

Origins of Capitalism and Jewish Ethics

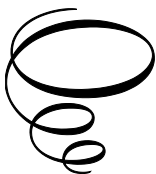
Origins of Capitalism and Jewish Ethics:

The Thought of Werner Sombart

By

Ilaria Iannuzzi

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In memory of my beloved parents, Gino and Luciana,
with love and devotion

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INTRODUCTION

The theme of the religious origins of the spirit of capitalism is part of the broader field of study that analyses the concept of the “spirit” of capitalism, which in turn is a specification of the notion of culture, understood as the set of values, ideas, norms and symbols that, at a given historical moment, underlie the development of the capitalist system (Gherardi, 2011, 85).

Reflection on the spirit of capitalism emerged, as is well known, particularly at the end of the 19th century—a period in which the concept of spirit was generally associated with the 19th-century concept of culture—and has continued into the contemporary era, where, in less general terms than in the past, it is applied to specific cases of investigation. We can make reference, in this sense, to the works on the spirit of capitalism by Boltanski and Chiapello, who understand it as the “ideology” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2014) of capitalism, aimed at legitimising a given praxis; to Stiegler (2006), who identifies it with the dimension of “desire” that fuels the energy necessary to undertake any kind of activity, including capitalist activity, denouncing the stalemate of desiring activity as a critique of the essential character of contemporaneity; or to Jany-Catrice (2012), who links it to the concept of “total performance”. The concept of spirit is currently re-emerging as an object of reflection and investigation because of its links to the notion of culture, both in relation to praxis and to the anthropological and subjective dimension.

From these brief references, a first important distinction emerges that differentiates Sombart’s work from most of the literature on the subject.

This is the distinction between *general* and *special*, i.e. between analyses that focus on the conceptual category of the “spirit” understood generically and transversally with respect to the various cultural spheres (law, art, religion, etc.) and analyses that focus, instead, on the spirit understood as “religious spirit”, i.e. deriving from a specific cultural sphere, religion, and from the ethics of certain religions. It is to this second type of analysis that Sombart’s investigation into the possible relationship between Jewish ethics and the spirit of capitalism belongs, but it also includes, among classical sociologists, Weber’s well-known thesis on Protestant ethics and the capitalist spirit. As far as contemporary studies are concerned—some of which have just been mentioned—it can be seen that the constant character of the spirit of capitalism that they highlight consists in the mutability of this spirit, to the point that it is sometimes preferable to speak of spirits of capitalism, and in its ability to adapt to the challenges it faces by incorporating them within itself, thus avoiding its decline and eliminating antitheses that in the past were considered unthinkable to unify, such as the spheres of quantity and quality, efficiency and equity.

It should also be pointed out that, generally, the spirit of capitalism has been and still is linked to a generic idea of culture, whereas its sources, including cultural ones, can be very different from each other. Sombart’s work, in this respect, stood out in terms of the complexity and heterogeneity of the variables considered, striving to analyse most of the sources. These include elements such as war, love, luxury and, as mentioned above in relation to the religious sphere, the Jewish religious ethic, in contrast to what was stated in the same years by his contemporary, the sociologist M. Weber.

In relation to the theme of the religious origins of the spirit of capitalism, it emerges how, up to now, it has been addressed starting from the analysis of the Protestant and, more specifically, Calvinist origins of such spirit—

following the path traced by the work of M. Weber (1904-1905)—as well as of the Catholic origins, which have been dealt with specifically and in more recent years by Michael Novak (1994).

The relationship between Judaism and capitalism, as investigated by the author, is here analysed in the direction of the search for the causes and motivations, traceable within the Jewish religious culture, that may have facilitated the birth and development of the capitalist system. The aim is to highlight the originality of Sombart's contribution on the subject from a sociological standpoint. This originality is due not only to the fact that the author's reading constitutes an alternative interpretation to the well-known Weberian theory—and is, therefore, relevant from the standpoint of the contents it proposes—but also to the fact that, through this research hypothesis, Sombart proposes a new methodological path. Far from being able to be generically compared methodologically—or even epistemologically, as we shall see—to M. Weber's thesis, Sombart's argumentation is fully revealed in its authenticity and multifaceted composition.

