidelberg (1908) at the conference of international philosophy. In fact, even if they had some mutual friends Croce, at that time, did not know Weber's work (except the youthful *Studi sulla Storia agraria della Roma imperiale* translated in *Biblioteca di Storia economica*). Weber's success had prompted Croce to get to know his work better, but the judgment he expressed on it was not completely positive¹⁶.

Nevertheless, in 1919, Croce suggested the Italian translation of *Parlamento e Governo. Critica politica della burocrazia e della vita dei partiti*, edited by Enrico Ruta, which was an editorial failure. Despite this, Croce proposed to his editor, Laterza, the publication of *Die protestantische Ethik*, receiving a rejection. Considering Croce's judgment on Weber, such a proposal concerning *Die protestantische Ethik* can only be explained by two factors: Weber emphasized the role of spiritual factors in the development of history and this greatly contributed to the further extension of the critique towards historical materialism, which Croce considered the main antagonist of his idealistic view. In short, Croce was convinced of a substantial convergence of some methodological aspects between Weber's approach and his own. But, as Mario Signore notes, «Weber's criticism to the materialistic conception of history does not mean the adoption of an idealistic conception» (Signore 2000, p. 317), because it was methodological in nature, aiming to correct some of the scientific limits of the Marxian methodology. Weber did not express any general philosophical opposition to historical materialism. It is – as Rossi points out – a «positive criticism» in order to propose a fruitful «study of mutual relationships between economic forms and the forms of the social organization in a specific historical context». In other words, Weber did not try to find an alternative historical view as opposed to Marxism, as Croce had done, because he attributed to historical materialism «scientific validity [...] as a method, even if within the limits arising from its inevitable unilateralism, as well as from the unilateralism of other points of view» (Rossi 2007, p. 320).

The Crocian misinterpretation of *Die protestantische Ethik*, as an anti-marxian work, is not an isolated case. Mario M. Rossi¹⁷ too, in his book *L'ascesi capitalistica*, interpreted Weber «as a kind of anti-Marx» (Mario M. Rossi 1928; on this see Rossi 2007, p. 313). Carlo Antoni in 1940 very much appreciated Max Weber's essay, pointing out that it represented one of the greatest interpretations of an entire historical epoch, because it «posed a problem where before there were only generic

¹⁶ We report Croce's words directly: «despite my admiration for his loyalty, his human generosity and his lively talent in grasping aspects of reality, I had to admit that he had abandoned the great speculative tradition, from Leibniz to Hegel. Besides, he also deceived himself by thinking that he could replace strict philosophy with reference to inferior qualities of mental life, with science and, perhaps, with so-called science of spirit...» (Croce 1948, p. 93).

¹⁷ In P. Rossi's opinion, Italian historians of economics (M. M. Rossi, G. Luzzatto, A. Fanfani, A. Saponi, etc.) had always shown a very superficial interest in Weberian work, of which they had an incomplete and inaccurate knowledge (Rossi 2007, p. 313).

opinions or emptiness, by creating a new method for its investigation» (Antoni 1940, p. 150). Nevertheless, Antoni – on a more general plane – seems to continue Croce's interpretation of Weber, emphasizing the supposed anti-materialistic attitude of Weberian thought (Antoni 1940, p. 152 ff.; on this see Rossi 2007, p. 312). In short, we can state that – in that historical phase – Weber's work was neglected or known in a twisted way.

3. Reading of Sombart's works by economists and economic historians

Italian intellectuals showed more hostility towards Werner Sombart for several reasons. First of all, he was perhaps the GHS member with the most polemical style; secondly, for his tendency to scientific generalizations on the basis of incomplete and sometimes superficial empirical research on the field of economic history and sociology; third, for his attempt to go beyond the confines of the scientific discipline, overlapping different methodologies and analytical approaches; fourth, for his «frequent changes of allegiance on the ideological battlefields of the modern age» and, finally, for his «position not far removed from Nazism» (Mitzman 1973, p. 136). These judgments were generally emphasized and shared by Italian economists and economic historians.

Italian economists do not seem to appreciate Sombart's work. They do not consider Sombart as an economist. There are a few of them (Loria, Bertolino and Michels) who emphasize the relevance of his work from the economic point of view, but they have also have addressed (except for Michels) severe criticisms to Sombart's methodology and results.

Luigi Einaudi represented the large majority of Italian economists, absolutely rejecting the contribution to the economic science of the GHS. In this sense, he simply recalls and – we may say – radicalizes the anti-GHS approach adopted by Francesco Ferrara in the previous century:

«Like the majority of Italian economic scholars, I have never been Germanophile. Not out of unreasonable hatred towards that nation; or because I could not recognize the great contributions made by Germans to progress in other scientific fields. But because the German contribution to the progress of economic sciences has been very mediocre, very inferior to that of Italy, France and, today, also of the United States, not to mention England. I've always thought that Wagner, Schmoller – and now we can also add Sombart – were mediocre economists. [...] I will continue not to study and not to mention Wagner, Schmoller and Sombart, not because they are German, but because, in my opinion, they wrote things of little importance and of low quality» (Einaudi 1921).

