

FRIEDRICH LINGER, WERNER SOMBART 1863-1941¹

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The rise and roots of Nazi Germany is one of the most debated issues in social science today. It is a recurrent topic in the media and new books continue to provide further analyses and perspectives. The key question, of course, is how much did the Germans themselves know and approve of? Friedrich Linger, a historian at the University of Giessen, gives a fascinating perspective on what has been called “the German catastrophe” with his penetrating study of the life and writings of Werner Sombart, the most quoted political and social scientist of the interwar years.

One could actually look at the development of Sombart’s career as a reflection of the German disaster, which hit Eastern Europe, including the Baltic states, particularly hard.

Compared to the most famous German social scientist today, Max Weber, Sombart sold more books during his lifetime and was more renowned than the oracle in Heidelberg. Why did Weber’s reputation skyrocket whereas Sombart’s declined quickly after his death? Perhaps it is time to rediscover Sombart, the trade union man, the European who wrote early praises of the USA. His famous article on why US did lack a socialist movement has become a classic.

Thanks to Linger’s deep analysis of Sombart’s books and articles, one can follow the development of his personality and scientific ideas in order to understand how one of the most famous socialist academics in Europe become an adherent of Nazism. Let me emphasize the following characteristics of Sombart:

- 1) His relation to the NSDAP:** Linger’s meticulous study of every step of Sombart’s career shows that, like the legal scholar Carl Schmitt, he completely failed to predict the outcomes of approaching the Nazi elite in the 1930s. Sombart was more successful in Italy, admiring Mussolini and praising the corporate state. Sombart’s big publications on socialism and capitalism between 1896 and 1927 resulted in huge sales and much praise.
- 2) His road away from socialism:** What made Sombart famous all over Europe was his early Marxism. No doubt he was formidably well read in Marx and Engels, applying their teachings to the theory of the ends and means of social policies (1896). Yet, each new book revised his early Marxism, piece by piece. By 1930, nothing was left of it.

- 3) His contradictions:** Sombart seems to have been unaware of the risk of publishing so profusely, opening himself to the possibility of saying both “p” and “-p.” Here, one may mention his infamous analysis of the role of the Jews in the origins and development of capitalism (1911). On the one hand, the Jewish merchants made a most important contribution to the transformation of the agrarian society into the industrial society, involving innovations, technological advances, and rising affluence. This praise *for* the Jews was held against Sombart. On the other hand, Sombart equated modern capitalism with a greed for profits, including usury among Jews, which opened him up to accusations of anti-Semitism. Sombart’s hypotheses about the importance of merchant capitalism in general and Judaism in particular was a kind of reply to Weber’s emphasis on the role of Protestantism in the emergence of modern or high capitalism as industrialization and joint-stock company (1904). One may note that Sombart had practical, friendly associations with Jewish industrial magnet, Walter Rathenau. Yet Sombart did not support a general status of equality for the Jewish people. When the explicit and harsh discrimination against Jews in academia started in 1933, Sombart did nothing, whereas Weber, during his shorter life span (1864-1920), always rejected all forms of anti-Semitism.
- 4) His unevenness, if not carelessness:** Lenger emphasizes that Sombart published two works of outstanding quality. First, Lenger draws the reader’s attention to *Sozialismus und Soziale Bewegung* (1996, 2 vol.), which was translated into several European languages and reprinted several time. Second, Lenger heralds *Der Moderne Kapitalismus* (1902), expanded into 3 vol. 1928 which put forth the well-known distinction between three types of capitalism: early (*Frühkapitalismus* ending before the industrial revolution), high (*Hochkapitalismus* beginning about 1760) and late capitalism (*Spätkapitalismus* beginning with World War I). However, Sombart also published nonsense like *Händler und Helden* (1916), which drew upon the untenable separation between British commercial character and German hero attitudes, as national culture (*Geist*).
- 5)** Sombart, like Schumpeter, was convinced that late capitalism would be followed by some sort of planned or communitarian economic system, a belief completely rejected by Weber (1978).
- 6) His arrogance:** Sombart could not be satisfied with all the recognition he received, from his bourgeois childhood to the ordinarious post at Berlin. He simply wanted to be the best social scientist in the world after Karl Marx. He advocated the teachings of the German historical school even more firmly than his teacher, Schmoller. He rejected Schumpeter’s foundation of mathematical modelling and claimed that Weber had not given him full recognition.

As Lenger’s biography provides lots of information about German social and political science around 1900 and the interwar years. It should be translated into English. One encounters themes that are much debated today: the nature of theory building, nomothetic versus historical methods or approach, the relevance of culture, and the evolution of the

economic system. The lengthy book presents the key actors of that time: Schmoller, Schumpeter, Tönnies, Hilferding and Weber.

Generally speaking, Sombart documented a detailed knowledge of social systems, as already evidenced in his first major work on the Roman agricultural system (1892). What led him away from Marxism or socialism were his traditional values, implicit in his huge list of articles and books on: the family, the state, and the nation. These value orientations led him to advocate a radical return to the agricultural economy in the 1930s, as late capitalism was coming towards its end. His would be a society with an authoritarian state planning and directing the economy. Sombart's evolution as the major theoretician of the *Arbeiterbewegung* to fascism had gone full course.

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