

## The old spirit of capitalism

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**In three essays previously unpublished in French, Max Scheler describes the ethical revolution brought about by the capitalist mentality. Since the 19th century, consciousness has been shaped by the very idea of work, as embodied by the modern entrepreneur.**

Reviewed: Max Scheler, *Trois essais sur l'esprit du capitalisme. Sauvés par le travail ?*, translated and annotated with a preface by Patrick Lang (Nantes: Éditions Nouvelles Cécile Defaut, 2016), 297 pages, 20 €.

In 1914, Max Scheler wrote three texts about capitalism. Read together, they prove how important this topic was to him in creating his philosophy and lay out a fairly original theoretical position. *Trois essais sur l'esprit du capitalisme (Three essays on the spirit of capitalism)*, very carefully edited by Patrick Lang, includes a French translation of these essays and a rich presentation of the historical context and contemporary issues at stake in Scheler's work.

Max Scheler (1874-1928) was an important figure in German-language philosophy at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although some aspects of his thinking were influenced by Husserl and while Heidegger held him in high regard, the 'phenomenological' approach to his work that has tended to prevail in France (where he was the subject of a real movement of curiosity in the 1950s and 1960s, as evidenced by a certain number of translations)<sup>1</sup>, is not necessarily the most appropriate. Scheler was a prolific author who wrote both essays and academic texts in an endeavour to be present on all fronts. He was among those who believed that in order to reach beyond dry neo-Kantism (reducing humans to theoretical and practical rationality), the best path to follow was suggested by the term 'philosophical anthropology'. This anthropology aimed to explore the broad expressions of the human being by isolating a few main fundamental orientations, in other words a few essential ways of relating to the world through which human inventiveness always finds a positive outcome. This philosophical trend became established thanks to authors such as Helmut Plessner (1892-1985) and Arnold Gehlen (1904-1976). Hans Blumenberg's substantial oeuvre (1920-1996) also fits into this category.

### The discussion about capitalism in Germany

At the turn of the last century, the scholarly world in Germany was the stage for major innovation. One after another, three major works definitively established the term 'capitalism' (known but rarely used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century): G. Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money* published in 1900, W. Sombart's *Modern Capitalism* published in 1902 and Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, first published in 1905. But above all, they also created a new approach: studying the historical, sociological and human significance of modern 'capitalism' from

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: *La Situation de l'homme dans le monde* (Paris: Aubier, 1951) or *Le Formalisme en éthique et l'éthique matérielle des valeurs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955). His famous work on sympathy had already been translated into French in 1928 (*Nature et formes de la sympathie*).

a resolutely non-economicist perspective. From that point onwards, the legacy of classical political economics split irreversibly into two branches. The first led to modern economic theory (which takes the dominant forms of production and exchange in the capitalist world as a given, in order to allow reasoning focused solely on their internal logic, governed by the pursuit of efficiency) while the second took the opposite perspective, placing capitalism in context and in perspective, asking: where does it come from? how has it spread? why do people adhere to it? in what sense does it represent a specific, if not unilateral, choice for societies?

Max Scheler understood the value of this novel approach. Above and beyond his legitimate questions about the relevance of Simmel, Sombart and Weber's assertions about economic history, he also saw that these were new ways of thinking, new topics of thought, new issues, which, together, broadened the field of reflection about the current world and had to be acknowledged. In a sense, the fact that, in Scheler's view, they could and should be echoed in philosophy was proof after the fact of their intrinsic importance.

As Patrick Lang reminds us in his preface, it was Werner Sombart's work that set the coordinates of the debate for Scheler (and, in fact, for most of the authors of the time, including Weber). In *Der moderne Kapitalismus*, Sombart created an impressive historical fresco giving causal importance to the capitalist mentality in and of itself (between spirit of possession and inclination to initiative, between passion for accumulation and predatory greed). Sombart posited an essential continuity extending from merchant capitalism, exemplified by North Italian cities for several centuries and boosted by the age of discovery, through to industrial capitalism, essentially promoted by ingenious and narcissistic entrepreneurs. Beyond the aspects relating to economic history proper (an important dimension of his work, which even went on to influence Braudel), the German thinker focused mainly on establishing a long-term genealogy of the character traits, forms of life and technical mechanisms (such as the books of accounts invented by Italian merchants) that flourished in the wake of Western industrial development and revolutionised societies.