The object of the present work is therefore the critical analysis of the link that the author identifies between Jewish ethics and the spirit of capitalism, through a multi-factorial investigation of the elements that are at the origin of the spirit of capitalism itself, carried out through the lens of sociology. The focus is on the religiously based culture that made a certain orientation possible, i.e. on the religious motivations through which a historically situated collectivity attributes meaning and significance to its everyday actions, analysing in particular those that, in the economic field, may have contributed to giving capitalism its original spirit.

This is a very different path from the one sometimes taken by the literature analysing the relationship between Judaism and capitalism. In other words, a path far removed from the mere interest in the alleged

benefits that capitalism would have brought to the Jewish people and from the ideological evaluation of a “natural” predisposition of the latter towards the business world.

The main reference is not only to the material dimension of capitalism, but above all to its spiritual dimension, which refers to its cultural roots and, therefore, to the set of values, norms and ideas that constitute the generative essence and, at the same time the foundation, of capitalism. But the reference is also, and primarily, to how this complex becomes concrete action, to which junctions define the relationship between the individual and the collectivity, with what potential and, above all, with what criticalities, both empirical and cognitive, for sociology.

In this sense, we also reflect on the contribution made by the organisational phenomenon, which is the result of the work of humans and does not pre-date humankind and human spirit without, however, excluding the reciprocal influence between organisation and spirit. This influence becomes all the stronger as capitalism moves towards its “mature” phase.

The objective, from this standpoint, is to reconstruct the processes that gave rise to the spirit of capitalism and that today appear to have been profoundly transformed. The intention is also to understand the drifts of current capitalism in the light of its cultural history and, therefore, to historicise the spirit of capitalism in order to update it in the sense of grasping its contemporary dynamics.

All this makes Sombart’s theorisation significantly original and rich in ideas for current sociological reflection. Indeed, it is believed that the theme under analysis allows for reflections and considerations on the role that religion plays in economic processes today. Although much less well known, the relationship between religion and economics is, for that reason, no less constitutive of capitalism. The drifts of today’s capitalism do not

seem to be fully comprehensible unless we start from the evolutionary dynamics of the economic system in question, dynamics that go back as far as its birth and that can be traced within the relationship that the capitalist spirit possesses with its ethical-religious source. In this way, the argument goes even further than the critique of the idea of the opposition between the spheres of religion and economics, since Sombart's analysis not only denies this opposition, but on the contrary highlights the centrality of a real interconnection between the two spheres.

Sombart's research therefore provides a valid and effective sociological lens for understanding past and present social processes, through which the complex connection between economy and religion can be explored in depth. The author's work allows us to analyse this link in its various forms: in terms of the reciprocal influence between economic thought and religious discourse; in terms of the relationship between religious beliefs and the economic behaviour of individuals; in terms of the link between certain religious matrices and the establishment of specific models of social order.

The research hypothesis of this paper is to understand whether the capitalist economic system can be considered the result of a materialistic and spiritual approach at the same time (therefore also objective and subjective), in what terms this crossroads unfolds and with what cognitive and empirical implications. In particular, we reflect on the Jewish religious content of the spiritual component, on the expectation of finding in this specific interpretation of the spirit of capitalism, more than in other religious approaches (Protestant, Catholic, etc.), the determinants of early capitalism and the central socio-anthropological aspects of its posthumous course, up to the current degeneration in terms of dehumanisation.