Economists, as Cavalli states, with their marginalistic approach, seemed to lack the necessary intellectual and scientific framework «for understanding the full meaning of Sombart's thought» (Cavalli 1965, p. 221).

We find it interesting to consider the case of the Italian economists who were not completely hostile to their German historicist colleagues.

Robert Michels, who during his stay in Italy had had an important role in the spread of the GHS theoreticians, wrote at length on Sombart and his work, calling him a «glory of economic science». Michels, an atypical economist, regarded the German scholar as the best economist of his generation. Moreover, he compared Sombart and Loria's work, showing analytical convergences between them above all in the comparison between capitalism and socialism, in order to focus on their structural differences (Michels 1908, p. 424). Nevertheless, it is true that Michels, who taught political economy in several Italian universities, was not considered an economist. As is well known, Luigi Einaudi did not want to attribute the chair of Political Economy at the University of Torino to Michels, because he regarded his works as particularly weak in pure economics. In Einaudi's opinion his scientific production belonged more to the historical-social sciences than to economics (see Malandrino 2006 and Mornati 2012). In short, Michels shared the fate of Sombart: they were not considered economists.

The situation is different for Achille Loria, who reviewed *Der Moderne Kapitalismus* for the "Giornale degli economisti", as «a new book about capitalism» (1902), pointing out that the author is «one of most vigorous and open minds of the young Germany» (Loria 1966, p. 183). Loria considers some of Sombart's methodological assumptions in the inquiry into modern capitalism to be right. He appreciates the attempt made by Sombart to use the analytical instruments of the Marxian work and agrees with the Sombartian rejection of the idea that the capitalist system is born only because of the effect of the transition from the «ancient right» to the «law of free competition» (Loria 1966, p. 188). Besides, Loria admires the chapter on consumption, the increase of which was a relevant factor in capitalist growth (Loria 1966, p. 189). And finally, Loria praises Sombart's mastery of Italian history and literature.

Of course, Loria does not deny that there are aspects which, in his opinion, are not convincing in *Modern Capitalism*. First of all, he charges Sombart with adopting a different scientific method to study a capitalist economy as opposed to a socialist economy. And this does not make any sense:

«I could not accept the Sombartian thesis that the inquiry and causal connection of economic phenomena is valid only in the contemporary capitalist epoch, and would be eliminated in the study of a superior economic form, like that of the socialist economy; for which it would be useful to adopt a teleological point of view, or a connection of the social phenomena not with reference to the causal relationships, but with reference to the purpose» (Loria 1966, p. 182).

Loria also criticizes Sombart's tendency to start from many aprioristic assumptions. But, he adds, it is not possible identify decisive regularities for the social order, starting from an aprioristic principle that the scientist sets as authentic, without trying to demonstrate it (Loria 1966, p. 183).

As far as the first volume of *Modern capitalism* is concerned (prevalently descriptive in character), Loria expresses strong disagreement with Sombart's idea that the capitalistic system is formed almost by chance or due to the presence of some unexpected factors, whereas its development should be «subject to a necessary law». Moreover, according to Loria, Sombart does not specify the distinctive features of the two phases of capitalism, which he describes as «a primitive capitalistic era» and «a more developed capitalism of our days» (Loria 1966, p. 187).

The second volume of *Modern capitalism* is more theoretical and deductive, because in it Sombart tries to identify the causes of capitalistic development and its constitutive elements. Also in this case, Loria does not accept the Sombartian hypothesis: while it is true that ground rent¹⁸ is one of bases of capitalistic accumulation, he cannot agree with Sombart who considers it the unique causal factor that can explain the accumulation process¹⁹ (Loria, pp. 185-186). Moreover, regarding the changes of the capitalistic system, it seems reductive to indicate, as the sole key factor, the «tendency of capital to increase in value (*Verwertungstendenz*)» (Loria 1966, p. 188).

However, one of the major limits Loria identifies in Sombart's work is an inadequate analysis of incomes. In fact, while Sombart gives a good description of the historical evolution «from handicrafts towards capitalist industry and the causes which determined such a process», the essence of the capitalist economy remains unexplored, and with it, «the nature of incomes» and «the intimate reasons of the two classes in which the human society is divided». This analytical defect explains why «all the intricate theoretical problems are unexplored, especially those concerning the circulation and distribution of capital» (Loria 1966, p. 191).

In this sense, Loria highlights the distance between Sombart and Marx, defining Sombart's Marxism as a sort of «eagle without beak and claws» (Loria 1966, pp. 190-191). Loria, in emphasizing the relationship between Sombart and Marx, focuses on one of the more controversial aspects of the German scholar. As is well known, Sombart cannot be called a Marxist, even if he draws inspiration from Marx for his studies on capitalism, since he always criticized the materialistic conception of history for its overly mechanistic and objectivistic approach and tried to enrich it by introducing the spiritual and subjective aspects in economic and social analysis. In his opinion, the economic life of a society is shaped by the prevailing spirit of the time, not by the material relations of production, as stated by Marx (Davis, 1997, p. 59; Lenger, 1997, pp. 151-153; Bosincu 2009, p. 5).

