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Werner Sombart and the Deep Origins
of Creative Destruction

**Claude Diebolt, Romain Diebolt,
Tapas Mishra**

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Claude Diebolt
CNRS & University of Strasbourg
cdiebolt@unistra.fr

Romain Diebolt
Southampton Business School, University of Southampton
R.Diebolt@soton.ac.uk

Tapas Mishra
Southampton Business School, University of Southampton
T.K.Mishra@soton.ac.uk

Abstract

This contribution revisits the origins of the concept of creative destruction by returning to Werner Sombart's *Krieg und Kapitalismus* (1913). Although Sombart never used the expression *schöpferische Zerstörung*, a systematic page-by-page reading shows that he articulated a destruction–creation mechanism that anticipates the structural logic later formalized by Joseph Schumpeter. Sombart presents war as simultaneously destructive and generative, arguing that fiscal, institutional, and ecological ruptures are not peripheral to capitalism but central to its emergence. His analysis of deforestation, scarcity, and technological substitution (especially the shift from wood to coal and coke) offers an early model of how material crises can trigger innovations that reshape production systems and energy regimes. The article also examines the subsequent marginalization of Sombart's contribution, situating it within broader methodological and political shifts in twentieth-century economics. It contrasts Sombart's historically grounded mechanism with the evolution of Schumpeter's thinking from 1911 to 1942, when the canonical formulation of creative destruction finally appeared. More broadly, the paper reflects on the dynamics of intellectual attribution in economic thought, illustrating how concepts often achieve recognition not through priority of insight but through subsequent elaboration and institutionalization. Reassessing Sombart thus enriches the genealogy of creative destruction and deepens our understanding of contemporary debates on innovation, energy transitions, war-related technological change, and the macroeconomic implications of AI. Building on recent work by Acemoglu, Mokyr, and others, the article argues that Sombart emerges not as the inventor of the term but as the first thinker to articulate its structural logic, and that recognizing this lineage enhances both historical scholarship and contemporary economic analysis.

Keywords

Creative destruction; Werner Sombart; Joseph Schumpeter; History of economic thought; War and capitalism; Technological change; Structural transformation.

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1. Introduction

Following the awarding of the 2025 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences to Philippe Aghion, Peter Howitt, and Joel Mokyr, the concept of *creative destruction* has once again moved to the forefront of economic debate.

Few ideas have permeated economic thought and public discourse as deeply as creative destruction. In textbooks, policy discussions, theories of innovation, and contemporary narratives surrounding artificial intelligence, it has become a convenient shorthand for the disruptive dynamism of capitalism.

Yet, despite its widespread use, the intellectual genealogy of the concept remains surprisingly underexplored. Over the past decade, several authors have suggested that Werner Sombart may have articulated key elements of creative destruction prior to Joseph Schumpeter. Most recently, Daron Acemoglu (2024) revived this claim, asserting that the idea can be traced back to Sombart. While this remark has reignited interest in the origins of the concept, it was made without reference to specific textual evidence.

Earlier contributions had already suggested a broader genealogy of creative destruction. In particular, Reinert and Reinert (2006) argued that the concept entered economics through Nietzsche's influence on Sombart and emphasized the importance of *Krieg und Kapitalismus* in the transmission of destruction–creation dynamics into economic thought. Their contribution opened an important line of interpretation linking Nietzsche, Sombart, and Schumpeter.

The present article complements and extends this perspective. Rather than reconstructing broad intellectual filiations, it returns directly to Sombart's text and offers a systematic reading of *Krieg und Kapitalismus* (1913), with the aim of identifying the destruction–creation mechanism at the level of textual evidence and conceptual structure.

The issue matters for two reasons:

1. Historically, attributing the concept solely to Schumpeter obscures the intellectual lineage in which he was deeply embedded, particularly within the German-speaking tradition.

2. Conceptually, understanding the true origins of creative destruction may reshape how economists interpret the relationship between innovation, disruption, the state, and structural transformation.

This contribution offers the first systematic textual reappraisal of Sombart's *Krieg und Kapitalismus* (1913) in light of this debate.

What follows is not a reconstruction by analogy, but a direct examination of Sombart's own words, with page references to the 1913 edition. Our conclusion is that Sombart does indeed articulate a destruction–creation mechanism strikingly close to what Schumpeter would later conceptualize, although framed through war, state-building, colonial expansion, and resource depletion rather than entrepreneurial innovation.