In the light of the above, this paper endeavours to problematise the following aspects: what role does the spirit play in understanding the

capitalist economic system? How are the spiritual and material components linked? In what ways does the Jewish religious *ethos* prove to be an important variable in the process of shaping the capitalist spirit? And what relations are established between this *ethos* and the more properly anthropological dimension of the reference group? Finally, what are the topical ideas that Sombart's reflections on this theme can provide for the analysis of contemporary times?

It is hoped that this work will highlight the relevance and originality of Werner Sombart's thought as a classic of sociological thought, in the conviction that, precisely as such, he can still contribute much to our times, in terms not only of simple reflection, but of critical analysis capable of generating concrete tools to frame development prospects.

CHAPTER I

CAPITALISM: A QUESTION OF SPIRIT?

1.1 The spirit in the debate contemporary to the author

Werner Sombart's reflections on the concept of *spirit* draw considerable inspiration from the intense spiritualist wave that developed at the beginning of the twentieth century and that found fertile ground for debate in Germany at the time, permeating many different areas of knowledge, from theology and philosophy to art, medicine and neurology (Iannone, 2013).

The author's treatment of the spirit category inevitably finds inspiration and lifeblood in the philosophical framework of spiritualism, in particular of French origin, which asserted itself during the nineteenth century through the work of, among others, Maine de Biran (1803), Bergson (1896; 1907), Blondel (1893), Le Senne (1925) and Lavelle (1947). Through it, the opposition between *matter* and *spirit* was put again at the centre of philosophical debate. Spiritualism, in this sense, was, as is well known, in favour of the spirit. Under the umbrella of the spiritualist instance, all those directions and conceptions of thought were brought together that attributed predominance to the spiritual element both in what concerns human life and reality as a whole.

The influence of Kantian and Hegelian philosophies is evident. From Kant, for example, the author takes up the idea of the spirit as "the proper requirement of man as such, of his soul capacity", formulated in the concept

of *subjective spirit*. While not considering spirit as a synonym for *reason*, the reference to Kant's idea of spirit as "productive power and creative originality of reason" is manifest.

Hegel was responsible for the distinction between *subjective* and *objective spirit*, which Sombart took up in his attempt to clarify the particular meaning he attributed to the concept of spirit. Also of Hegelian derivation are the ideas of a suprapersonal spirit and opposition to necessity—hence of freedom—as a characteristic that differentiates spirit from matter (Kenny, 2013). Only the human being, being endowed with spirit, is able to oppose the laws of necessity to which, for example, animals, which have no spirit, are subject. By linking the spirit to the human being alone, however, Sombart distances himself from the conception of the spirit as an element in the history of the entire universe and "of the universe as an organic totality" (Kenny, 2013, 124). The spirit is characteristic of human history alone. From the modern meaning of spirit, therefore, the ideas of conceptual thought, deliberate will, artistic creativity are taken up, to go further and affirm the spirit not only as the integrated whole of these components, but as an element that is positioned upstream, allowing them to assert themselves. In this sense, the will, the principle of higher mental activities does not coincide with the spirit, but exists *through* the *work* of the spirit.

Sombart's sensitivity to "phenomena" also seems to derive from the Hegelian approach, which in the author's system become the "facts" through which the spirit behind them can be grasped. In this sense, the influence of Husserl's phenomenology within Sombart's approach is manifest (Iannone, 2013; see also Engel in Cavalli, 1969; Paci, 1961, 1974). Sombart was also influenced by the debate, which arose in those years and was linked to Hegel's use of the concept of "spirit", between the spiritual

and natural sciences, which saw the author come out in favor of the first, as the only sciences capable of approaching the “complexity of the human being” (Iannone, 2013, 49) and able to allow the subject to *understand* the specific meanings of the historical-social reality he or she experiences¹. Neoplatonic influences are also very strong, together with those deriving from the German currents of neo-Kantism and value philosophy and from Italian idealism, as evidenced by the many points of contact and comparison between Sombart and Croce (Pisanelli, 2015).

