

The “Reactionary Modernist” and His Transnational Legacy: Werner Sombart and Japan

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During his life time, Werner Sombart (1863 –1941), nowadays a marginal figure that is seldom mentioned in any companion to the history of sociology or economic science, belongs to one of the most productive and famous social scientists of Germany. Not only in the European continent, but also in countries outside Europe, especially in the United States and Japan, Sombart’s writings on modern capitalism attracted a broad range of readers – from the leftist social reformers to the ultranationalists. In Japan, Sombart was for the first time taken up by the German-trained economist Fukuda Tokuzô in the debate over the spirit of modern capitalist enterprises in the early twentieth century. In the course of Japan’s interwar economic slump and military expansion after the Showa financial crisis, his later writings were embraced by the ultra-nationalist economists and were transformed by them as theoretical tools to establish a uniquely “Japanese economic science”. This presentation sheds light on Werner Sombart’s dominant role in shaping the understanding of “capitalism” in modern Japan. It combines the empirical study of the border-transcending economists’ group, which helped disseminate the historically- oriented economic knowledge of German Historical school in Asia, and the conceptual history of the concept “capitalism” in the Japanese context.