¹⁸ In his introduction to the Italian version of *Modern Capitalism*, Alessandro Cavalli reports that Sombart feels outraged by the excessive criticisms from historians of economics addressed to his theory of ground rent, as if the book dealt only with this! Moreover, they do not understand the ancillary role that the Sombartian theory of ground rent can play with respect to the Marxian theory of «exploitation», distracted maybe by the «very evident even if not explicit polemical intent against Marx» (Cavalli 1967, p. 30).

¹⁹ Schumpeter shares Loria's opinion. In fact, in his *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, he writes: «W. Sombart, in the first edition of his *Theorie des modernen Kapitalismus*, tried to make the most of those cases. But the attempt to base primitive accumulation entirely on the accumulation of ground rent showed its hopelessness as Sombart himself eventually recognized» (Schumpeter 2008, p. 17; note n. 12).

Alberto Bertolino, examining the economic contribution of Sombart, states that many judgments about Sombart are based on misinterpretations, ideological visions and prejudices. This was true during his life and remains true after his death. In fact, the reconstruction of Sombartian thought and its critical assessment continue to have «the same level of indeterminacy and fragmentation» (Bertolino 1964, p. 171). The fact is, Bertolino adds, that the judgments on Sombart did not take into account his complex methodological approach. But, according to Bertolino, the analysis of «Sombart’s methodological categories» is a necessary pre-condition «before showing particular inaccuracies or incompleteness» in his scientific production (Bertolino 1964, p. 175). Bertolino emphasizes the main components of Sombart’s methodological approach, recalling works like *Der proletarische Sozialismus* and *Die drei Nationalökonomien*²⁰, in addition to *Modern Capitalism* (Bertolino 1964, pp. 172-173).

In his opinion, Sombart starts focusing on the «material conditions of the social life»; but he adds that these conditions are decisive only if they are rooted in an environment pervaded by peculiar ideological and cultural features (for instance, the desire to overcome the traditional society through the invention of new forms and means of life): «the material conditions of economic life can be considered effective in the formation and the development of the capitalist system, only if they contain a [capitalistic] spirit. [...] the causes of capitalism may not be of a sole kind» (Bertolino 1964, p. 172).

Such a relationship between the material conditions of life in society and the spiritual life, enables one to be equidistant between historical materialism and idealism. So, the criticisms addressed to him, of being a “Marxist” or of being an “Idealist”, are equally unfounded (Bertolino 1964, p. 172 ff.).

Nevertheless, Bertolino acknowledges a certain «contradiction in the Sombartian methodology», because he aimed at the explanation of the «economic and social activity in its totality», but despite this, he often conducts his analysis on the plane of historical facts or on the plane of theoretical knowledge (Bertolino 1964, p. 178). Ultimately, Sombart «reduces theoretical inquiry to history» (Bertolino 1964, p. 182): «all Sombart’s efforts had had the result of showing the impossibility of scientifically reconciling theory and history, which was the opposite of what those efforts were pursuing» (Bertolino 1964, p. 183).

For these reasons, Sombart seems incapable of adequately judging the contemporary economy and its dynamism. He criticizes the new models of economic and social organization, the spread of science and social progress (Bertolino 1964, p. 181). The framework of the economic epoch «that he depicts is gloomy, pervaded by a black pessimism, dismal romanticism, apocalyptic visions» (Bertolino 1979 [or.:

²⁰ Reviews of *Die drei Nationalökonomien* were written by F. Vito, *Die drei Nationalökonomien – Geschichte und System der Lehre von der Wirtschaft by Werner Sombart*, in “Rivista Internazionale di Scienze Sociali e Discipline Ausiliarie”, Serie III, Vol. 1, Fasc. 3 (Maggio 1930), pp. 263-270 and by Ugo Spirito, *La nuova scienza dell’economia secondo Werner Sombart* in “Nuovi studi di diritto, economia e politica” (1930). The latter is also published in *I fondamenti dell’economia corporativa* (1936) and in *Il corporativismo* (1970), a volume which collects some works by Spirito. The importance of *Die drei Nationalökonomien*, from a methodological point of view, has been also emphasized by Majerotto 1935, pp. 132-134 and Majerotto 1941, see particularly p. 520.

1936], p. 479). In short, Sombart loses the «spirit of modernity and ... cannot judge it: and like all the things that you do not really know, you either idolize or hate them» (Bertolino 1979 [or.: 1936], p. 479).

After this youthful work, Sombart was read in Italy by economic historians through his *Der Moderne Kapitalismus*. The Italian scholars, as he himself admitted, proved to appreciate his work. Sombart showed gratitude towards them and, particularly, towards Gino Luzzatto who, after having translated *Modern Capitalism*, really saw it as a work of history (on this see: Saponi 1944, p. 16). Luzzatto confirms this attitude of Sombart, stating that the German scholar had substantially accepted the suggestions of many historians and in the second edition, «he had not only significantly attenuated the unilateral rigidity of many of his thesis, [...] but he really changed the fundamental nature of his work, by elevating history from a mere means of proving a thesis to its main subject» (Luzzatto 1966, pp. 515-516).

In general, Luzzatto emphasizes that Sombart has promoted research on an issue of great relevance and complexity like the genesis of modern capitalism. So, Luzzatto writes, if it is true that «in many cases, he simply poses a problem without studying it in depth» and in a way «so striking» and unacceptable for other historians, we have to admit that Sombart's work has promoted research «in this field», even though these studies were addressed «to develop his idea, [...] or to demonstrate his errors». And this is surely a great merit of a controversial but fruitful work (Luzzatto 1966, p. 527).