Against the background of his time, then, Sombart’s thought would be increasingly characterised as the expression of that cultural climate of effervescent debate and mingling between the spheres of sociology, philosophy and anthropology (Pisanelli, 2015).

1.2 Spiritualism and materialism

As is well known, the spiritualist reading differs from the materialist one, according to which, in explaining the phenomenon of capitalism, it is essential to look at its exclusively material dimension. From this standpoint, Werner Sombart, while not denying in his writings the role and historical relevance of objective capitalist structures in the development of capitalism itself, opts for a spiritualist view of its genesis, affirming the pre-eminence of the *spirit of capitalism* in understanding it².

¹ Natural sciences, from this standpoint, study what is external to the subject and remains so even in the cognitive moment, making it possible, unlike the sciences of the spirit that concentrate on what is internal, to know only “the causal links between phenomena” (Izzo, 1974, 367-368).

² This does not mean that Sombart disregards the role of material elements in the genesis of capitalism, but only that they should be considered secondary to the spiritual element. As stated by the author himself, everything in his work that is valid is due to the spirit of Marx, to whom all his admiration as a theorist and historian of capitalism is addressed. “Whoever wants to surpass Marx must have been a Marxist” Michels (1908, 420) says, referring to Sombart.

The focus is thus mainly on subjectivity (Carosso, 1952) and the actor (Cavalli, 1973), in connection with structures and institutions. Although it focuses on the role of the part, it does not eliminate from the analysis the whole, the collective level, so to speak. The focus of the enquiry, therefore, is not the individual as such, tending to absolutisation as happens in methodological individualism, but the dialectic between the individual and the collective, between the part and the whole.

It is fundamental to underline how, in the author's thought, the subject is never considered as universally defined: his or her passions, thoughts and will are always closely connected to the historical context in which the subject is placed and are strongly affected by this historicity. From this standpoint, capitalism itself, Sombart states, is a historically delineated phenomenon, the result of the encounter, entirely by chance, between the immaterial dimension represented by the spirit and the material dimension constituted by concrete conditions, the "fundamental conditions" (Sombart, 1967, 122). Although, at first glance, it might seem that the Marxian "dialectic of matter" is simply replaced by a Sombartian "dialectic of spirit" (Rogin, 1941), it is not possible to speak of a true spiritual dialectic, since, according to the author, there is not necessarily a link between the spirit of a given economic system and the subsequent one, the latter does not arise from the contradictions inherent in the preceding systems—it is not, therefore, a "spirit that by definition negates" the previous spirit (Cavalli, 1967, 26)—nor does the evolution of capitalism depend on an evolutionary process of its spirit (Iannone, 2006a)³. Since there is no line of development proceeding from spirit to spirit and, therefore, from system to system, it

³ Sombart thus departs from the concept of "stage theories", which presuppose the existence of an evolutionary process. Indeed, he does not recognise stages within the economic system, but only phases (Cavalli, 1967).

follows that each economic spirit is a unique phenomenon, which in its specificity is realised only once in history (Parsons, 1928).

Far from the cold economic explanation of production theories or models, the understanding of processes—including economic ones, in this context—is linked to human will (Pérez Franco, 2005).

The Sombartian reading has therefore also been rightly defined as a *bioeconomic* interpretation of the genesis of capitalism (Bevilacqua and Borrelli, 2015), as it links the development of certain phenomena—including the birth of capitalism—to variables connected to the *bíos*, highlighting how they are fundamentally the result of subjectification processes (Bevilacqua and Borrelli, 2015)⁴.

1.3 The spirit of capitalism

The sense in which the spirit of capitalism is to be understood is, according to Sombart, the “simplest and most generic”: “spirit” *is all that is mental and intellectual, found in the sphere of economic life* (Sombart, 2017, 55). A more precise conceptualisation of the spirit of capitalism can be found in the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, under the heading *Capitalism*, written by the author in 1929: spirit is “the sum total of the aims, motives and principles that determine the behaviour of men in economic life” (Sombart, 1930a, 196).