Max Scheler fully adhered to Sombart's key historical intuition. In his view, a specifically capitalist (or entrepreneurial) spirit did exist and it was coherent, permanent in terms of its main traits, and distinct from the bourgeois spirit, while nonetheless connected to it in several ways. This spirit, driven by an exacerbated desire for wealth and possession that leads to the unbridled and boundless pursuit of acquisition, could be considered as the cause of capitalist social relations. Scheler expressed himself in the purest Sombartian style – deliberately provocative and paying more attention to literary images than to meticulous detail – when, for example, he established the genealogical links that supposedly link the modern businessman or entrepreneur with out-dated historical figures such as the Italian *condottiere* or the pirates of the south seas.

'Everywhere, it is through a *type combining the man of war and the acquisitive man* that the transition takes place. It is with great surprise that we learn how many freebooters, pirates and explorers charged with acquisition there actually were up until the 17th century in Italy, in France, in England and even in Germany – types which, very progressively, took the shape of the Italian merchant companies and great trading companies of the 16th and 17th centuries.'

(p.162)

However, compared to Sombart – who was no stranger to sarcasm – and to Weber, who underlined their unpleasant sides clearly (but plainly), Max Scheler emphasized the irrational, infantile dimension to the impulse and drive mechanisms governing the entrepreneurial activity at the heart of capitalism. This was something he shared with Freud, an author he cited occasionally, whereas the phenomenologists of his time were careful to keep their distance.

According to Scheler, on the one hand, the bourgeois spirit, organised around private property and the obsession with protecting it, closes itself off to everything that gives intensity and substance to life: ‘values’ in the sense of the lasting forces that attract and incite human will and human intelligence; the things that make us want to act, that sometimes create a willingness to sacrifice. On the other hand, the capitalist spirit is essentially based on a playful fascination with indeterminate accumulation as an aim in and of itself, combined with an appetite for power fuelled by narcissism. With time, this serious and calculating bourgeois spirit even ends up waning, overtaken by conformity and demagogy. Now autonomous, the capitalist world therefore goes on to function alone, freeing up considerable room for stupidity and vulgarity (not just for impersonal domination and mechanical constraints, as Weber’s work posits). Here, under Scheler’s pen Sombart’s vaguely amused distance from the bourgeois and capitalist world took a ferocious turn: for him, such a world did not deserve to survive and was in fact already beginning to crumble silently. It was therefore possible to position oneself after its demise, as if the cycle of transformation were already complete. From this perspective, it would be logical for anthropological and ethical reflection to be inspired by a desire to finish with capitalism before finding something better. It is clearly no coincidence that Scheler was not only one of the first thinkers to use the term ‘anti-capitalism’<sup>2</sup> but also one of the first to try and make it a key word within an autonomous theoretical and normative position. The value of this book put together by Patrick Lang is therefore that it shows that non-Marxist anti-capitalist philosophy has a long history in which Scheler has an important place.

## Religion of work

Following the development of Scheler’s thought through the three texts translated by Patrick Lang, it becomes clear that a sort of ‘religious turn’ did occur when, putting Sombart’s work into perspective, the emphasis of his thinking shifted under the influence of Weber’s questions. It seemed that Weber was in fact right when he claimed, contrary to the author of *Modern Capitalism*, that without the depth of religious impulses – which, in human history, have always determined the most radical redirections of life and thought – the ethical revolution represented by the advent of the capitalist mentality could not have occurred. The eternal passions that stir the human soul, such as the love of possessing, accumulating and gaining wealth do not suffice. More specifically, according to Weber, some of the strong psychological forces called upon and used by Protestantism, eventually – after a few more links in the chain – led to an ethics of professional success, which, historically, made possible the spirit of capitalist enterprise as we know it. The anxious pursuit of salvation became the pursuit of tangible worldly success. Scheler knew that Weber’s spectacular ‘Protestant’ argument had been discussed.<sup>3</sup> Taking up the results of these discussions, Scheler reasserted the unique historical importance of Protestantism, however he did so in a much more cautious way than the sociologist before him.

