“Floating Jews” - The *luftmentsh* as an economic character

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Abstract. The Yiddish word “*luftmentsh*”, literally “air-person”, refers to petty traders, peddlers, beggars and paupers. The word appeared for the first time in Yiddish literature in the 1860's and began to be used by economists and statisticians in the 1880's-1890's. The case of the *luftmentsh* is particularly interesting because of the interplay of religion, gender, antisemitism, and economics. This article focuses on the term *luftmentsh* in economic and statistical discourse in the first part of the 20th century as a case study of the fundamental intertwining of economics and literature. We characterize the *luftmentsh* as an “economic character”, i.e. as an economic-statistical category associated with a complex imaginary borrowed from Yiddish literature. We show that this economic character popularized an influential yet ambivalent image of Jewish masculinity at work, as well as offering a way to reconsider antisemitism in the history of economic thought.

Keywords: Jewish history, literature, economic character, antisemitism.

JEL Codes: B10, B41, Z12.

Introduction

“*Luftmentsh*” (plural *luftmentshn*) is a compound word in Yiddish: “*luft*”, meaning “air”, and “*mentsh*”, meaning “man”, “person”, or “human being”.¹ Literally an “air-person” or “air-man”, the word has been used to refer to Jewish petty traders, peddlers, beggars, and paupers in 19th-20th century Eastern Europe. These *luftmentshn* were said to “live in the air” in the sense of “floating”, of having no definite occupation, profession or business. “Floating in the air” also evoked wandering and traveling, notably in the case of peddlers who travelled from place to place. More importantly, the “air” metaphor implied poverty: *luftmentshn* lived *from* the air in the sense that they had almost no means of subsistence.

The word *luftmentsh* appeared originally in the Yiddish literature of the second part of the 19th century. Desanka Schwara identifies its first use in an 1865 novel by Sholem Yankel Abramovitsh, entitled “The Magic Ring” (Schwara, 2003, 93). At the time, much of Jewish life in Eastern Europe was marked by poverty. The historian Salo Baron estimated indeed that in late 19th-century Russia, about 40% of the Jewish population were *luftmentshn*, i.e. people without education, capital or specific profession (quoted in Schwara, 2003, 91).

But the expression *luftmentsh* was not merely a descriptive term for the dire economic straits of the Jewish population; it also involved the attribution of aesthetic and poetic value to poverty and meaningless economic activity. Some artists, such as Marc Chagall, used the theme of “floating Jews” to romanticize the lives and bodies of poor Jewish men.² As Schwara notes, the *luftmentsh* is “the romanticized, transfigured designation for people who have become resigned to poverty” (Schwara, 2003, 217).

¹ The Yiddish *luftmentsh* is a transliteration in Latin characters of the original word written in Hebrew characters. In this article, we use the YIVO system of transliteration and its recent complement proposed by Isaac Bleaman (Bleaman, 2019). We followed the guidelines of the Library of Congress for Hebrew transliterations and omitted diacritical marks.

² On the theme of “floating Jews” in Marc Chagall's paintings, see Berg, 2008, 54-57; Goldberg, 2003; Harshav, 2006.

Jewish authors also used the *luftmentsh* from a self-critical or ironic perspective. Most novelists writing about *luftmentshn* were indeed satirists, and the characters they created were first and foremost conceived to be comic. This is notably the case of Menahem-Mendl, hero of the eponymous novel by Sholem Aleichem. Menahem-Mendl is arguably the most famous representation of the *luftmentsh*, even though his professional profile differs from the previous examples. Unlike small-town peddlers and beggars, Menahem-Mendl is a “speculator”, who decided to leave his *shtetl* of Kasrilevke to make a fortune in big cities. He dabbles unsuccessfully in various precarious businesses (exchange on the financial market, real estate, commerce of wood, sugar, oil, writing) before ending up as a failed matchmaker and immigrating to the US. Menahem-Mendl is a naive character, who is mocked and criticized by his more “grounded” wife Sheyne-Shendl, who stayed in their *shtetl* and despised the air-activities of her husband (Sholem Aleichem, 1911).

Irony did not imply contempt, however. These descriptions of *luftmentshn* can frequently be understood as the authors’ reflections about their own fragility and powerlessness (Berg, 2008, 205). Sholem Aleichem, for instance, lost his fortune in financial speculations, and spent his life wandering across towns and continents, like the Menahem-Mendl character he created. Chagall also painted himself and his wife floating in the air in *Over The Town*, and considered himself to have been “born between sky and earth”.³

Things changed in the 1880's-1890's when the term *luftmentsh* began to be used in political and economic discourse. The expression was used by authors who were no longer exclusively writers but also political activists, reformers, economists and social scientists. In his book “*Luftmenschen – History of a metaphor*”, Nicolas Berg argues that this evolution changed the meanings from self-ironizing literary characters to a social discourse that criticized Jews as unproductive. Berg argues that the emergence of the negative *luftmentsh* entailed the

³ Quoted in Goldberg, 2003, 120.

disappearance of the self-ironical attitudes and positive cultural appreciations regarding Jewish poverty (Berg, 2008, 85-152).