The spirit is linked to the mind, to the intellect and, therefore, to the human spirit, which manifests itself in the activity of transforming the world, which is proper to the human being and passes through the translation

⁴ The theme of the impact of capitalism on human life will be the subject of a special in-depth examination in the chapter of this work devoted to the drifts of this economic system.

of the intellectual element into action. The spirit of capitalism is the “*economic intention*” (Pérez Franco, 2005, 33) of capitalism.

In the author’s thinking, the spirit of capitalism is made up of the union of two elements: an entrepreneurial element and a bourgeois element, typical features of the figure of the entrepreneur.

The entrepreneurship element, also known as the “romantic spirit”, is, in turn, a combination of the aspiration to the infinite, the aspiration to power and the enterprising spirit. The former symbolises the Faustian spirit, the spirit of restlessness that causes every goal to be set outside the boundaries and the desire to overcome every limit existing in nature to be manifested (Sombart, 1967; Iannone, 2006a). The second represents the instinct to place humans and things under one’s control. Finally, the enterprising spirit expresses the tendency to work together to achieve a common task (Sombart, 1967). These elements constitute the so-called romantic imprint of the spirit of capitalism, which manifests itself in all its vigour in the phase of early capitalism, in which the entrepreneur—the new economic subject—is presented as “bold, fresh, provocative, easy-going, but also adventurous, full of illusions and prejudices, completely irrational” (Sombart, 1967, 333). The prevailing spirit is undoubtedly a spirit of adventure, piratical, fantastic, which operates like “a sudden burst of greed that drives men towards daring enterprises” (Sombart, 1967, 334), it is a spirit that “possesses an immense destructive force against all the old natural formations, the old bonds, the old barriers”, but which also proves to be strong because of its ability to “construct new forms of life, new creations, artistic and artificial” (Sombart, 1967, 173). This new spirit, incubated in a qualitatively differentiated human being (Rimbotti, 2002), “fights its way” (Sombart, 1967, 174) through all spheres of human life.

In Sombart's reconstruction, however, the enterprising spirit is not sufficient to give rise to the great capitalist system. For it to emerge, the entrepreneurial element must necessarily be accompanied by bourgeois virtues. The latter are exemplified by qualities such as thrift, diligence, moderation and faith in contracts, all of which tend to order and preserve, unlike the enterprising spirit that aims at conquering and gaining (Iannone, 2006a). The capitalist spirit only emerges from the combination of methodical approach, rationality and goal orientation on the one hand, and the thirst for adventure and the desire to overcome existing limits and boundaries on the other (Sombart, 1967). It can only be achieved through that union of passion and reason present in the ideal type of economic man that represents the essence of the capitalist spirit (Carosso, 1952).

The bearers of the new spirit can be found in all the peoples of Europe—Sombart, indeed, states that the capitalist spirit arises “from the depths of the European soul” (Carosso, 1952, 791), in all social strata—and, therefore, it would be pointless, from this standpoint, to frame the investigation of capitalism in terms, for example, of class—, in all professions and in all religions⁵. Nevertheless, it is still possible to find, according to the author, some groups of the population who, due to a number of factors, participated considerably more than other groups in the development of capitalist entrepreneurship: heretics, foreigners and Jews, to whom particular attention will be devoted in the critical analysis that follows in chapter two.

Sombart's reflections on the genesis of the capitalist spirit, through the connection between the latter and the emergence of a bio-social-psychic

⁵ With regard to the possibility of finding the presence of the capitalist spirit in all religions, it should be noted that the reflection is much more structured and complex than this statement. We will return to the religious origins of the capitalist spirit in more detail later in this paper.

type of human being carrying new values, transcends the economic sphere by linking the presence of this new figure to a change in society in general. This change is evident when, in particular, the new capitalist mentality seems to inform “every corner of life on the globe” (Festa, 2013, 7), thus leading to a new question about the capitalist spirit: is it the child of the modernisation process or had it “slept silently in the spirit of humanity until then, waiting for the right moment to emerge?”. Is this, then, a passing phase in the history of mankind or “its natural landing place until then undiscovered?” (Festa, 2013, 7).