Barbieri agrees with Luzzatto, writing:

«Sombartian work, though incomplete in some respects concerning the history of our country, continues to stimulate new ideas and new research. And this is the reason it is still valuable» (Barbieri 1964, p. 167).

Armando Saponi shows appreciation and gratitude towards Sombart, recognizing him as a master and a source of inspiration. In the preface to his *Storia economica* (ed. 1955), he thanks A. Doren, H. Pirenne and G. Luzzatto, but – especially – the author of *Modern Capitalism*, highlighting that the Italian edition dated 1925²¹ led him to the systematic study of the transition from the mercantile society in the Middle Ages to the modern capitalistic society.

In general, we can say that the Italian economic historians recognized the importance of Sombart's contribution and they are far from making judgments like those expressed by Schumpeter who wrote that «*Modern Capitalism*... shocked professional historians by its often unsubstantial brilliance» (Schumpeter 1986, note n. 14, pp. 816-817). But, while it is true that Italian economic historians considered *Modern Capitalism* as a significant source of inspiration, it is also true that they did

²¹ Saponi states that «his interest in the problems of economic history was increased by the first edition of Sombart's *Modern Capitalism* in 1896» (Saponi 1955, p. XI). Evidently, Saponi is wrong about the date of publication of Sombart's work, since the first edition is dated 1902. Saponi was probably misled by the first edition of *Sozialismus und soziale bewegung im 19. jahrhundert* (1896).

not hesitate to express their criticisms on four distinct aspects of *Der Moderne Kapitalismus*²²:

- the collection and the connection of historical facts is often not rigorous;
- the analysis of the transition from the Middle Ages to the capitalistic era is incomplete, because Sombart attempts to interpret it in a single, homogeneous way with reference to the whole European continent;
- his study of “the case of Italy” is too superficial and imprecise;
- finally, his category of the “capitalist spirit” does not appear very productive from the analytical point of view. It can – if anything – be considered useful in order to mark the methodological distance from Marxism and historical materialism.

Luzzatto does not underestimate the effects on the reader of a style determined by the «temperament of a passionate writer» (Luzzatto 1966, p. 517) who tends to take the polemical tone to extremes, but he does not overlook a more serious methodological defect that risks compromising the objectivity of the historical reconstruction of the origins of capitalism. In his opinion, Sombart simply makes a careful selection of those «historical facts [...] that can support his thesis», neglecting different facts and points of view in contrast with it (Luzzatto 1964, p. 187).

Barbieri adopts the same critical approach put forward by Luzzatto, criticizing Sombart’s tendency to propose models of generalizations, grounded on a few elements and a few selected facts, which do not seem able to furnish a correct explanation of the origin of capitalism: a very complex and variegated phenomenon highly characterized by many regional peculiarities. Some inaccuracies – in collecting and organizing the data – are acceptable, if we consider the «magnificence» of Sombart’s aspirations, but a similar tolerance must disappear if we consider the «sense of peremptoriness» of his statements and great «presumption» animating Sombart’s work (Barbieri 1964, p. 153)²³. In short, the reader of *Modern Capitalism* gets the impression that the particular empirical phenomena that Sombart chooses in order to pursue and ground his generalizations, have a merely justificatory function. In fact, such facts are supposedly adopted merely because of their adaptability to his aprioristic view concerning the genesis of the modern capitalism.

²² These criticisms emerged in 1964 in the issue of “Economia e Storia” devoted to *L’opera di Werner Sombart nel centenario della nascita* (in the same year, Cavalli published a critical note on this issue in “Quaderni di sociologia”). Fanfani’s *Preface* to this issue testifies the interest towards Sombart’s work from some Italian Catholic circuits. In fact, at Milan’s Catholic University where he worked, «in focusing on Weber and Sombart, then almost unknown in Italy», Fanfani «analysed the crisis of capitalism and of western society...», looking specifically at their methodological approach (Raponi 1981, p. 269). Gino Luzzatto (editor of the Italian translation of *Der moderne Kapitalismus*, 1925) published a *Giudizio sintetico sull’opera storica di Werner Sombart* in “Nuova Rivista Storica”, *L’origine e gli albori del capitalismo. A proposito della seconda edizione del “Capitalismo moderno” di Werner Sombart* (1922). Gino Barbieri inspired and helped to achieve the publication of a monographic issue of the journal, participating with an article entitled *Werner Sombart ed il valore dello “spirito economico” nella ricostruzione storiografica*. Both historians recognize the importance of Sombart’s works, identifying the strengths, but not hesitating to focus on the weaknesses.

²³ In Barbieri’s opinion, Sombart tends to ridicule the works of other historians, accusing them of «ignorance and stupidity» (Barbieri 1964, p. 153).

