

Footsteps of man, traces of thought. *Vom Menschen* of Werner Sombart

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Abstract

In his work – *Vom Menschen* – Sombart wonders “Who is man?”. This article tries to answer this timeless question, by revisiting some of the key points of the work. Sombart, as well as the author of this present work, have a similar objective: to deal in scientific terms, not only with the human being but also with his body language, soul and spirit. The purpose is to portray “a human science with a critical edge”, a “science of rational comprehension”. A question arises in relation to the bond between body, soul, and spirit: do they harmoniously constitute man? Or, do they lead to de-humanization? (a certain deprivation of the constitutive essence of man). These key questions are addressed to the following subjects: a) ancestors, in view of which centuries of theoretical elaborations of fundamental anthropology are reviewed; b) *Erfahrungswissen*, which is the experience that leads to knowledge of facts and *Evidenzwissen*, or known evidence, which is the *a priori* knowledge; c) actions and reasons; d) the spirit.

Keywords: man/human being, science of rational comprehension, de-humanization, soul, spirit.

1. Introduction

Every age is also a humanistic season; no age passes without taking into account the theme of man and the problems he faces. The literature on this subject is vast and therefore no century in the history of mankind passed without crossing this theme. This explains why I entitled my reflection “footsteps of man, traces of thought”.

Vom Menschen of Sombart is not an exception to this rule and I would like to begin by stating that the actuality of this work is a bit implicit in this timeless theme.

It is true that after Auschwitz and Hiroshima, we often wonder whether it is still possible to speak of man and humanism. If it ever was possible to speak about it, what could have been the possible terms of debate? Sombart had his work published in 1938. At that time those tragic steps of the history of humanity had not yet been made. However, that year marked a turning point for the history of humanity.

The year 1938 represented a turning point for Germany that was coming to be a “Nazi Nation” for nearly 5 years. As soon as Hitler took control of the Supreme Command of the German armed forces, the policy of *Gleichschaltung* was enacted and local governments and the federal states virtually lost their legislative power. Austria was annexed and the annexation of Sudetenland marked the beginning of the process of realization of a Greater Germany based on the principles of Pan-Germanism. In the same year, we can also recall the dramatic episode of the Kristallnacht in which Jews entered definitively in the viewfinder of the pogrom that led to Holocaust. Some other aspects contextualize this period: the decrees implementing the German citizenship laws – most sadly known as the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, the law on Jews’ passports and the order of exclusion of Jews from the German economy.

It was thus not a coincidence that the Nazi regime hindered in every possible way the publication and the distribution of the work, especially if we consider – and this is the fundamental point on which I would like to reason – that the major cognitive effort of Sombart is, not only limited to the content (his intend to respond to the question «who is man»¹ notwithstanding that this is the most explicit cognitive object of the work), but rather to the scientific/epistemological/methodological² understanding of man. Sombart gives us not just another idea or *Weltanschauung* of man, which can be more or less worthy of support or discussion, but a scientific, not ideological view of man. The second most important thing he mentions is to look at man within the context of natural sciences and spiritual sciences linking them both. Rather than further outlining man’s essence, Sombart thinks it is necessary to find a scientific response to man, which would have been the only thing able to contrast the fatal ride of ideology or pseudo-science of man that was imposing itself, or more precisely the only response that could have hindered pseudo-science if only the work had been widespread. But unfortunately this is not the case.

On the other hand, when philosophy emancipated itself from theology in the seventeenth century with Descartes, the consequence was not the denial of God or a new idea regarding the creation of man. The themes of God and the creation were neither disputed nor welcomed, they simply were not considered, and for long time remained in parentheses, just as Sombart does in these pages, where he explicitly defers with the problem *elsewhere* because it does not fall within the domain of science. The consequence has an epistemological nature with respect to the possibility to scientifically test body, soul and even spirit: first through dualism that wants body to be a prerogative of doctors, biologists, physicians and chemists, being the soul an exclusive object of certain sciences of the spirit, and then, the overcoming of this dualism, through a research that reconciles both body and soul. In this matter Sombart seeks to find not only an interconnection between disciplines but also between spirit, soul and body; an interconnection that is presumed to be a more accurate replica of the uniqueness and originality of man compared to other creatures.

¹ Iannone 2013, p. 161.

² Weber 1958; Gallino 1959; Cavalli 1969.