The main relevant novelty is linked to the fact that the spirit manifests the imposition of real new “motivational structures of economic action” (Scheler, 1988, 50), which completely overturn the pre-existing ones. In such a reversal, they assert themselves as normal and ‘just’, even overcoming the sanctions resulting in particular from non-compliance with Thomist ethics, until then the ethics of reference for economic conduct (Scheler, 1988).

If before, therefore, there were individuals and entire groups endowed with an acquisitive impulse to go beyond the sustenance conforming to their social status, now this mode of behaviour becomes a “*general* institution”, a “*general* rule” (Scheler, 1988, 48). That “impulsive disposition”, which previously could only boldly take shape “in dark alleys and on the fringes of life’s high road”, is subsequently transformed into the “dominant soul of regular economic life” (Scheler, 1988, 49), into a veritable new *Weltanschauung* based on the idea of change as a value in itself (Baechler, 1977).

What, then, of the spirit of capitalism in the present era?

1.4 The future of the capitalist spirit

Is it still possible to discern, within the capitalism of our times, that same spiritual matrix from which this economic system originated?

In continuity with Weber's interpretation of the supremacy of the "steel cage" over the spiritual dimension of advanced capitalism, Sombart highlights the degenerative mechanisms that appear in mature capitalism in terms of the objectification of bourgeois virtues within the system itself and which cause the spiritual dimension to take second place to the increasingly predominant material one. Whether this in the long run would automatically lead to the disappearance of the spirit from capitalism, the author does not say. What is certain, in his reading, is that the same spiritual components that started capitalism are hardly to be found with the same vigour in advanced capitalism. They do not disappear, therefore, but lose power (Sombart, 1932, 1941, 2017), unlike the Weberian reading that affirms the eclipse of the original religious spirit.

If it is within religiosity that a certain *ethos*, which inspires the capitalist spirit, originated, it is not surprising that the current capitalist economic dimension seems to have lost along the way the very *ethos* that gave birth to it. Through a kind of secularisation process, capitalism rejects any foundation that transcends it, any principle that lies outside itself and its own self-referentiality, in the conviction of a full and total autonomy of operation. The capitalist system therefore appears to lack the spirit of the past (Iannuzzi, 2020)⁶.

In spite of the loss of its original spiritual qualities, capitalism nevertheless manifests itself as a system that stands on its own spirituality,

⁶ Spiritless capitalism is configured as exclusively material capitalism, operating under the principle of "for money through money" and no longer through the premise of "for money through God" (Hernández i Martí, 2014, 166).

albeit qualitatively different from that theorised by the classics of sociological thought, including Sombart and M. Weber. It is from the 1960s, in particular, that a “transversal, global and holistic” (Hernández i Marti, 2014, 169) spirituality emerges, aimed at achieving a process of “re-enchantment of the world” (Maffesoli, 2009), i.e. a new foundation of the social bond centred on a “diffused, porous and fluid” sacredness, capable of combining at the same time the immanent and the transcendent, in order to “endow the individual with a full consciousness of existence” (Hernández i Marti, 2014, 169). All this takes place simultaneously with the process of progressive deinstitutionalisation of religion that results in a personal search for the sacred and the desire to “believe without belonging” (Davie, 1994; Hernández i Marti, 2014).

It is precisely within the capitalist sphere that this spirituality of an experiential and emotional kind would find a vast source of fulfilment, through the enormous development of the cultural industry, for example, and through the new spiritual industry, which develops thanks to the increasing mercantilistic approach of this “new psychological-spiritual sphere” (Hernández i Marti, 2014, 170), generating what has been called “spiritual capitalism” (Hernández i Marti, 2014, 162-173).