This article focuses on the term *luftmentsh* in economic and statistical discourse in the first part of the 20th century. The main thesis of this paper is that the figure of the *luftmentsh* offers a complex and ambivalent image of the Jewish worker *both in economics and literature*. This claim challenges Berg's arguments concerning the loss of ironical and positive content in the rhetoric of economic “productivity”. We show that his narrative is too simple, and overstates the transition from literature to economics. On the one hand, the accusation of economic unproductivity was also present in Yiddish literature. On the other hand, even though the *luftmentsh* was on the whole a pejorative denomination in economic discourse, it entailed positive attributes too. Our new narrative also carefully attends to gender, which, we show, plays a central role in the image of the *luftmentsh* and participates in its complexity and ambivalence.

This paper contributes to the research on the interplay between economics and literature, and relates to previous analysis about the ways in which economists and novelists have reflected upon the problem of poverty in the 19th century (Lallement, 2010). Our focus, however, is more specifically on an “economic character”, i.e. on a literary figure having relationship to economic life (Goux, 2016, 65). Creating economic “types” or “characters” can be considered as an approach common to both economics and literature (Goux, 2016, 74). Existing research about economic thought and literature has paid attention to these literary figures, particularly to Robinson Crusoe (e.g., Watts, 1951; Pignol, 2018), as well as Don Quixote and Don Juan (Perdices de Blas and Reeder, 2013) or Eugénie Grandet (Pignol, 2016b). The *luftmentsh*, as embodied in the literary characters of Menahem-Mendl or Benjamin the Third, has been frequently read and understood by Jewish critics as a “Jewish Don Quixote” (e.g., Litvakov,

1924; Opatoshu, 1936). The case of the *luftmentsh* is particularly interesting because of the interplay of religion, gender, antisemitism, and economics.

Jews, Jewishness and Judaism have played a central yet understudied role in the relationship of economics and literature. Speculation, the stock-exchange and the rise and fall of ambitious social climbers have been powerful and recurring themes in economic novels, especially in the nineteenth century (Akdere and Baron, 2017, 2). From Shylock to Fagin and Frédéric de Nucingen, there is a very long literary tradition of Jewish characters, acting as bankers, usurers or speculators, and frequently involving anti-Jewish stereotypes about greediness, social ambition or power. Yet, as Bruna Ingraio argues, the Jewish identity of these figures has not been yet thoroughly investigated (Ingraio, 2017, 36). When these issues are studied, it is usually through the angle of antisemitism—and more specifically, on the antisemitism of the author, and not of their creations. For instance, in a footnote within his article on Balzac, Thierry Suchère discusses whether the antisemitism of the 19th century stock exchange novel is specific to the era, or reflects the personal views of the novelists (Suchère, 2018, 12). What remains undiscussed, however, is the way in which representations about the Jews—whether antisemitic or not, personal or not—are intertwined with economic reflections.

This article intends to show that shared discourse about Jews is an important conveyor of economic representations and is thus a particularly useful -yet understudied- domain to analyse the intersection of economics and literature. The imaginative resources of fiction, e.g. fantasies, dreams, illusions—figures prominently in the economic representations of the Jews. This idea is well accepted in the case of economic antisemitism, that is, for ideas regarded as delusional, irrational and scientifically worthless. What is perhaps more original is the claim of an essential entanglement between facts and fictions in the economic thinking about the Jews.

In that regard, the paper makes two important claims. First, economics does not lag behind literature (at least in our case study) in the capacity to create economic “fictions”. This

challenges the idea, as expressed by Alexandre Péraud for instance, that the economists' use of the fiction is essentially different and less complex than literary fiction *per se* (Péraud, 2013). A corollary of that idea is that literary narratives are somewhat “richer” than the stories told by economists (e.g., Pignol, 2016a) and that economists either misuse or misunderstand economic novels.⁴ Hence most of the research on the relations between economics and literature has focused on the economic content of literary works, answering questions such as “how do authors X or novel Y represent economic relations?” (Citton, 2017, 227).⁵ This case study focuses instead on economics. It is not about Yiddish literature, but about economists draw on Yiddish literature. We are thus not concerned about the faithfulness of these readings to the originals, but about the role and place of that fictionalized character in economic discourse.

The second claim is that analysis of economic representations cannot escape gender. The *luftmentsh* was a counter-model not for all Jews, but for Jewish men only: these “floating Jews” were seen as weak and feminized men who did not provide for their families. Not only were Yiddish literary *luftmentshn* almost all men, the very categories of production and labor themselves were gendered, and the economic character of the *luftmentsh* unmask the assumptions about normative masculinity. This article highlights how gender analysis—and particularly attention to masculinity—is crucial to the construction of economic norms and discourse and more generally shows the potential of critical masculinity studies in the history of economic thought.