After consideration, though, this ‘religious’ turn seems to reflect a greater underlying conceptual depth. Rather than explaining capitalism through greed and the immature desire for accumulation, Scheler shows that it is rooted in a certain way in which the gift of the world is organised. This therefore called for an anthropology of work.

‘The new *drive to work*, no longer limited on religious and moral grounds, born from the energy of will and activity turning toward matter *as a consequence* of having turned away from God and the intelligible heavenly sphere, [...] leads, first, to boundless acquisition,

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<sup>2</sup> In 1919, he wrote a text entitled ‘Christlicher Sozialismus als Antikapitalismus’.

<sup>3</sup> For Weber’s replies to his critics, see *The Protestant Ethic Debate. Max Weber’s Replies to his Critics, 1907-1910* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001).

second, to a boundless drive for acquisition, and finally, much later, to a new pleasure and a new drive for pleasure' (p. 204).

The intuition expressed here is clear. Before attraction to wealth, even before any passion and any interest, it is a certain human 'attitude' towards things and towards one's environment that enables the form of activity favoured by the modern entrepreneur. This attitude is none other than work itself. Because work shapes consciousness. It 'makes us see' the world (and other people) as available resources asking to be exploited, calling for rational use and skilled control. There is a clear connection here with the labour-centred utilitarian conception of human activity that would characterise Heidegger's existential ontology a decade later.<sup>4</sup> But what interested Scheler here was that the entrepreneur's 'world-view', which, in his view, transformed every aspect of social life during the process of industrialisation, led to this form of consciousness being exclusively – and excessively – systematised. It is based on this conclusion that we can envisage a veritable critique of capitalism. In a sense, despite their allusive nature, Scheler's texts are the missing link in the chain between Max Weber and the themes characteristic of the Frankfurt School. The latter, from Horkheimer and Adorno onwards, grounded their Marxist critique of capitalism in a general contestation of 'modernity'. In their view, this modernity locked itself into a perspective of 'instrumental rationality' that became increasingly brutal as it gained in assurance.<sup>5</sup> What ethical perspectives can emerge from such an approach? It is striking that Max Scheler, who turned entirely away from the labour movement and political socialism, should have turned instead towards an intellectual youth craving existential authenticity and new ideals; ideals linked to personal accomplishment and achieving exciting collective goals. Renewal would come from this youth, he claimed, albeit in somewhat out-dated terms.

'In young people's conception of the constantly evolving world, phenomena of spiritual fatigue such as scepticism, relativism, historicism, retreating into the personal self, have also lost ground in the face of powerful progress towards the immediacy of *lived contact* with *things* themselves, towards *absolute* evidence, which firms up strength of action and character, towards expansive abandonment to the world' (p.237).

The full wealth of this world of values only opens up to us when we turn away from the utilitarian orientation inherent to 'work'; it appears not through the simple contemplation that the Greek philosophers of antiquity contrasted with labour, but thanks to the affirmative energy that emanates intrinsically from certain great realities in the historical world. The man of action, the artist, the mystic, are all models adhering in a non-rational, committed fashion to that which exists, that which warrants being loved and constantly reconfirmed by commitment itself. In a way, long-term history proved the philosopher right. After the powerful nationalist wave set in motion in August 1914 retreated, once the last glimmers of communism and fascism had faded, from 1960 onwards, the 'new social movements' (linked to anti-authoritarianism, anti-militarism, the claims of minority groups, aspirations towards alternative ways of life, etc.) were what allowed the 'world left' (Wallerstein) and, more specifically, anti-capitalism, to reinvent itself. These movements presuppose an attachment to 'values' that the labour movement could not place at the centre of its questions and demands.