A capitalism that deals with the spirit, therefore, but also a capitalism that grows and strengthens through a new spirit built on two fundamental ideas: to dilute the excesses of capitalism through practices and values derived from holistic spirituality and to encourage “positive thinking” since the creation of wealth and capital would take place through “an experience of the soul” (Hernández i Marti, 2014, 171), capable of attracting the blessings of an abundant and positive universe. Personal success or failure, according to this reading, depends entirely on oneself and one’s thinking.

Social or economic constraints are therefore relegated to a secondary position.

If capitalism becomes self-referential, finding within itself the meaning originally attributed to it from the outside, how, then, to construct those beliefs linked to the capitalist system, aimed at justifying its order and supporting, through legitimisation, “its modes of action and coherent dispositions”? (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2014, 72). Can capitalism produce such control devices by itself?

By linking the meaning of the “spirit of capitalism” to the concept of “ideology that justifies commitment to capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2014, 68)⁷—i.e. by adopting Boltanski and Chiapello’s approach that lies somewhere between a Marxian and Weberian reading—, the impossibility for this economic system to dispose of its spirit emerges. Indeed, the substance of the ideology through which participation in the system is justified may change, but the ideology—hence the spirit—as such cannot fail, unless the whole structure falls apart.

Given that, as experts in labour psychology have pointed out, material incentive and pure compulsion alone are not sufficient to generate the disposition to participate in the capitalist system with involvement and passion, the only sources to appeal to in order to derive the motivations to adhere to capitalism can be found within those discourses that emphasise not only “the benefits of an individual nature that can arise from participation in capitalist processes” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2014, 68),

⁷ The notion of “ideology” should not be understood here in its Marxian sense of “false consciousness”, i.e. a discourse aimed at concealing real material interests, but as “a set of shared beliefs, inscribed in institutions, committed to action and therefore rooted in reality” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2014, 64).

but also the collective benefits—definable, in particular, in terms of the common good—that such involvement helps to produce for the community.

However, as is well known, collective benefits do not always sufficiently motivate people to participate in the capitalist system. For this reason, “the expressions of the spirit” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2014, 76) aimed at stimulate subjects to the capitalist cause must manage to “meet their moral experience of everyday life” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2014, 76-77) and propose, at the same time, behavioural models and an attitude towards the world that they can recognise as their own.

The spirit of capitalism, therefore, encompasses, in this sense, both the justifications of the individual, i.e. the motivations through which the individual engages in the capitalist enterprise, and the general justifications, i.e. those that highlight the extent to which the action of the capitalist enterprise can produce common good. If the capitalist system has survived despite predictions of its collapse and grown ever stronger, it is probably due to its ability to generate representations “capable of guiding action” and “shared justifications” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2014, 71), which make it not only plausible but even desirable.

In the light of the above reflections, the spiritual dimension, albeit in a different way, seems to continue to play an important role in the existence and development of the capitalist economic sphere. This is evident if one considers that nowadays the term “capital” no longer indicates, in the first instance, the material dimension of economic conditions, such as the means of production, but immediately refers to the concept of “human capital”, thus addressing the sphere of the human mind, ability, knowledge, know-how, inventiveness, predisposition to collaboration, etc.

However, the question is whether it is sufficient to include again the subjective dimension in the economic sphere without reflecting on the

nature of the use of resources linked to subjectivity. In other words, it is not enough to claim that we are in the era of the “return of the subject” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2014, 573) if the subject referred to is the homo oeconomicus, the individual agent as classically conceived by economics, and not the subject understood as a human being and as a person, that subject whose indispensability Sombart already observed at the dawn of the last century⁸.

The questions concerning the future of the capitalist system therefore run parallel to those concerning the future of its spirit.