Our analysis is based on a large number of economic and statistical studies about Jews in the early twentieth century, mostly in German and Yiddish. We identify two channels of transmission in the emergence of the *luftmentsh* as an economic character. Economic reflections about *luftmentshn* can be traced back first to Max Nordau, a German Zionist leader, whose 1901 discourse popularized that figure. The first section of the article analyses Nordau's speech and

⁴ For a critique of these ideas, see Bras, 2016.

⁵ See for instance Missemer, 2013; Prendergast, 2014; Petit, 2015.

its influence on Zionist economist thought. A second channel involves authors who were familiar with the original meaning of the word in the Yiddish literature. These authors, who built a richer imaginary about *luftmentsshn* than Nordau, are studied in the rest of the paper. In this domain, we focus on the works of Yakov Leshchinsky, for two reasons. First, his work was widely influential among Yiddish writing economists (Mahler, 1967; Alroey, 2006; Estraiikh, 2007, 2017; Vallois, 2021c). He edited several journals on Jewish economic issues, and directed the Economic-Statistical Department of the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO). Leshchinsky played a pivotal role in mediating ideas, methods, and statistics between Germany and Eastern Europe, since he was one of the rare Yiddish-speaking authors with extensive contacts in the German Jewish community (Kuznitz, 2014, 37; Vallois, 2021a). Second, this focus on Leshchinsky allows continued conversation with other historians, since Berg and Schwara build their claims about economic and statistical discourse on the basis of (some of) Leshchinsky's writings. The article concludes with some methodological reflections on antisemitism and Jewish self-critique in economic-literary discourse.

1. Max Nordau's 1901 discourse and its influence

In Yiddish culture, there is no unique and stable definition for popular “types” such the *luftmentssh*. As Jennifer Caplan notes, these characters, “unlike other set of stock types, for example the *Commedia dell'arte* characters”, did not “develop as a set or at one particular time”; they “do not owe their origins to a specific author, and there is no real agreement on exactly how many archetypes there are” (Caplan, 2016, 138-139). However, most authors referring to *luftmentsshn* agree on a more or less similar definition of that word, on the basis of two influential sources: Sholem Aleichem's antihero Menahem Mendl and Max Nordau's famous discourse at the Fifth Zionist Congress in Basel. As a matter of fact, many—perhaps even most—writers who used the word *luftmentssh* in the 20th century did not know its literary

origin and, as both Schwara and Berg note, many mistakenly attributed it to Nordau's speech (Schwara, 2003, 92-93; Berg, 2008). On December 27, 1901, Nordau, one of the most prominent leaders of Zionism at the time, declared in German:

“particularly in the East, where the great majority of [Jews] dwell, the Jewish people is a nation without trade or occupation [*Beruflosen*]. We do have at present a large number of Jewish artisans and wage laborers, but the economic “type”, which is still so common in the East, is that of the *Luftmensch*, that specifically Jewish phenomenon wherein grown people, in decent enough health, wake up each morning with the hope of some miracle coming to pass that would furnish them some way to get through the day, and who marvel every evening, either out of blind faith or superstition, at the very wonder of the fact that they managed to find a bit of bread for themselves and their kinfolk” (Nordau [1909] 1923, 117-118)⁶

In this description, Nordau provided four typical elements for what became then the classical image of the *luftmentsh* in Zionist discourse. The main characteristic of a *Luftmensch*, is, first, professional instability, or lack of a clear and fixed source of income, which results in poverty. According to Nordau, *Luftmenschen* are *Beruflosen*, “without trade or occupation” (Nordau [1909] 1923, 118), and live on a day-to-day basis. Second, these poor Jews are excessively religious and superstitious, hence their naivety and their “hope of some miracle coming to pass”.

Nordau was very probably not familiar with Yiddish literature but as we shall see later, these two characteristics were actually consistent with the original description of *luftmentshn* characters in Yiddish novels. Nordau's important twist, however, was to insist much more on the association between “air” and the idea of groundlessness (*Bodenlosigkeit*). *Luftmenschen* “live in the air”

“in the literal sense, for they lack even a footprint's breadth of land to call their own and therefore they exist entirely suspended in mid-air; and by way of metaphor one may say so because they lack a solid economic base to stand upon and they live, as

6 The quote is taken from the original copy of the discourse in German, but we borrowed its English translation from Lederhendler, 2009, 133.

does the individual *Luftmensch*, day by day, by the grace of miracles, rather than proper labor” (Nordau [1909] 1923, 118)