### **Are Scheler's ideas relevant today?**

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<sup>4</sup> M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1927, § 15.

<sup>5</sup> M. Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002 [1944]).

In his preface, Patrick Lang underscores the fact that the value of Scheler's texts is twofold: first, in terms of the history of ideas and, second, in terms of contemporary concerns in which challenging capitalism has become central once again.

The first aspect is uncontroversial. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, criticism of modern capitalism has taken two distinct channels. Propelled by the labour movement and deployed by socialism, the *social* critique of this modernity has mainly focused on the exploitation of workers and the generalised deterioration of working conditions. As for the *cultural* critique, it has focused on the narrow-minded forms of life and personality that come with the spread of bourgeois values in collective life and with the progress of industrial modernisation. Although they were contemporaries, Balzac and Proudhon, and much later William Morris and Karl Marx, were not talking about the same thing, even though their ideas and sympathies sometimes merged or at least converged. The German scholars who took up the term 'capitalism' around 1900 to develop the historical and anthropological approaches mentioned above clearly fell into the category of 'cultural' critique. It was at this time that, in a more or less impressionist fashion, the term 'capitalism' started to be used to attack a mentality or a civilisation rather than a specific economic organisation. Curiously, the communist regimes prolonged this demonization (the insulting reference to capitalism or capitalists as enemies and essences), which is sometimes still conjured up by the mere use of the words today. This was also the time when indifference to the labour question – the 'social' question as it was termed in the previous century – drew strength from an argument that was endlessly repeated throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Socialism, it was said, had become a force like any other in the parliamentary game and had revealed its true colours. It was well and truly part of the 'system', thereby confirming that the working class could not counter the deepest and most worrying trends overwhelming us. Worse still, there was reason to believe that if it were to take power, under the aegis of an ultra-powerful state, socialism would only accentuate the tendency towards the alienating homogenisation and rationalisation that are the hallmarks of capitalist civilisation. One might say that these post-Sombartian discussions defined the moment when this cultural critique began to be expressed as a research agenda able to feed into history, sociology and even psychology.<sup>6</sup> Herein lies its considerable importance, clearly identified by Max Scheler.

But does this still speak to us today?

What seems to support Scheler's ideas today is, first, the fact that the range of criticisms levied against capitalism seems to have remained fairly stable over time. The history of critiques of capitalism is homogeneous enough for us to be able to easily refer back to the past, whether in terms of the exploitation of workers, the deepening of inequalities, the focus of values on efficiency and profit, the lack of environmental responsibility, the ethical promotion of greed, or the inclination towards accumulation for accumulation's sake, and, in its wake, towards excess (*hubris*), boundlessness or the overstepping limits in and of itself. These fields remain relevant to us today.

However, three obstacles can be identified.

First, in these texts and in others, Scheler presents a frankly disagreeable image of philosophy, or at least of his philosophy. From the outset, his arguments are aristocratic, ultra-dogmatic, arrogant and unshakeably confident in his ability to judge anything in a clear-cut and

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<sup>6</sup> Aurélien Berlan. *La Fabrique des derniers hommes. Retour sur le présent avec Tönnies, Simmel et Weber* (Paris: La Découverte, 2012). A. Berlan believes that it is German academic sociology (Tönnies, Simmel, Weber) that took up the legacy of *Kulturkritik*. The non-economic critique of capitalism (and this is particularly clear when the term itself is used) forms a very specific set of discourse, which overlaps to some extent with *Kulturkritik* (which, originally, targeted modernity more than capitalism) but without actually identifying with that trend.

peremptory fashion, without an ounce of nuance. In both spirit and style, we are not far from Heidegger.