The answer to the questions relating to the fate of the capitalist system can only come through the discovery of the spirit of its origins and its roots, among which the religious matrix also stands out. Indeed, it does not seem possible to understand the degenerative mechanisms and drifts of current capitalism without going back to its original spiritual and material constitution. It is from the primordial mechanism that we need to start in order to “explore the capitalist mechanism” (Rimbotti, 2002, 14) and grasp its potentialities and contradictions.

It is along this road, therefore, that this work intends to continue, in the conviction that in order to “defuse the moloch” (Rimbotti, 2002, 14) and highlight its gaps and shortcomings, it is indispensable, following

⁸ See, in this regard, Hirschman’s considerations regarding the anthropological change of the contemporary subject. According to the author, capitalism did nothing but achieve exactly what was required of it. The accusation of “impeding the development of the ‘full human personality’”, from this standpoint, would be inappropriate since this impediment represents what precisely it was intended to achieve. If, in fact, the spirit of capitalism was intended to repress certain negative tendencies in humans, thus making the human personality “less predictable and more ‘one-dimensional’”, it cannot be blamed for fulfilling its original promise. Capitalism, in other words, “would have done exactly what would soon be imputed to it as its greatest fault” (Hirschman, 1979, 95-96).

Sombart's teaching, to know the intentions that animated it, which can be found, in particular, within its spiritual foundations.

CHAPTER II

JEWISH SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS CONDITIONS UNDERPINNING CAPITALISM

2.1 The spirit-body relationship of capitalism

The reflection on the relationship between the body and the spirit of capitalism proves to be a constant element in Sombart's work and its foundation. The centrality of this distinction rests mainly on two reasons: method and substance. It enables a fuller understanding of Sombart's methodological framework, but also of the original and current processes that characterise capitalism. In particular, the spirit-body dialectic contributes to affirming, within the capitalist dimension, the primacy of subjectivity—in particular of the capitalist entrepreneur—over the exclusively material dimension that also strongly connotes capitalist dynamics (with all that these aspects can mean also in terms of theoretical and methodological difference from the Marxian approach)⁹. However, it is not a question of simply substituting the spirit for the body. Sombart's is not a “mere” spiritualistic conception of capitalism. In order to grasp the significance and relevance of the spiritual foundations of capitalism represented by the Jewish religious ethic, it is always necessary to recognise the material and social sphere as a constitutive element of the capitalist system. Indeed, the spiritual sphere alone, even though it is in a position of importance prior to

⁹ Consider, for example, the importance of the production process and the associated relations and forces of production within the Marxian vision.

the purely material dimension—represented, for example, by the “production relations” and the “productive forces”, using Marxian categories—cannot do without the latter, since the spirit is never detached from the historical context of reference.

The reflection will therefore be structured into a first critical examination of the *external* contribution of the Jewish people to the capitalist cause through elements such as commercial instruments and the State¹⁰—elements that will be identified under the *body of* capitalism. We will then go on to show how this contribution is insufficient to give life to the capitalist system as a whole if we do not consider the *spirit*, i.e. the *inner* influence exerted by the Jewish people and deriving, on the one hand, from the objective historical circumstances experienced and, on the other, from the doctrinal structure proper to the Jewish religion.

The aim will be twofold: on the one hand, to investigate the relationship between Jewish ethics and the capitalist spirit as such and to show its peculiarities and typicality; on the other hand, through the examination of the “Jewish anthropological identity” (Sombart, 1997, 26), to bring out, precisely in the light of this relationship, the link with the sphere of the *character of* a people. The genesis of the capitalist system thus depends not only on religious ethics, but also—as we shall see in more detail—on the ethnic characteristics and circumstantial experience of the community in question. It is through these elements that the character of the *modern economic man* is shaped and idealised.

This question has long been asked: “does the capitalist spirit arise from capitalism or the latter from the former?” (Sombart, 2017, 439). In fact, the question is misleading. Capitalism and the capitalist spirit do not stand “as

¹⁰ Note that the term “State” is intended to refer, in any case, to the “modern State”.