In this way, Sapori adds, sharing the view of Luzzatto and Barbieri, Sombart²⁴ artificially builds a homogeneous framework in order to explain many heterogeneous historical experiences. According to Sapori this attitude can only be partially justified by the incompleteness «of documentation, as a whole, unfit to make a broad, complete summary covering several regions» (Sapori 1955, p. XII). Barbieri also blames Sombart for his attempt to build homogeneity where in the historical evolution we see heterogeneity. The fact is – Barbieri insists – that Sombart, starting from his aprioristic hypothesis, tends to standardize the temporal sequences and the ways different European countries (and regions) supposedly completed their transition from medieval to capitalist society (Barbieri 1964, pp. 155). Sombart – Luzzatto insists – puts together periods and geographical spaces that are too wide, with obvious explicative distortions: «to join the economic events of all European people in a single framework – as he wanted – forces Sombart into desperate dialectical efforts to reconcile an alleged general feature of a particular period with peculiar facts that contrast with such a feature» (Luzzatto 1966, p. 517). And when this kind of generalization fails, he uses his lively style and his strong evocative power in order to «achieve the desired results». As Sapori states, with his intuition Sombart builds evocative visions of future possibilities, substituting the necessary scientific procedures²⁵ (Sapori 1944, p. 29).

This erroneous methodological approach is particularly evident in his historical reconstruction of the “Italian case”. Barbieri notes that the sole concern of the German scholar seems to be that of making the Italian transition conform to that of other European countries and, above all, of Germany (Barbieri 1964, p. 155). Sapori expresses the same kind of considerations, even though – he admits – a similar obstacle emerges significantly in the Italian case, because when Sombart wrote his main work, in Italy there was a marked lack of specific literature about this subject. This forced Sombart to use – as the sole source – the legal acts or the «statutes of the arts and municipalities», which were surely unfit to accurately reflect «the full reality of life» (Sapori 1955, p. XIII).

Finally, all the Italian historians emphasize the fact that Sombart ultimately failed to free his view from the materialistic conception of history.

Sapori strongly criticizes «the economic position of the historian», since if we subordinate the historical explanations to economic ones, we will alter the function of history, hindering at the same time the universal progress of historical knowledge. Sombart made this mistake, because he started from aprioristic hypotheses in historical research, reducing its autonomy, changing the historical explanation into a mere «tool of economics» (Sapori 1967, p. 399). Of course, the category of the “spirit of capitalism” was conceived by Sombart in order to overcome historical materialism, but – as Barbieri notes – it does not really become a useful interpretative instrument, because of the methodological uncertainties shown by

²⁴ Sombart, as a man and as a historian, attracts and at the same time repels Sapori’s attention: «I didn’t share the same enthusiasm as his admirers for his “innovations”, but – in a way – I was fascinated by him: I didn’t reject his ideas, like his numerous opponents, but I felt that [...] many things didn’t work» (Sapori 1955, p. 398).

²⁵ On this see, Sapori 1943, Sapori 1955.

Sombart in the use of the empirical facts and the way he builds his scientific explanations. Sapori recalls the complex relationships between Marx and Sombart, questioning whether we can consider the German scholar a Marxist. In his opinion, we cannot say that Sombart was Marxist, especially after 1912-'13, but we can certainly say that Sombart had serious difficulties in freeing himself from the methodological framework of historical materialism. As Sapori writes: «we may think that in 1896 Sombart was referring to Marxism; but we cannot wonder ... if later he overcame from a nominal point of view this scheme, which was not a Sombartian one, maintaining the substance created by Marxian thought» (Sapori 1944, p. 11. See also p. 12).

As we have seen, these scholars do not blame Sombart for the weakness of his economic culture or for his inability to work in an appropriate way on historical issues. They point out – if anything – a certain superficiality in the collection of empirical facts, an inadequate way of considering archive documents (legal acts, statutes of the arts and municipalities, etc.), a certain haste in generalization procedures. In short, Italian historians denounce Sombart's incoherent methodological choices.

4. Sombart and the Italian sociology

The last aspect concerns the way Italian sociologists judge Sombart's work. We will deal with the relationships between Italian sociologists and Sombart with reference to three different periods: 1) until the second postwar phase; 2) from 1960 to the end of the nineties; 3) since the first decade of the new century.

In the first period²⁶, as we have already mentioned, the reception of the Sombart's work found the same difficulties as other sociological studies. In fact, while from a general point of view the spread of sociology in Italy was particularly problematic because of the opposition to it represented by idealistic and Marxist views, the relationship with German sociology was even more difficult, fragmentary and overly episodic. As Michels wrote «German sociology [...] has remained practically without significance in Italy» and «Sombart is known only for his work in economic history and socialistic research» (Michels 1930, p. 37).

So, in this period, Sombart's desire to be recognized as a sociologist by sociologists seemed to be rather remote and such an acknowledgment – when attributed to him – had a negative meaning: sociology was considered «the field of dilettantism and nonsense» and the title of “sociologist” was generally used «in a derogatory sense» (Sapori 1944, pp. 17-18). Only a few, the most serious scholars, attributed to him the title of sociologist with the purpose «of honoring Sombart, as he deserves» (Sapori 1944, pp. 17-18).