2. Intellectual Background: Sombart, Schumpeter, and the German Tradition

Understanding Sombart's contribution requires situating him within the broader German Historical School, which emphasized institutional evolution, historical specificity, and the embeddedness of economic systems in political and sociocultural structures (Alcouffe and Diebolt, 2009).

Sombart had already identified many of the structural features of capitalist transformation in earlier works such as *Die deutsche Volkswirtschaft im neunzehnten Jahrhundert* (1903), where he emphasized the decisive role of war, state formation, and large-scale enterprises in shaping nineteenth-century economic development. This broader intellectual trajectory situates *Krieg und Kapitalismus* as part of a longer project rather than an isolated intervention.

As Backhaus (1996) emphasizes, Sombart occupied an ambiguous yet central position within the later German Historical School, shaping the intellectual environment in which Schumpeter was trained. Sombart belonged to the later generation of this tradition, alongside Weber ([1904-1905] 1992), Schmoller (1900), and Brentano (1902). His multi-volume *Der moderne Kapitalismus* (1902-1927) sought to provide a comprehensive historical sociology of capitalism, an ambition far broader in scope than Schumpeter's later analytical focus.

Sombart's relative neglect in modern economic discourse contrasts sharply with the breadth of his analytical ambition. As Peukert (2012) clearly shows, his work was fundamentally concerned with capitalism as a historical formation characterized not only by economic mechanisms, but also by political, cultural, and institutional dynamics. In this perspective, Sombart sought to identify the "great tendencies of capitalist evolution" rather than to isolate static equilibria or purely functional relationships. This macro-historical orientation helps explain why his insights into processes of destruction and transformation have often remained underappreciated: they are embedded in a broader interpretative framework that differs markedly from the more analytically oriented tradition that would later dominate twentieth-century economics.

Schumpeter, though often associated with the Austrian School, was intellectually hybrid. He admired Sombart, cited him frequently in *Theorie der wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung* (1911), and shared with him a fascination for the disruptive mechanisms of capitalism. Yet Schumpeter translated these disruptions into microeconomic processes of innovation, whereas Sombart interpreted them as macro-historical transformations shaped by war, conflict, and state formation.

The intellectual relationship between Sombart and Schumpeter was not merely abstract. Schumpeter was fully aware of Sombart's work and cited him repeatedly in *Theorie der wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung* (1911), particularly in discussions of capitalist dynamics and structural transformation. Although there is no evidence of close personal collaboration, both operated within the same German-speaking academic milieu, where Sombart's historical sociology of capitalism was already highly influential. Schumpeter's later analytical reformulation thus emerged in an intellectual environment shaped, at least in part, by Sombart's macro-historical interpretation, even if it was ultimately translated into a different theoretical language.

This difference in focus partly explains why Schumpeter's concept became canonical, while Sombart's conceptual insights remained dispersed and under-acknowledged.

3. What Sombart Does Not Say: No *Schöpferische Zerstörung*

A philological examination of *Krieg und Kapitalismus* confirms that Sombart never uses the expression *schöpferische Zerstörung*.

This is important. The linguistic invention of the phrase, its elegance, symmetry, and rhetorical power belongs unequivocally to Schumpeter. Any claim that Sombart “invented” the term is therefore incorrect.

But focusing solely on vocabulary obscures what truly matters. Concepts in economic thought often exist before their labels.

The essential question is: Does Sombart articulate a destruction–creation mechanism equivalent in structure, if not in name, to creative destruction?

To answer this, we must turn to the text itself.

4. War as a Dual Force: Destruction and Creation

The opening chapter of *Krieg und Kapitalismus*, titled “*Das doppelte Gesicht des Krieges*” (“The double face of war”), establishes the foundational dialectic.

Sombart begins with what he calls the “common image” of war:

“*Der Krieg als Zerstörer: das ist das Bild, das uns allen vorschwebt.*” (“War as destroyer: that is the image that comes to everyone’s mind.” — p. 16)

But he immediately challenges this one-dimensional interpretation. Speaking of colonial expansion, he states:

“*Vergegenwärtigt man sich die überragende Bedeutung der Kolonien... so genügt diese eine Leistung des Krieges...*” (“If one recalls the overwhelming importance of colonies... this one achievement of war suffices...” — p. 26)

to justify viewing war also as:

“*Schöpfer kapitalistischen Wesens*” (“creator of the very essence of capitalism” — p. 26)

This duality is encapsulated in Sombart’s most cited line:

“*Das doppelte Gesicht des Krieges: hier zerstört er, und dort baut er auf.*” (“The double face of war: here it destroys, and there it builds.” — p. 11)

The significance of this sentence cannot be overstated. Sombart does not merely juxtapose destruction and creation; he links them. War destroys prior structures but in doing so lays the foundations for new economic orders: fiscal systems, colonial markets, large-scale bureaucracies, credit instruments, and specialized industries.