2. Depersonalization and dehumanization

An interconnection, that is both faithful and dangerous to human nature³. For Sombart to ask what it means to be a human in itself means to verify if this interlaced design of spirit, soul and body that is constitutive of man still exists. In the case it still exists, we should investigate whether it is still balanced and harmonious or that man is going through a situation of progressive substitution of life (namely of body and soul) with every kind of spiritual constructs, and therefore of de-animation. This position is clear to him thus it has been widely demonstrated in his work. It is an erosion of the human soul. An erosion that puts human soul at the service of every kind of objective spiritual system. Thus, everything that was originally part of the soul is no longer considered and is forgotten.

The spirit perverts the nature of humanity and its essence, compelling it to a regression, and, as a consequence, man returns to a state of primitiveness and bestiality, which is – strange irony – owing to an extreme increase in his spirituality.

Additionally, Sombart recognizes this process in economics. In the critical examination of capitalism⁴, Sombart describes the spirit of capitalism (the early capitalism) as romantic and bourgeois chiefly because it is the emanation of personal motives and of the European soul⁵. The phrase that everyone can remember is: «Capitalism was born from the depths of the European soul and the soul, as such, is always related to life just as human soul is always related to the person»⁶.

When original capitalism became mature, the bond between spirit and soul was broken and the continuity with anthropological motives, with the needs of collectivity and with entrepreneurial subjectivity was lost. Is in this context that comes into picture the objectification of the impulse to make profit. An impulse that transformed the company into «a monster with its own intellect and its own life»⁷ because «the bourgeois virtues that an entrepreneur had, as a person, at the beginning of capitalism (and that he must have had if he aspired to success), now has been transferred to the company»⁸.

It is fairly plain to see that spiritualization resulted in depersonalization and, even then, Sombart wrote in relation to capitalism: «It is here that the destiny of humanity will be decided: if the most important aspect of human activity, the economic activity, re-enters into the domain of the person or rather into the domain of the spirit»⁹.

³ Donati 2009; Duprè 2007; Lugarini 1996; Nietzsche 1979; Pope 1819; Simon 2011; Steiner 2008; Mills 1963; Zundel 2002.

⁴ Weber 2002; Iannone 2006; Plotnik 1937; Sombart 1978; Spirito 1930.

⁵ Schiera 2005; Iannone 2011.

⁶ Sombart 1978, p. 791.

⁷ Ivi, p. 532.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Ivi, p. 860.

In *Vom Menschen* all these aspects become clearer in its constitutive elements. Especially, it clarifies that spiritualization not only leads to depersonalization, social or individual disintegration, diseconomies or inefficiencies but also some forms of dehumanization. It deprives man of his constitutive essence of spirit, soul and body.

The point here is to understand *how everything will become clearer*, how Sombart is going to take the path of science in this reflection about man while still talking about «soul»¹⁰ and about «spirit»¹¹, which – scientifically speaking – are slippery constructs.

3. The scientific idea of man

To get to the point, how is it possible to build a science of man?

1. First and foremost, the ancestors¹² (as the author refers to), is to say, «the tribute paid to the thought of one who no longer is»¹³.

If we want to start from the beginning (in this case by the work itself), it is imperative to look at the phrase of the exergue that Sombart uses as incipit of his work. The phrase was taken from Goethe and reads as follows: «After a long time truth is found, it brought back together the noble spirits: drawn from the ancient truth»¹⁴.

Sombart finds a confirmation to this sentence in the words written by the Roman poet Terenzio who wrote: «Nullum est jam dictum, quod non sit dictum prius»¹⁵.

Sombart is therefore convinced that making references to the assertions of predecessors (even if they differ from his opinions) offers «fascinating scenarios»¹⁶ (as he himself defines them). These scenarios more than others offer greater certainty in terms of persuasion of the reader about the correctness of determined assumptions. If we want to answer the question «how is it possible to build a science of man?»¹⁷, we have to review some theoretical elaborations (which is certainly an important value of this work), through a cognitive effort, not without difficulties. These include not just learning, but also relating to that organization of knowledge, of binding, of amalgamation, of ordered cohesion that we generally call “systemization of ideas”. This kind of reasoning is very similar to that of Spencer who said “science is organized knowledge.”

¹⁰ Iannone 2013, p. 161.

¹¹ Iannone 2013, p. 165.

¹² About this concept: Merton 1991; Mongardini 1970.