Besides, in sociology, as in economics and in economic history, Sombart aroused controversial reactions by adopting an interdisciplinary method, able to promote «a historical sociology», following M. Weber's example, in order to

²⁶ In this period, Vallecchi ed. published *Il socialismo tedesco* (or. *Deutscher Sozialismus*), translated by G. Lorenzoni (1941).

overcome the «naturalistic view» of the Positivist approach (on this, see: Sapori 1944, p. 18). The general attempt carried out by Sombart to ground his inquiries on the historicity of the economic and social phenomena was not appreciated. As is well known, he «made no distinction between sociology and economics, and he considered both of them based on history» (Rizzo 1974, p. 13)²⁷. It is no surprise that Sombart wrote: «It is an idle question, being merely terminological in nature, whether the science to which this work belongs is economics or rather economic sociology or something similar» (Sombart 1967, p. 89).

The second phase (1960-1990)²⁸ can be considered that of the spreading of the Sombart's work amongst Italian sociologists. This period is characterized by the partial Italian translation of the *Der moderne Kapitalismus* edited by A. Cavalli with a long *Introduction* by the editor, the new edition of *The Bourgeois*, with the *Introduction* by F. Ferrarotti and by the Italian translation of *Luxus und kapitalismus* edited by M. Protti, with the *Introduction* by the editor. To these translations, which show an increasing interest by Italian sociologists in Sombart's work, we have to add some important essays on Sombart: *La fondazione del metodo sociologico in Max Weber and Werner Sombart* by A. Cavalli (1969), *Werner Sombart* by F. Rizzo (1974), *Teorie dello sviluppo capitalistico: Weber e Sombart* by S. Segre (1989).

On many occasions A. Cavalli emphasizes the innovative sociological features of Sombart's work. He recalls the value judgments debate which involved M. Weber and Sombart in a challenging methodological reflection, leading to a redefinition of sociology and his approach to the analysis of the social phenomena. Cavalli appreciates Sombart's analysis of European economic life in the modern age, emphasizing the historical-sociological point of view of *Modern Capitalism*. In his opinion, this aspect has often been neglected because this work was generally considered an economic and a historical study, but it shows elements of the greatest originality concerning significant aspects of sociological analysis (Cavalli 1967, p. 42). In particular, Cavalli adds, there are many chapters of *Der moderne Kapitalismus*, which are sociological in nature even from a strict disciplinary point of view. This can be considered true for the Sombartian analysis of the consumption dynamics in capitalist society and of luxury or for his description of labor organization in the handicraft sector, or the study of urban territories, etc., which with contemporary sociological approach might be treated in terms of sociology of

²⁷ On the «interdisciplinary nature of human and social sciences» see what Rizzo writes, emphasizing the analytical convergences of historiography, sociology and economics, «towards the common goal of eternal man's discovery» (Rizzo 1974, p. 28).

²⁸ In 1980, 1989 and 1997, Edizioni Ar (Padova) published *Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben (Gli Ebrei e la vita economica)* in three volumes. The first volume was translated by Renato Licandro; the other volumes by the group of Edizioni Ar. This publishing house belongs to Franco Freda, the founder of "Fronte Nazionale", a fascist movement. This edition of *Die Juden* is a sort of evidence that some authoritarian fringes used Sombart's work to give strength to their ideas (Trocini 2010, p. 1076). Later, we will mention the ambiguous relationships between Sombart and Nazism, when dealing with his last work, *Vom Menschen* (see p. 22). In 1981, il Corallo (Padova) publishes a new edition of *Il socialismo tedesco*, after that of Vallecchi ed., in 1941. In 1982, Edizioni del Veltro (Parma) published *Lusso e Capitalismo*, edited by Riccardo Frassinelli.

consumption, sociology of organizations, sociology of industry or, even, sociology of territorial systems, and so forth.

On the other hand, as Luciano Gallino notes in his *Sociologia economica e scienza economica* (1965), it is useful to remember that Sombart was a paramount theoretician of economic sociology and of the relationships between economy and society. On this aspect, Gallino recalls a significant passage in an article by the German scholar in which he states that sociology is the science of associated life, whereas the economy is associated life: «economics is sociology...and economic sociology is economic theory» (Sombart 1931 in Gallino 1965, p. 422).

Franco Rizzo points out that, beyond the necessary distinctions between historiography, economics and sociology, Sombart was convinced that the social sciences had to move towards «the goal of an endless rediscovery of the human being» (Rizzo 1974, p. 28). Besides, Franco Rizzo, quoting Bertolino, adds that the Sombartian approach is an attempt to solve the problems of the emerging “dynamic sociology”, with the purpose of focusing on the general forms of social life. As a result, a strong “sociological structure” is the hard core of the Sombartian view and represents the true interpretative key of economic phenomenology as well. In this sense, Sombart can be considered not only an innovative sociologist, but – like Max Weber – a reformer of the «sociological method [...] in the same direction in which his friend Max Weber worked» (Rizzo 1974, p. 210).

In his introduction to *Luxus und Kapitalismus*, Mauro Protti emphasizes the importance of luxury as a topic serving to explain some important aspects of capitalistic dynamics (Protti 1988, pp. 22-23). In his opinion, Sombart introduces this reflection on luxury in the context «of a complex and methodologically eclectic analysis» (Protti 1988, p. 9), which, beyond its limits, is also full of pointers on the methodological and analytical plane (Protti 1988, pp. 6-7, pp. 29-30).