He presses the point further:

“Und doch! Ohne den Krieg wäre er überhaupt nicht da.” (“And yet! Without war, capitalism would simply not exist.” — p. 23)

And again:

“Der Krieg hat kapitalistisches Wesen nicht nur zerstört; er hat sie erst möglich gemacht.” (“War has not only destroyed capitalist essence; it has made it possible in the first place.” — p. 23)

We see here the skeleton of creative destruction: a structural transformation generated by destruction itself.

5. Methodological Reversal: From Capitalism Causes War to War Causes Capitalism

The most explicit theoretical turn comes when Sombart urges economists to invert the usual Marxian question:

“...nicht untersuchen: inwiefern ist der Krieg eine Folge des Kapitalismus, sondern inwieweit ist der Kapitalismus eine Wirkung des Krieges.” (“...not examine in what way war is a consequence of capitalism, but in what way capitalism is an effect of war.” — p. 10)

This methodological reversal translates into a radical thesis: capitalism is not the generator of destruction; destruction is the generator of capitalism.

For Sombart, war and the state-building processes it triggers are not a pathological deviation from capitalism. It is the womb of capitalist modernity.

6. The Most Striking Passage: From Ecological Ruin to Technological Breakthrough

The clearest parallel to creative destruction appears in Sombart’s discussion of naval construction and metallurgy.

He begins by describing these industries as:

“Kinder, die der Krieg gezeugt hat” (“children engendered by war” — p. 31)

Their voracious demand for wood leads to catastrophic deforestation:

“...ein Zerstörer geworden: der Zerstörer der Wälder in Europa.” (“...it [war] became a destroyer: the destroyer of Europe’s forests.” — p. 31)

Then comes the transformational moment, the Sombartian precursor to creative destruction:

“Wiederum aber steigt aus der Zerstörung neuer schöpferischer Geist empor...”
 (“Yet again, from destruction rises a new creative spirit...” — p. 31)

This “creative spirit” manifests as a series of substitutions and technological shifts:

- Ersatzstoffe (substitutes for wood),
- the adoption of coal,
- the invention of coke metallurgy,
- and the energetic transition that underpins the Industrial Revolution.

Sombart concludes with a sweeping statement:

this new process *“hat die ganze großartige Entwicklung des Kapitalismus im 19. Jahrhundert erst möglich gemacht.”* (“made the entire magnificent development of 19th-century capitalism possible.” — p. 31)

This is creative destruction *avant la lettre*. The mechanism is identical: destruction → scarcity → innovation → new capitalist regime.

7. How Far Ahead Was Sombart? A Three-Level Assessment

Sombart did not coin the expression. The rhetorical invention belongs to Schumpeter. The destruction–creation dialectic is fully articulated in 1913. Its structure is the same as Schumpeter’s, though the domain (war vs. innovation) differs.

Systemic Interpretation: Two Different Worlds

Sombart (1913)	Schumpeter (1942)
Destruction exogenous: war, imperial policy, state-building	Destruction endogenous: innovation, competition
Creation as institutional and resource-based	Creation as entrepreneurial
Macro-historical transformation	Microeconomic dynamics

As this comparison makes clear, Sombart and Schumpeter converge on the idea that capitalism evolves through disruptive transformation, yet they embed this process in distinct causal architectures: exogenous forces of war, state formation, and resource shocks in

Sombart’s case, and endogenous entrepreneurial innovation in Schumpeter’s. Understanding this contrast is essential for situating their contributions within a unified genealogy of creative destruction. Sombart shows how capitalist modernity is built on the ruins of previous orders. Schumpeter shows how capitalism continually destroys and rebuilds itself. Both share a structural imagination; they differ in locus and mechanism.

In sum, Schumpeter’s formulation of creative destruction emerged within a broader intellectual lineage of development thinking, where earlier authors (including Sombart) had already articulated similar destruction–creation mechanisms.

The following excerpts illustrate the centrality of the destruction–creation mechanism in *Krieg und Kapitalismus*.