Second, as matters stand, it now seems self-evident that all the past major conceptions of capitalism – whether by Marx, Sombart or Weber – can be justifiably criticised for hugely underestimating its flexibility and diversity, including in terms of its motivational and psychological components. Braudel, despite being very Sombartian in some senses, already expressed his scepticism about the spirit of the ‘German’ discussions of the turn of the century. In his view, while there were certain constant features in the characters of those wanting to play the profit game, there were also substantial evolutions and variations and, ultimately, it was not certain that these psychological factors were actually that important.<sup>7</sup> In the same vein, in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, L. Boltanski and E. Chiapello<sup>8</sup> noted the end of an era: ‘the spirit of capitalism’ – which no longer simply concerned the small class of industry leaders (consumerism aside, ‘management’ played an important role disseminating this) – had become a very flexible, very mobile aspect of capitalism itself. We should expect to see it constantly adapting and reinventing itself. And, therefore, we should not retrospectively endow it with too much long-term unity. All these elements undermine Scheler’s ideas.

Third, Scheler’s critique of work, which lies at the heart of the volume, raises a certain number of difficulties. If we take the term ‘work’ as encompassing all activities whose main result is providing a good or a service meeting a need, then the idea that the perspective of work is spontaneously that of blind domination cannot actually be defended. Empirically, a huge part of what mankind has done by ‘working’ has meant, and still means, being with or collaborating with things and beings in nature: for example, by managing processes (e.g. in agriculture), by governing animals (e.g. in breeding), by drawing on given resources, by repairing identified failings, etc. Of course, it is obvious that industrial societies (whether capitalist or communist) have generally been aggressive and irresponsible in their relationships with their natural environment. It is also clear that a portion of socially organised human work has had to redefine itself according to this new constraint. But it would be excessive to therefore conclude that ‘human work’ is destined by its very essence to slide down the fatal slippery slope leading from a simple instrumental or technical perspective (harmlessly seeking the means to spare effort by promoting efficiency) to suicidal plundering and systematic capture. This is one initial reason to resist any attempt to ground the critique of capitalism in putting into perspective the notion of ‘Work’, understood as an anthropological possibility.

A second reason comes from the fact that, if we choose this approach, it leaves us with a leap in the dark as our only choice. If, ontologically speaking, the world of work – and, by extension, the world of economic practices and social relationships in general – has no consistence, no momentum in and of itself (if it only serves to perpetually confirm the dull logic of laborious mastery of the world), then any confidence placed in alternative experiences, intelligent resistance, local protest or attempts at regulation seems laughable. This is how Scheler – who identified capitalism as a kind of invasive pathology meeting no resistance – linked anti-capitalism with the perspective of a spiritual revolution: in his view, the advent of a new man able to subvert modernity was the only hope for salvation. Today, analogous conceptions continue to play a significant role in intellectual debate, including among authors who claim to be of Marxist inspiration. It is argued, for example (following André Gorz<sup>9</sup> and Moishé Postone<sup>10</sup>), that ultimately our problems derive from the

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<sup>7</sup> *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Centuries* (London: Collins, 1981-1984 [1979]), 3 vols.

<sup>8</sup> London; New York: Verso, 2005 [1999].

<sup>9</sup> *Métamorphoses du travail, Quête du sens, Critique de la raison économique* (Paris: Galilée, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge

modern mythicisation of work, seen as a way of controlling the world and achieving collective fulfilment. More radically, the economic world – and by extension, the social world as a whole – can even be seen as caught in a stranglehold by a totalitarian logic that will have to be overturned by an overwhelming historical leap, albeit one that is obviously very different from the leap envisaged and sometimes implemented by the revolutionaries of the last two centuries.<sup>11</sup> Of course, under certain conditions, anger and violent disgust with the current world, the love of risk and the spirit of adventure can all provide interesting psychological resources for the future. Anti-capitalism may even have a fundamental need for them. But they cannot function alone. A more solid foundation might be found by paying careful attention to the alternatives that actually exist, to the possibilities drawn up within an economic world (of work and especially of production) that has its ambiguities. In such a context, Scheler's impatience probably does not provide the best counsel.

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University Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, J. Vioulac, *La Logique totalitaire. Essai sur la crise de l'Occident* (Paris: Puf, 2013).