Nordau’s words epitomize the classical stance of early German Zionism toward *Luftmenschen*, in which their poverty, their “lack of a solid economic base” is attributed to the lack of a land of their own. Nordau’s second important innovation was to put forward the notion of physical weakness. Three years earlier, at the Second Zionist Congress, Nordau had advocated for the “rejuvenation” of the Jewish people through the creation of a “muscular Judaism” [*Muskeljudenthum*] (quoted in Presner, 2007, 1). Nordau’s idea of muscular Judaism was a call for a “regenerated race of healthy, physically fit, nationally minded, and militarily strong Jews” (Presner, 2007, 2). As Todd Presner has shown, the dialectic of Jewish regeneration/degeneration in early Zionist discourse meant that the muscle Jew was the ideal and positive counter-image of the poor Eastern European *Luftmenschen* (Presner, 2007, 21-34). Hence, if the latter had to regenerate, it was because they were considered physically degenerate, and either unfit or unwilling to take physical work.

Gendered assumptions are central in that portrait. In Nordau’s description, and in early Zionist iconography at large, the muscle Jew was pictured as a heroic warrior, a resolutely masculine character (Presner, 2007, 3). Conversely, *Luftmenschen* were thought of as physically weak Jews, and productivization, i.e. physical regeneration through work, was intended to “masculinize” them. Economic unproductivity was associated with femininity, and advocates of Jewish “productivization” feminized Jewish men when describing the prototypical Jewish worker (Weinberg, 2007, 423). However, these feminized figures remained male characters. The traditional discourse on Jewish economic productivization, from early 19th century “Jewish Enlightenment” [*Haskalah*] to Soviet economic reforms, overwhelmingly focused on the rehabilitation of male workers, and marginalized women (Penslar, 2019, 515;

Weinberg, 2007, 423; Yalen, 2020).⁷ Expectations to be productive or to learn a trade were thus expectations of men, but not of women. It is also worth noting that both masculine and feminine gender norms here assumed bodily ability: the *Luftmensch* was not disabled; in fact, if women appear rarely in this economic discourse, people with disabilities appear even less.

Nordau's depiction of *Luftmenschen* served as a political justification of Zionism: "it is clear, that the first task of Zionism must be [...] to make them [the *Luftmenschen*] economically more competent" (Nordau [1909] 1923, 129). According to Nordau, the creation of a Jewish state would enable their "productivization", with a strong priority given to agricultural work. This political and economic agenda was related to an epistemic one: in the same discourse, Nordau also called for the development of Jewish statistics, claiming that "an exact statistical research of the Jewish People is an uppermost necessity for the Zionist movement" (Nordau [1909] 1923, 113).

Nordau's speech and writings played a decisive role in the diffusion of the word *Luftmensch* among economists and statisticians. The popularization of Nordau's view can be easily traced to Arthur Ruppin. Shortly after Nordau's speech, in 1903, an association for Jewish statistics was created in Berlin, which published the *Journal for Jewish Demographics and Statistics*, and Ruppin was appointed as its editor. In the first year of his editorship, Ruppin published his influential *Die Juden der Gegenwart* (The Jews of To-day), in which he wrote:

"in Galicia we find the same picture. Only a tiny fraction of the Jews has a stabilized existence to some extent, the majority live on a day-to-day basis and do not know in the morning, where they will find something to eat at noon for them and their families. Max Nordau created the word "*Luftmenschen*" for this existence" (Ruppin 1904, 181)⁸

Here Ruppin explicitly attributes the invention of the word *Luftmensch* to Nordau, and his description is obviously inspired by the latter's words, especially the idea of living "on a

⁷ For a general analysis on the debate over Jewish productivization, see Penslar, 2000.

⁸ This quote is identical in the 1911 second edition of Ruppin's book, which is more frequently referred to (Ruppin 1911, 55).

day-to-day basis”. The idea that they should labor productively “for them and their families” also implies that, like Nordau, Ruppin assumes this conversation is about Jewish men, and that proper men should be economic providers not only for themselves but also for the women and children related to them. What is also interesting is that Ruppin further developed Nordau's conception and gave a statistical definition for the notion of *Luftmensch*: “in the statistics, these *Luftmenschen* appear under the category of “paid services of different kinds” or “independents without profession”, and it is significant, that the Jews, who make only 11,09% of the population in Galicia [...], represent 51,51% of independents without profession and 39,8% of the paid services of different kinds” (Ruppin, 1904, 181).

Written in German, Ruppin's *The Jews of To-day* had a significant influence on economists and statisticians, even beyond the restricted field of Jewish statistics. For instance, in his 1912 *Die Zukunft der Juden* (The Future of the Jews), Werner Sombart borrowed directly from Ruppin: “in Galicia the picture is not much different: here too a very large number of Jews do not know what they will find to provide for their subsistence on the next day. This is an existence, that Nordau called ‘*Luftmenschen*’”. Sombart then gave the exact same statistics as Ruppin (Sombart, 1912, 14-15).