Box 1. Selected Passages from Sombart (1913) on Destruction and Creation
1. War as Destroyer
<i>“Der Krieg als Zerstörer: das ist das Bild, das uns allen vorschwebt.”</i> (“War as destroyer: that is the image that comes to everyone’s mind.” — p. 16)
2. War as Creator of Capitalist Essence
<i>“...genügt diese eine Leistung des Krieges... um ihn auch als Schöpfer kapitalistischen Wesens zu betrachten.”</i> (“...this one achievement of war suffices to regard it as a creator of the very essence of capitalism.” — p. 26)
3. The Double Face of War
<i>“Das doppelte Gesicht des Krieges: hier zerstört er, und dort baut er auf.”</i> (“The double face of war: here it destroys, and there it builds.” — p. 11)
4. Capitalism as a Product of War
<i>“Ohne den Krieg wäre er überhaupt nicht da.”</i> (“Without war, capitalism would simply not exist.” — p. 23)
<i>“Der Krieg hat kapitalistisches Wesen nicht nur zerstört; er hat sie erst möglich gemacht.”</i> (“War has not only destroyed capitalist essence; it made it possible in the first place.” — p. 23)
5. Destruction Generating Innovation
<i>“Wiederum aber steigt aus der Zerstörung neuer schöpferischer Geist empor...”</i> (“Yet again, from destruction rises a new creative spirit...” — p. 31)

These passages show that Sombart not only juxtaposed destruction and creation but also framed them as dynamically connected components of capitalist development.

Box 2. Timeline of the Emergence of Creative Destruction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1911 — Joseph Schumpeter, <i>Theorie der wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung</i> Innovation conceptualized as <i>Neue Kombinationen</i>, but destruction remains implicit rather than theorized.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1913 — Werner Sombart, <i>Krieg und Kapitalismus</i> • Explicit articulation of a destruction–creation mechanism rooted in war, institutional change, ecological depletion, and energy transitions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1926 — Second Edition of Schumpeter’s <i>Theorie</i> Growing emphasis on the disruptive character of innovation, though the term “creative destruction” still does not appear.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1939 — <i>Business Cycles</i> Schumpeter (1939) begins to integrate innovation, structural change, and cyclical dynamics in a more systemic way.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1942 — <i>Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy</i> Canonical formulation of creative destruction as the essential fact about capitalism, defined as an endogenous process of industrial mutation.

This timeline highlights the conceptual gap between Sombart’s historically anchored destruction–creation logic and Schumpeter’s later formalization of an endogenous innovation-driven mechanism.

8. The Reception and Marginalization of Werner Sombart

The fate of Sombart’s contribution illustrates what Perlman and McCann (1998) describe as the uneven historical survival of key economic ideas, where conceptual foundations are often forgotten as later authors coin more memorable labels. Although Werner Sombart was one of the most influential economists and sociologists in early 20th-century Europe, his reception in the economics discipline has been marked by a curious combination of prominence and marginalization. Understanding this trajectory is essential to explaining why his destruction–creation framework was forgotten for decades. This marginalization reflects,

more broadly, what Hodgson (2001) has described as the discipline's progressive "forgetting of history," which disadvantaged historically oriented thinkers such as Sombart.

In the years before World War I, Sombart's work was widely read across Europe. *Der moderne Kapitalismus* quickly became a monumental reference for the historical study of capitalism, and young economists (including Joseph Schumpeter) were directly exposed to his structural interpretation of economic transformation.

However, Sombart's intellectual standing deteriorated sharply during and after World War I. His openly nationalist positions in *Händler und Helden* (1915), and later his ambiguous posture toward elements of National Socialism in the 1930s, severely damaged his international reputation. His works became politically suspect in the post-war era.

Concurrently, the economics profession underwent a methodological shift toward formalism, econometrics, and Anglo-American analytical styles. Scholars rooted in historical analysis and institutional sociology were increasingly marginalized. Sombart suffered both political discrediting and methodological displacement.

Schumpeter, by contrast, benefited from being located at Harvard, publishing in English, and articulating his ideas within emerging neoclassical frameworks. When he coined the expression "creative destruction" in 1942, the phrase's rhetorical power and analytical clarity ensured its rapid uptake, while Sombart's antecedent insights faded from collective memory.

This historical trajectory helps contextualize Schumpeter's own intellectual development.

9. From Schumpeter 1911 to 1942: How the Concept Evolves

Against this background, it is instructive to trace how Schumpeter's concept evolved across his major works.