¹³ Iannone 2013, p. 158.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 153.

¹⁵ Iannone 2013, p. 158.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Ivi, p. 155.

Sombart textually writes: «the path is fraught with many difficulties, for which I hope the reader will forgive me»¹⁸. One of these is certainly «the exorbitant plentitude of quotes that interrupt the sequence of speech, that let appear the author as a kid devoid of autonomy, but which are nonetheless essential if»¹⁹, as Sombart notes, «the way of sincerity and fairness is chosen»²⁰.

Now, if we consider that the *philosophical anthropology* was born precisely to reconstruct in a unique insight the different fragments that dismembered the figure of man, in order to «integrate the knowledge gained from scientific investigations on human being»²¹, as Coreth would have said; as Sombart points straight to the recovery of the global image of man, we can insert without doubt this work within this theoretical-disciplinary orientation. Probably this is the sense of what he calls a *fundamental anthropology*, which combines and merges philosophical anthropology and cultural anthropology, leaving apart biology, psychology or theology²².

However, soon emerged the first contradictions or forms of autonomy the author conceded to himself in order to emancipate from any disciplinary label. In fact, if it is indubitable that this review of ancestors properly leads in that direction, then it is also true that Sombart does not want to *interpret* the results of science, because an interpretation always requires pre-comprehension, prejudices, expectations, hypotheses, presumptions, and conjectures on which we can build. Sombart wants to renounce *ab origine* to a philosophical interpretation of the world and of reality. Is it possible to get rid of these constraints?

Or, a collection of testimonies or facts (that Sombart continually invokes) is inevitably destined to be responsible for a cognitive theory? Can it be a simple act of documentation? Or, it is always an act of reconstruction of the theory of human society at a given space and in a given time?

2. These doubts do not seem to worry the author that much. On the contrary, Sombart says that in order to gather a “generally valid knowledge or to practice science in the modern sense of the term”, an ascesis is necessary. Ergo, we need to give up all our entertainment and let the others accuse us of being positivists. *We should look for our know-how only within the ambit of the experience and of logical evidence*, in order to be able to impose it to every human being endowed with reason, regardless of his ideological, religious, philosophical or political position.

Therefore, what really matters is not just the *ancestors* but also *experience*. Actually *ancient knowledge* is not taken for granted in itself, but is subjected to a critical scrutiny and constantly compared with empirical evidence that can confirm or refute it through the logical evidence.

Thus, the experience to which Sombart refers is the *Erfahrungswissen*, is to say the experience that leads to the knowledge of the facts, and *Evidenzwissen*, is to

¹⁸ Ivi, p.155.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Coreth 1978, p. 11.

²² About these aspects: Coreth 1978; Gehlen 1961; Habermas 1966; Lowie 1934; Mauss 2001; Pansera 2001. About culture: Simmel 1976; De Nardis 1996; Tenbruck 2002.

say evidence which is the a priori knowledge, which understands the necessity of a phenomenon, in its essence.

A positivistic idea of science²³ not just as an anti-philosophical critique, but especially as an anchor that stops at facts and as an anti-metaphysical positivism. Indeed, this program consists not only in emancipating social sciences and in constituting sociology in the wake of what has already been said in other writings of Sombart in relation to the origins of social sciences, and in particular his writings in honor of Max Weber published in '23 but has a much wider scope. In fact, in that occasion, he explicitly criticized some of his contemporaries like Vom Mollh, Paul Barth and all those who generally used to sustain that social science had always existed since the time of Plato and Aristotle.

The program is to delve into this experience and to penetrate essence in this evidence, without falling into the «birdlime of metaphysics»²⁴. Sombart says that this modality of observation “necessarily based upon a transcendental sphere”, in the same way in which policy – “as based on ideology and judgments” – should be deactivated.

Therefore, what leads us to the essence are both experience and evidence. But, what is experience? What is evidence? And, how do they penetrate the essence?

3. Now we come to the concept thanks to which the more sociological aspect of the work could emerge: the concept of action.

Sombart says that Kant has shown the way forward. According to Kant, in order to understand the essence of man we should understand his actions, behavior, demeanor, conduct «which is unique or different from that of every other creature in the universe»²⁵. But most of all we should understand his motives (different from the «unconscious causes» he considers to be part of psychoanalysis).