As a general rule, after Nordau's discourse and its popularization by Ruppin, economists and statisticians working on Jewish economic problems used the word *luftmentsh* in a sense that was consistent with Nordau's definition. This was not only the case of Zionist supporters, but of authors from all over the political spectrum, including socialists, communists, Bolsheviks, and non-affiliated ones. In an article on Jewish migration published by the National Bureau of Economic Research in 1931, the socialist demographer Liebmann Hersch wrote that “by the term *Luft-Mensch* is meant a person with no definite trade or steady employment, who avoids severe manual labour and lives from hand to mouth by small occasional jobs and commissions” (Hersch, 1931, 506).

In the end, following Nordau and Ruppin, most economists and statisticians understood the word *luftmentsh* in a restricted and negative sense, as a synonym for lack of profession or professional instability (e.g., Thon, 1907, 119; Spivak, 1930, 69). All these authors considered that the predominance of the *luftmentsh* type called for productivization policies, even though they disagreed on the content of such reforms (e.g., projects of agricultural colonization, in Palestine or elsewhere; development of professional and vocational training, participation to the class struggle).

This suggests, as Berg claims, that the poetics and aesthetics of poverty essentially disappeared in the transition from Yiddish literature to economic and statistical sources. An important reservation regarding this thesis shall be indicated however in this section. It should be noted indeed that the rhetoric of economic unproductivity was also present in the Yiddish literature of the late 19th century. Abramovitsh, author of *The Magic Ring*, in which Schwara identifies the first occurrence of the word *luftmentsh*, supported in his early years the classical views of the “Jewish Enlightenment” [*Haskalah*] on socio-economic reforms, considering that Eastern European Jews should be “modernized”, and fully embrace secular and professional education (Miron, 1995, 2017). If Abramovitsh gradually moved away from this position of “Jewish enlightened” [*maskil*], *The Magic Ring*, along with his most famous novels, that he rewrote throughout his whole career, can and have been read as critiques of the traditional and religious way of life of Eastern European Jews, of their superstitions and naïve belief in miraculous solutions to poverty.

2. The entanglement of economics and literature in Yiddish

In Yiddish, the word *luftmentsh* seems to have been a relatively frequent and standardized word in the early 20th century. An Optical Character Recognition (OCR) full-text research of the term “*luftmentsh*” on the Yiddish Book Center, a digital library of nearly 11,000 Yiddish

books, hits 128 results, from 1920 to 1989, and over a large range of publication domains (e.g., art and literary critics, politics, economics, history, novels).⁹ In all of these occurrences, the overall sense of the expression remained consistent with Nordau's definition. Similar results can be obtained in the Yiddish press of the same period.¹⁰

Though it was delivered and subsequently printed in German, Nordau's discourse was known to many Yiddish writers. In his textbook *A General History of the Jews*, which had a huge impact on Russian Jewish intellectuals (Seltzer, 2010), the historian Simon Dubnow wrote for instance that "Nordau reported about the uncertain economic situation of the Jews, about the mass of *luftmentshn* in the economy" (Dubnow, 1938, 324). Ber Borochov, the influential leader of Marxist Zionism in Russia, even claimed in a brochure in Yiddish, like many German authors (cf. *supra*), that Nordau invented the word: "the term *luftmentsh* was Nordau's contribution to our literature", wrote Borochov, "and it expresses [Jews'] remoteness from the soil [*bodn*]" (Borochov [1916] 1919, 8).

It is therefore no wonder that the use of the word *luftmentsh* in these texts fitted the main characteristics of Nordau's description: the professional instability, the "economic groundlessness" (e.g., Borochov [1916] 1919, 13) and the lack of a "substantial foundation" (Zineman, 1947, 317); and the naïve hope in "prompt salvation" (Finkelstein, 1947, 121). Leshchinsky was no exception in that regard, and his conception of the *luftmentsh* was influenced by Nordau's views too, for instance when speaking about the "miracle-livelihood" of the Galicians Jews (Leshchinsky, 1928c, 58).

There is, however, an overall and significant difference in the respective economic uses of the words *Luftmensch/luftmentsh* in German and Yiddish. This difference can be explained by sociological factors pertaining to the audiences that the Yiddish-writing economists were

⁹ For this OCR research, we used the Jochre research engine of the Yiddish Book Center at this address: <https://ocr.yiddishbookcenter.org/>

¹⁰ We obtained these results with an OCR research on *Historical Jewish Press*, the online databasis of the National Library of Israel, which includes a large number of Yiddish journals of the 19th-20th century.

addressing. Most Yiddish writers at the time had indeed no choice but to make a livelihood from journalism (Harshav, 1990, 165). Many Jewish social scientists could not obtain academic positions and worked for the press, philanthropic organizations, or as journalists, doctors, lawyers (Vallois, 2021a; Estraikh, 2017).