Schumpeter's articulation of capitalist transformation developed significantly across his major works, and this evolution is crucial for understanding both his originality and his intellectual proximity to Sombart.

1911 — *Theorie der wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung*

In the first edition, Schumpeter does not mention creative destruction, nor does he frame innovation as intrinsically destructive. Innovation is defined as *Neue Kombinationen*, a positive act of entrepreneurial novelty. The displacement of old structures is acknowledged but not conceptualized as a systemic mechanism.

1926 — Second, revised edition

In the 1926 edition, Schumpeter adopts a more dynamic vision in which innovation undermines routines and established industries. Yet the concept remains unnamed; destruction is a consequence, not a driver.

It is difficult to believe that this evolution occurred in complete isolation. By the time Schumpeter was refining his theory of capitalist transformation, Sombart's historical sociology of capitalism had already circulated widely within the German-speaking academic world. While direct lines of influence are rarely traceable with certainty, the structural proximity between Sombart's destruction–creation dialectic and Schumpeter's later formulation invites reflection. Rather than a sudden conceptual rupture, the emergence of creative destruction may be understood as a theoretical condensation of ideas already present in the intellectual atmosphere of the time.

1942 — *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*

The fully formed concept appears only in 1942 (“The Process of Creative Destruction”, Part II, Chapter 7, pp. 81 ff.). Schumpeter now describes creative destruction as the central mechanism of capitalism: “*This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism.*” (1942, p. 83). This represents a conceptual leap: destruction becomes the motor of capitalist evolution.

Seen in this light, Schumpeter's 1942 model moves closer to Sombart's 1913 insight: that creation is inseparable from destruction. Yet Schumpeter frames destruction as endogenous (driven by innovation), whereas Sombart frames it as exogenous (driven by war, resource pressure, and state-building). Both accounts are complementary rather than substitutes.

10. Why Sombart Matters Today: Modern Relevance of a Forgotten Insight

Revisiting Sombart is not an exercise in historical reconstruction alone. His destruction–creation framework offers insights that are deeply relevant to contemporary transformations.

The contemporary relevance of this genealogy is underscored by Joel Mokyr’s recent contribution, *Creative Destruction or Destructive Creation? A Prelude to the Industrial Revolution* (2023), in which he emphasizes that long-run growth depends on the continuous interplay between knowledge, institutions, and technological disruption. Mokyr’s analysis resonates strongly with the Sombartian insight that transformative innovation often emerges from periods of rupture, scarcity, and systemic pressure rather than from smooth incremental change.

Much of today’s discourse on AI follows a Schumpeterian narrative focused on entrepreneurial innovation. Yet major technological leaps (particularly in AI) depend on exogenous drivers: state investment, geopolitical competition, defense spending, and macro shocks. This also echoes Sombart more than Schumpeter.

Sombart’s emphasis on war as a generator of new industries resonates with the recent resurgence of industrial policy (CHIPS Act, European Green Deal), and renewed investment in defense technologies amid geopolitical tensions.

Sombart’s analysis of wood scarcity and the shift to coal and coke offers an early model of how environmental constraints can induce technological substitution. Today’s decarbonization challenge mirrors this dynamic: ecological destruction can precipitate innovation.

The COVID-19 crisis, supply-chain fragility, and geopolitical instability highlight the importance of rebuilding after systemic shocks, a dynamic Sombart analyzed with remarkable clarity. In short, Sombart provides a theory of transformation driven by *external* destruction, complementing Schumpeter’s *internal* innovation-driven model.

11. Beyond Sombart and Schumpeter: Early Formulations of Destruction–Creation Mechanisms

Although Sombart provides the most direct and textually explicit pre-Schumpeter articulation of a destruction–creation dynamic, he is not entirely alone. Several earlier thinkers, across different traditions, had touched on related ideas, though never with the systematic clarity found in *Krieg und Kapitalismus*.

Marx (1867) famously described capitalism as a system that constantly revolutionizes the instruments of production, and he analyzed how crises periodically destroy capital to restore profitability. Yet Marx interpreted destruction primarily as a pathological outcome of contradictions, not as a generative mechanism. Unlike Sombart, he did not frame destruction as a necessary *precondition* for capitalist emergence.