Sandro Segre, comparing the theories of capitalist development constructed by Weber and Sombart, emphasizes the same features of their scientific design. He particularly focuses on the profound interactions between economic and social components of their analyses, because they attribute a basic role to the juridical and political institutions both for the genesis of modern capitalism and for its “proper working” (Segre 1989, p. 112). On the other hand, without an eminently sociological reading key, it would be impossible to explain the rationalization processes typical of modern capitalism and the profound changes in its institutional context (Segre 1989, p. 112 ff.), in labor conditions and in social relationships (Segre 1989, p. 120 ff.).

Der Bourgeois also led to an interesting debate amongst Italian sociologists too. Such a debate involved, among others, Ferrarotti, Cavalli and Rizzo. Ferrarotti, for instance, contrasted *Der Bourgeois* to *Modern Capitalism*, because the first shows the best qualities of Sombart: a «lively style», a considerable «agility and fluency of thought» and a capability to focus on some peculiar features of the protagonists of modern capitalism (Ferrarotti 1978, p. VIII). By contrast, *Modern Capitalism* lacks these qualities, being an overly complex and dispersive work «which wants to be systematic and definitive, but is – in many parts – muddled and uneven» (Ferrarotti 1978, p. VIII).

Franco Rizzo rejects such a simplistic approach and the distinction between *Der moderne Kapitalismus* and *Der Bourgeois*, because such a distinction aims to emphasize exclusively the lack of scientific rigor or the heterodox views of Sombart. But it is precisely this interpretative attitude which produced a superficial reading of the Sombartian work, losing many «precious insights». In Rizzo's opinion, these neglected insights are original aspects of Sombart's work and they could promote fruitful new research (Rizzo 1974, p. 209).

From this point of view, Rizzo shares Cavalli's opinion. Cavalli thinks that *Der Bourgeois* opens new analytical possibilities, with its reference to the «social situation of Jews» and to the fact that the Jews seem to be in a «privileged situation able to favor the emergence and the spreading of the capitalist spirit». In this way Sombart furnishes «a starting point for solving one of the major difficulties of his theory on the origin of the capitalist spirit: the identification of a social situation that can explain the attitudes that deviate from traditional social values and that can also explain those advantageous motivations which could favor the genesis of a new economic mentality» (Cavalli 1967, p. 32).

After this period of rediscovery of the German scholar, it was not until the beginning of the twenty-first century that we could find new studies on Sombart. In his *Sociologia economica. Profilo storico* (1998), Carlo Trigilia insists on the negative significance of this gap for the development of Italian economic sociology²⁹. What is particularly striking is that although Sombart was certainly one of the founders of the economic sociology (Trigilia 2002, p. 158), his contribution to the discipline does not appear in the main Italian textbooks of sociology and economic sociology³⁰.

In reality, at the beginning of the century, fresh sociological reflections were prompted by the first translations of some of Sombart's essays, or by new translations of works considered interesting in terms of contemporary sociological debates. These included: *Dal lusso al capitalismo* edited by R. Sassatelli (2003), *Unità di cultura e costituzione in Europa. Tre esempi storici* by P. Schiera (2005), *Perché negli Stati Uniti non c'è il socialismo?* edited by G. Martinotti (2006)³¹, *Le origini della sociologia* edited by S. Fornari (2009), *Tecnica e cultura* edited by G. Iorio (2012), the Italian translation of *Vom Menschen* edited by R. Iannone, *Umano, troppo umano. Per un'analisi dell'opera di W. Sombart Sull'uomo*, with a long introduction by the editor (2013).³²

²⁹ On this see Trigilia 2002, pp. 181.

³⁰ We can read just a few lines on Sombart (and on the relationship between entrepreneurs and social marginality in the first phase of capitalistic development) in a chapter devoted to Max Weber, by Paolo Jedlowski in his *Il mondo in questione* (Jedlowski 2002, p. 133). The first edition of Jedlowski's book is dated 1998. Besides, the same author edited *La sociologia. Contesti e modelli culturali* (2000), with Franco Crespi and Raffaele Rauty. Here we can find similar reflections about Sombart and his analyses of the origin of modern capitalism (Crespi - Jedlowski - Rauty 2000, pp. 183-184) and extensive comments on Sombart's essay *Technik und Culture* (Crespi - Jedlowski - Rauty 2000, pp. 192-194).

³¹ In 1975, A. Cavalli edited a translation of this Sombartian work for Etas.

³² Also the Italian translations of *Händler und Helden* (Mercanti ed eroi): the first by Enrico Daly, with a preface by F. Ingravalle (2012); the second translated and edited by Fabio Degli Esposti. F. Ingravalle and F. Degli Esposti, introducing their translations, propose interesting reflections from a historical

Roberta Sassatelli edited a new partial translation of *Luxus und Kapitalismus* (with the Italian title *Dal lusso al capitalismo*, 2003), proposing a revised version of the preceding translations by Frassinelli and by Protti (Sassatelli 2006, p. 56). She thinks that the Sombartian work on luxury can be re-read and re-assessed in order to explain not only «the origin of capitalism», but also the dynamics of late capitalism (Sassatelli 2006, p. 8).