This was notably the case of Leshchinsky. Throughout his long career, he regularly contributed to the main Jewish journals in Eastern Europe and the United States, addressing a large, international readership (Manor 1961; Estraikh 2007). The social context of Leshchinsky's discourse matters because it shows that economic journalists like Leshchinsky and Yiddish writers actually shared an audience. Poets and novelists frequently wrote in the same journals as statisticians and social scientists. This is particularly true for the three authors who are usually regarded as the “triumvirate of great writers” in Yiddish literature: Sholem Yankel Abramovitsh, Yitshok Leybush Peretz, and Sholem Aleichem (Katz 2004, 240; Miron 1995). These three authors were all famous by the 1890s, and publishing popular pieces in Hebrew or Yiddish in the 1900s always seemed to connect to them one way or another. Leshchinsky's first work for instance, *Statistics of a small town*, was published in the Hebrew journal *Ha-Shiloah*, to which Abramovitsh regularly contributed (Leshchinsky [1903] 1960). Leshchinsky then wrote in Peretz's Yiddish-language *Yiddishe bibliotek* (Jewish library) his influential *Jews in London* (Estraikh 2007, 18-219).

Conversely, the popular press played a pivotal role in the diffusion of these three “great” writers. This was particularly true for Sholem Aleichem, whose “best-known characters were created in Yiddish newspaper serials and later expanded into book-length works” (Katz 2004, 214). Sholem Aleichem published in particular in *Haynt* the second series of Menahem-Mendl letters (and other novels; Dymshits, 2013).¹¹ In concrete terms, the reader of *Haynt* could read on page 2 Leshchinsky's weekly economic column, and the next day on the same page, an

¹¹ The book version of Menahem-Mendl and the newspaper serials were not strictly identical. On the difference in literary structure between the two, see Novershtern, 1984.

episode of Menahem-Mendl. In the Zionist journal *Ha-olam*, in which Peretz also contributed, Leshchinsky's and Sholem Aleichem's articles regularly appeared alongside each other, in the same issue (e.g., Leshchinsky, 1911b). Leshchinsky's above mentioned 1916 article was published originally in *Yiddishe velt*, which offered selections by Peretz, Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem. As a general rule, Yiddish newspapers to which Leshchinsky was a contributor included poems, literary criticisms, “belles lettres”, but also ethnography, economic analysis and journalistic reports.

This proximity between Leshchinsky and popular Yiddish writers is further documented by his correspondence. Leshchinsky was in touch with major figures of Yiddish literature at the time, such as Sholem Asch, Dovid Bergelson, Abraham Liessin, Shmuel Niger, Daniel Tsharni, Dovid Hofshiteyn, and Der Nister.¹² For most of these authors, there was no clear-cut distinction between journalism and other literary activities. Tsharni was a poet and a journalist; Bergelson and Asch were known as Yiddish writers but also contributed, like Leshchinsky, to the American journal *The Forward* (*Forverts*) in the 1920s-1930s. Liessin and Niger wrote their own pieces but were mostly known as influential literary critics and editors of reviews, to which Leshchinsky also contributed. This small circle of writers, editors, journalists, poets also interacted with Chagall, who was close to Leshchinsky.¹³

It is important to note that Leshchinsky never considered his readership's diverse background as an external constraint on his writings. His literary inspirations and references also reflect his methodological conviction that literature could be regarded as a source of ethnographic and socio-economic evidence. In 1921, he published a book on the history of Yiddish literature, entitled “The Jewish economic life in the Yiddish literature”, which was also intended to be a contribution to Jewish economic history. Leshchinsky argued that Jewish

12 YIVO Archive. Papers of Jacob Lestschinsky, RG 339, Box 1 Folder 2 (Asch), Folder 7 (Bergelson), Folder 19 (Hofshiteyn), Folder 30 (Tsharni), Box 2 Folder 39 (Liessin), Folder 45 (Niger, Der Nister). On the proximity between Leshchinsky and Yiddish novelists, see also Estraikh, 2017.

13 Chagall to Leshchinsky, 1939, YIVO Archive. Papers of Jacob Lestschinsky, RG 339, Box 3 Folder 72).

economic mentality had been characterized as a “middleman-ish inheritance” (*farmitler yerushe*), which had provided the main material of Yiddish literature. He distinguished three main periods in the history of Yiddish literature: the golden age of this mentality, as exemplified by Abramovitsh; its downfall, illustrated by Sholem Aleichem; and lastly the apparition of new social classes (Leshchinsky 1921, 18-24).

From this naturalistic perspective, literature could be an important source for economists and social scientists. Though he took a different path than his novelist friends, Leshchinsky saw no definitive boundaries between his own works and “belles lettres”, i.e. writing stories and fictions about Jewish economic life. This conception was perhaps specific to Leshchinsky, who distinguished himself with his recognized literary skills and ambitions (Manor, 1961, 162; Mahler, 1967, 192).¹⁴ However, the sense of proximity between economics and literature was most probably shared by other Yiddish-writing economists and statisticians who at the time had no choice but to address audiences similar to Yiddish novelists.