To understand the actions and the motives means to understand the spirit, obviously seen as the universe of meaning, or alternatively – to quote Simmel – as the reign of forms. Obviously, idea is only possible through the mediation of spirit and body, which, in Sombart, is the same. Every act is always spiritually oriented and this enables him to say that there are not motives *that are not already contained in a connection of sense, in a system of spiritual relations*.

The motives cannot be understood without knowing the spiritual relations to which, in a certain sense, they belong. In the aim of understanding the meaning, we can look at the following statement: «There must be capitalism»²⁶, he says, «*before there are capitalist motives. I understand them only if I know what capitalism is*»²⁷.

What emerges here is a very strong bond between human actions and human

²³ Comte 1969; Comte 1979.

²⁴ Iannone 2013, p. 157.

²⁵ Ivi, p.164.

²⁶ Sombart 1930, p. 227.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

essence and between essence and the spirit. From the very first pages of his work, Sombart writes that «An action is worthy of our interest as a functional instrument of knowledge of what he is (is to say a man)»²⁸.

4. Ontology? It is a bond which is clearly questionable or harbinger of discussion because it seems to refer to an ontology of being more than a social dimension of the experience, to metaphysics more than sociology as the empirical social science.

Actually, it seems that Sombart tells us that everything depends on the meanings given to the words. In particular to the word “*ontology*”: in fact, in the wake of Aristotle, it can be considered as a branch of metaphysics, is to say as a research into the ultimate causes of reality, or it can be considered as a phenomenology²⁹ of being, an exploration of reality based on how reality “reveals” itself. A school of thought first proposed by Husserl and later by Heidegger (who was nominated as the rector of the University of Freiburg in 1933). There is no doubt that the meaning of essence – in Sombart’s point of view – is akin to the aforementioned one, which is that of the phenomenology of being, not the metaphysical one. This aspect is observable in his explicit citations of phenomenology and the distances he obsessively took from metaphysics.

4. Concluding remarks

Sombart therefore appears as a sociologist suspended between spirit and soul but anchored to the motives and concrete actions through a continuous juggle between:

- methodological individualism and holism,
- the individual motives which are recovered, next to the collective sense,
- the causal explanation which is attached to the motives, next to the theological one referred to the sense,
- empiricism, next to universalism,
- psychological understanding, next to the understanding of the sense and the concrete.

Then we have a true mixture of opinions. A mixture which had been object of criticism by the school of Spann (more than Spann himself) in the early 1936 (two years before *Vom Menschen* saw the light). Criticism that Sombart does not seem to consider, remaining fairly faithful, right till the end, to positions considered at least eclectic, because they are at the same time causal-empirical and universalist-teleological; or, as Vom Wiese noted, these positions are idealistic – because these opinions covered the distance between spirit and the soul, so dear to the socratic-platonic-hegelian tradition – and also positivistic thanks to the recovery of the category of facts and of causality. Though he speaks about causality, he underlines the importance of spiritual elements, a position in contrast with the positivistic empiricism.

²⁸ Iannone 2013, p. 164.

²⁹ About this aspect: Schutz 1964.

Therefore, it is possible for us to say, as Bertolino³⁰ did, that close to a certain degree of empiricism and positivism – which never abandoned the mentality of Sombart – two postulates always remained deeply rooted in his thought:

a. *the inner knowability of the reality of human actions* owing to which the scholar can interpret, comprehend the occurrences of social life *in so far as he himself is man*;

b. *the systematic organicity in the interpretation of that actions* through which they are knowable. This is possible only if they are critically coordinated with the spirit of a specific human society.

Apart from these specific contents, there is a certain original effort of Sombart to give us, a «human science with a critical edge»³¹. It is such an original science that Sombart wonders *if we should consider it as a new science (as Vico would say)*³², *a propedeutic science, a universal science, or a fundamental science. The latter hypotheses is the dearest to Sombart because all the branches of science regarding man are grafted to it. A science attributing to each one of them a precise meaning and conferring them a position in the cosmos of science according to which every one of them can navigate the same way as sailors watching the North Star.*

This is a sort of renewed positivist ambition to group hierarchically all sciences as if the social sciences could draw greater strength from this action.

Certainly, a human science with a critical edge is, according to Sombart, *a science of rational comprehension*, forced to move between the narrow limits of the transcendental forces on one side, and the natural forces on the other.

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³⁰ Bertolino 1964, p. 174.

³¹ Iannone 2013, p. 157.

³² Piovani 1968; Vico 1983.

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