Nietzsche (1883, p. 15) expressed a philosophical intuition related to this dynamic when he wrote in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that “*Ich sage euch: man muss noch Chaos in sich haben, um einen tanzenden Stern gebären zu können. Ich sage euch: ihr habt noch Chaos in euch.*” (“I tell you: one must still have chaos within oneself to give birth to a dancing star. I tell you: you still have chaos within you.”). While not an economic concept, it reflects a wider cultural awareness of creation emerging from rupture.

Other members, Schmoller (1904), Bücher (1893), analyzed transformation through war, state formation, and long-run institutional change. But none connected destruction and creation as explicitly as Sombart did.

What distinguishes Sombart from these earlier currents is not merely that he discussed destruction, but that he systematically linked destruction to the genesis of new institutions, technologies, and energy regimes. No previous author offered such a structurally coherent and historically grounded mechanism. This makes Sombart the clearest genealogical antecedent to Schumpeter’s later formulation.

12. Implications for Economic Teaching and for the Narrative of Capitalism

Revisiting Sombart not only enriches the historical record but also challenges the way economists teach and conceptualize capitalism today.

Textbook treatments generally present creative destruction as an endogenous feature of market competition, driven by entrepreneurial innovation. The Sombartian perspective shifts the lens from firms to states, wars, ecological pressures, and resource constraints, highlighting exogenous shocks as catalysts of transformation. This expanded view encourages students to see capitalism as an interplay between markets and the larger political–ecological environment.

Sombart shows why economic history cannot be reduced to background material. His destruction–creation framework demonstrates how historical crises (wars, scarcity episodes, fiscal breakdowns) shape long-run economic trajectories. Integrating such material into teaching helps restore the relevance of historical reasoning within economics.

Sombart’s account highlights innovations that arise not from entrepreneurial vision but from necessity, coercion, or survival pressures. This complements the Schumpeterian story and resonates with modern issues such as climate adaptation, pandemic resilience, and geopolitical competition.

In a world marked by pandemics, climate change, and geopolitical conflict, Sombart’s model of exogenous destruction triggering structural change may be more relevant than ever. Teaching this alternative genealogy encourages a more pluralistic and realistic understanding of how capitalist evolution occurs.

13. Conclusion: Sombart’s Place in the Lineage of Creative Destruction

A close reading of *Krieg und Kapitalismus* shows that Werner Sombart never coined the phrase “creative destruction,” yet he articulated the underlying mechanism with a clarity and historical richness unmatched before Schumpeter. His account reveals how capitalism can emerge out of war, scarcity, institutional rupture, and ecological pressure, offering a vision of transformation grounded not in entrepreneurial initiative but in large-scale structural shocks. Reintegrating Sombart into the genealogy of creative destruction therefore expands the conceptual horizon of the term: it reminds us that processes of renewal often originate in forms of disruption that lie beyond market competition and individual innovation.

The history of this concept also offers a striking illustration of what Stephen Stigler (1980, p. 147) famously called “Stigler’s Law of Eponymy”: no scientific discovery is named after its original discoverer. The trajectory from Sombart to Schumpeter conforms almost perfectly to this rule. If Sombart articulated the structural mechanism in 1913, it was Schumpeter who later supplied the memorable label, embedded it within a coherent analytical architecture, and rendered it fertile for subsequent generations of economists. Schumpeter himself anticipated this asymmetry. In *Ten Great Economists* (1952, p. 83), he observed that “*the intellectual achievement of an analyst does not consist in the content of the statement which expresses the fundamental principle, but in his knowing how to make it fertile and how to derive from it all the problems of the science concerned.*” By this standard, Schumpeter’s lasting recognition reflects not merely priority of formulation but priority of elaboration.

The modern formalization of creative destruction in endogenous growth theory, most notably in Aghion and Howitt’s (1992) model of growth through creative destruction, transformed Schumpeter’s insight into a tractable analytical framework. By endogenizing innovation as a process of sequential technological replacement, their work gave mathematical precision to what Sombart had earlier described in historical and structural terms. Seen from this perspective, the trajectory from Sombart to Schumpeter to Aghion and Howitt reveals not a rupture, but a progressive articulation of the same underlying mechanism.

Yet acknowledging this does not diminish Sombart’s role; rather, it clarifies it. In this broader perspective, Sombart emerges not as the inventor of the expression, but as the first thinker to reveal how destruction can become a generative force in capitalist development. Recognizing this deeper lineage enriches both the history of economic thought and our capacity to interpret contemporary transformations driven by technological change, geopolitical conflict, and the challenges of the energy transition and artificial intelligence.

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