In his preface to the Italian translation of *Warum gibt es in den Vereinigten Staaten keinen Sozialismus?*³³, Guido Martinotti points out the importance of Sombart's reflections on the American peculiarity: the relation between the highest level of economic growth and «the lack of a socialist movement» (Martinotti 2006, p. XII). The Italian sociologist criticizes some of Sombart's theoretical assumptions, showing «his mechanical ingenuousness», but the limits of the Sombartian analysis do not diminish the general interest of his reading of American society and its meaning for the contemporary debate: «As often happens, even a mistaken theoretical prerequisite can lead the author to ask questions which continue to be posed again, after a hundred years, without finding generally accepted answers» (Martinotti 2006, p. XIII).

In 2009, Silvia Fornari translated *Die Anfänge der Soziologie*, written by Sombart for the volume in honor of Max Weber (*Hauptprobleme der Soziologie, Erinnerungsgabe für Max Weber*, 1923). In his long and informed *Presentation*, Fornari highlights the most important milestones of Sombartian thought, revisiting the historical context in which the genesis and evolution of sociology were debated. As Fornari points out, in this essay Sombart emphasizes the historicity of social phenomena (Fornari 2009, p. 41 ff.), because the «society does not represent only a meaning, which is objectively given, but it is a changing functional link grounded in its own laws» (Fornari 2009, p. 48).

In 2012, Gennaro Iorio edited the Italian translation of Sombart's speech on *Technik und Kultur* delivered at the first congress of the German Society of Sociology (Frankfurt 1910). As Iorio recalls in the *Introduction*, this speech was not successful, but it is still interesting as a product of a debate particularly focused on the relation between technology and society (Iorio 2012, p. 18 ff.). Besides, the Sombartian analysis seems relevant to our reflections on contemporary society, deeply permeated by technology (Iorio 2012, pp. 24-25).

Finally, let us recall the Italian translation of Sombart's last work, *Vom Menschen* (1938), edited by Roberta Iannone, who in her long introduction defines it as the Sombartian «spiritual will» (Iannone 2013, p. 12). *Vom Menschen* is important because it frees Sombart from the accusation of racism³⁴ and witnesses his criticism

point of view. It is useful to remember these books as a sign of the enduring interest in Sombart's work. Unfortunately, a deeper examination of their content it is not possible in this paper, since that would lead us off our topic.

³³ *Warum gibt es in den Vereinigten Staaten keinen Sozialismus?* is a collection of papers written by Sombart for the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften* in 1905 and published as a book in 1906.

³⁴ On this see Cavalli: he does not define Sombart as a real Nazi, but he consider Sombart's works (after 1933) at least as an attempt «to offer his favors to the National Socialist regime» (Cavalli 1965, p. 226). On Sombart's ambiguous attitudes towards Nazism and racism, see also Riess 1996, p. 201; Lenger, 1994, pp. 358-364; Gioia 2014, especially pp. 17-23.

of Nazism³⁵. Roberta Iannone points out that the German scholar rejected the idea of sociological explanations grounded on race, environment, biology, psychology (Iannone 2013, p. 25), criticizing the anthropologists who used such an approach (Iannone 2013, p. 37). In his essay Sombart emphasizes that the analysis of human beings can be fully carried out only through an interdisciplinary method, in order to avoid every dualistic approach separating the “physical analyses” from the “cultural” ones: «only the sciences of the spirit can aspire, for the Author, to approach the complexity of the human being» (Iannone 2013, p. 49).

Conclusions

As we have seen, there were various general reasons for the difficult spread of the scientific contributions of the scholars of the GHS: the first is linked to the hostility of pure economics (in the Walras-Paretian or in the Austrian version) towards an approach that systematically tried to explain economic phenomena through a historical perspective. To this we have to add the obstacle represented in Italy by the strong presence of Idealism and Marxism. Croce and the Socialist theoreticians found the Historicism of the GHS incompatible with their view of the historical dynamics of the economy and society. The opposition to the GHS therefore had profound roots in the cultural orientations that prevailed in the Italian social sciences of that period.

In this sense, the difficult spread of Sombart’s scientific contribution has a paradigmatic character. In fact, it encountered serious obstacles, being subjected to harsh criticism both on the methodological plane, and for its scientific findings. Besides, any appreciations of Sombart’s work (above all by economic historians and sociologists) have always been preceded or followed by severe critiques. Such critical attitudes have generally emphasized Sombart’s originality and his capability to open new fields of research, but at the same time they show serious doubts about the analytical instruments that Sombart used, his scientific categories and, in general, about some of the significant results of his work. This ostracism towards Sombart seems to continue even today. For example, if we exclude the conference held in Lecce (28-29 March 2014) for the centenary of the publication of *Der Bourgeois*, it seems that there were no other commemorative events. As a result, even today, when the many rancorous disputes involving Sombart are definitely a thing of the past, it seems difficult to consider him fundamental part of classical sociology or economic sociology.

³⁵ As is well known, in 1933, Sombart – as president since 1932 of the *Verein für Sozialpolitik*, decided to dissolve it in order to prevent attacks from the Nazi regime (Lenger 1994; Crespi – Jedlowski – Rauty 2000, pp. 193).

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