3. Rags and walking-sticks. The economic attributes of the *luftmentsh*

A first basic consequence of the sociological proximity between Yiddish-writing economists and Yiddish novelists was that the former were familiar with the classical works of the latter. The denomination *luftmentsh* was in particular frequently associated with the character of Menahem-Mendl. In his books and articles, Leshchinsky made several references to that literary figure. The reference appeared sometimes through comparison, for example when writing that some Jewish merchant speculated during the war “exactly like Menahem-Mendl” (Leshchinsky, 1930, 170). More often, Leshchinsky used “Menahem-Mendl” as a substantive form, a specific social category: in Russia, observed Leshchinsky, the

¹⁴ This ambition appears clearly in a chapter entitled “A Day in the Old Market”. That chapter, which was published in two of Leshchinsky’s books (Leshchinsky, 1933, 141-150; 1931a, 63-70), was inspired by *A Night in the Old Market*, a symbolist and dark play by Peretz, which takes place in a typical *shtetl* marketplace.

productivization process changed significantly the life of “shopkeepers, merchants and other Menahem-Mendels” (Leshchinsky, 1923, 3; see also 1921, 11; 1930, 102; 1945, 19-20).

Here again, Leshchinsky’s writing practices were representative of Yiddish publications at the time. Such designation reflected ordinary and widespread usage: many of Sholem Aleichem’s popular characters became everyday words in Yiddish (Katz, 2004, 214). The *Thesaurus of the Yiddish language*, published in 1950, even mentions the verb *menahem-mendl*, literally “to Menahem-Mendl-ize”, i.e. acting or behaving like Menhamen-Mendl (Stutchkoff, 1950, 432). The explicit mention of Menahem-Mendl is important, because that particular character conveys economic meanings that do not figure in Nordau’s definition, in particular the idea of a special inclination for speculation, and a strong desire to rise socially.

More generally, Yiddish offers a rich lexicon for the concepts associated with the word *luftmentsh*. In the entry on “inactivity and laziness” [*umtetikayt un foylkayt*], the *Thesaurus of the Yiddish language* mentions no fewer than 74 nouns (including *luftmentsh*), 86 verbs, 61 comparisons, 39 adverbs and 39 idioms and proverbs (Stutchkoff, 1950, 431-434). Though Yiddish economic discourse does not use every expression listed in the *Thesaurus*, Leshchinsky’s works show that the association between “air” and economic unproductivity generates a whole range of related expressions, as table 1 shows.

Expression	English translation	Language	References
<i>Luft haknoses</i>	Air-incomes	Yiddish	1921, <i>Yiddische literatur</i> , 11.
<i>Luft gesheftn</i>	Air-businesses	Yiddish	1925, <i>Ekonomishe lage</i> , 90 ; 1930, <i>Tsvishn</i> , 100.
<i>Luft yidn</i>	Air-Jews	Yiddish	1925, <i>Der emes</i> , 55.
<i>Leben fun luft</i>	to live from the air	Yiddish	1907, <i>London</i> , 10.
<i>Otem mit arbet luft oder spekulatsye luft</i>	Breathing from work-air or speculation-air	Yiddish	1925, <i>Der emes</i> , 58.
<i>Luft parnoses, a parnose fun der luft</i>	Air-livelihoods, a livelihood from the air	Yiddish	1928, <i>Di entviklung</i> , 35 ; 1933, <i>Oyfn rand</i> , 174, 175.
<i>Luft figuren</i>	Air figures	Yiddish	1931, <i>Yidn in poyln</i> , 64-65.
<i>Klaynbirgerekh luftmases</i>	Petty-bourgeois air-masses	Yiddish	1921, <i>Yiddische literatur</i> , 19.
<i>Anshei ha-avir</i>	Air men	Hebrew	1960 [1950], <i>Ha-Tefuta</i> , 124.
<i>aus der Luft leben</i>	to live from the air	German	1916, <i>Fragen</i> , 165.
<i>in der Luft schweben</i>	to float in the air	German	1916, <i>Fragen</i> , 165.
<i>Luftgeist</i>	Air-spirit	German	1916, <i>Fragen</i> , 165.
<i>Luftmentschtum</i>	Luftmentsh-hood	German	1932, <i>wirtschaftliche Schicksal</i> , 118-119.

Table 1. Derivatives of the word “*luftmentsh*” in Leshchinsky’s works

Several expressions in German were derived from *Luftmentsh*; the German word appeared in English publications (e.g., Leshchinsky 1948, 67); and there was also an equivalent in Hebrew. Yet on the whole, most derivatives of the air-metaphor were to be found in Yiddish. It should be noted that the references in the third columns of table 1 are merely examples. Some expressions such as “air-businesses” [*luftgesheftn*] or “air-livelihood” [*luft parnose*] were indeed very frequent, not only in Leshchinsky’s works, but in Yiddish publications in general.

In Yiddish, the word *luftmentsh* could function as either specific or general terms. *Luftmentsh* and its derivatives are often used in enumerations, such as: “a large number of *Luftmenschen*, beggars, peddlers, and domestic servants turned to productive work” (Leshchinsky, 1932, 39). In a restricted sense, this suggests that *luftmentshn* are a specific type of Jewish pauper, different from beggars, peddlers, and domestic servants. Elsewhere, Leshchinsky distinguishes between a class of hand-workers and a class of middlemen, in which *luftmentshn* are included among others (e.g., merchants, shop-keepers, tavern-owners; Leshchinsky, 1921, 25-29). But in a larger sense, he used the word *luftmentsh* as the most general designation for all types of paupers. This usage is consistent with the frequent expression “*stam a luftmentsh*”, which can be translated as “simply a *luftmentsh*” or “an

ordinary *luftmentsh*”, and figures at the end of enumerations as a synthetic category, e.g. “agents, sellers, merchants, contractors, in one-word, ordinary *luftmentshn*” (Cohen, 1945, 21).

It can thus be argued that the term *luftmentsh* also bears a relationship to terms with which it appears in conjunction in enumerations, even though these terms do not use the “luft” components. For instance, “stargazer” and “windprofession” are related to *luftmentsh* in this sense. We collected the occurrences of these terms and classified them in several semantic domains. (See Table 2a.) The complete list of occurrences and expressions is given in table 2b in the appendix.

Semantic domain	Expressions	English translations
Shady business and idleness	<i>Leydik geyer, pust-un-pas, Betteljudentum [German], Schnorrer [German], Hausierer [German], Schacher-Macher [German], Sterngucker [German]; die, für die das Sichumhertreiben auf dem Markt an sich eine Profession [German], mikakh u-mimkar [Heb], sarsur, sarsurot kalkalit [Heb]</i>	Idler or loafer, idle, beggar-Jewry, beggar or parasite, peddler, haggling huckster, stargazer, those, who take “let-oneself-hanging-around the market” as a profession, trade or commerce (litt : negotiation and selling), haggler, haggling economy
Middleman	<i>Farmitler, farmitlerishe elementen, farmitler natsie, kleinhändlerisch-vermittlerischen Traditionen [German], farmitleray kremeray, farmitleray psikologye, farmitler yerushe, farmitler klas, makler, maklergayst, hendler, hendlerish-meklerish yidntum, Vermittler- und Tauschvolk, Markt – und Schankvolk [German]</i>	Middleman, middlemen elements, nation of middlemen, small-merchant-middleman-ish traditions, middleman-hood, shopkeeping-hood, middleman mentality, middleman heritage, middleman class, broker, broker-spirit, merchant, merchant-broker Jewry, middleman-and-exchange nation, Market-and-tavern nation
Floating and wandering	<i>Spazierstockjuden [German], farmitler vanderig folk, Windberufen [German], Hausierer [German], das jüdische Wandelgenie [German], yarid yidn</i>	Walking-stick Jews, middleman-wandering nation, wind-professions, peddler, the Jewish wandering genius, (trade) fair-Jews
Smallness, lack of resources	<i>Kremerlakh, luftmentshelekh, hendlerlakh, meklerlakh, stam mark-yidn, kaptsn, nishul-maamad [Heb], frohliche Arme und lustige Bettler [German]</i>	Small shopkeepers, small Luftmentsshn, small merchants, small middlemen, simple market Jews, pauper, someone lacking of social status, joyful pauper and funny beggar
Jewish spirit	<i>Farmitleray psikologye, farmitler yerushe, farmitler natsie, kleinhändlerisch-vermittlerischen Traditionen [German], hendlerish-meklerish yidntum, natsionale meklerishe neshome, Handel khush, farmitleray, maklergayst, das jüdische Handelgenie [German]</i>	middleman mentality, middleman heritage, middleman-nation, small-merchant-middleman-ish traditions, merchant-broker Jewry, national-brokerish soul, commercial talent, middleman-hood, broker-spirit, the Jewish commercial genius

Table 2a. Semantic domains related to the word “luftmentssh”

It should be noted that our method of identification cannot pretend to perfect accuracy. We did not reproduce only the most frequent terms that appeared in conjunction with “luftmentssh”. The different semantic domains are not clear-cut categories, and many expressions belong to several domains: for instance, wandering is closely associated with business activity in general in Yiddish, as in the expression *handl-vandl*, which means “trading and maneuvering”, though *vandl* means literally wandering, either physically or spiritually in the sense of the Diaspora (Katz, 2004, 171). Also, this table also excludes terms that relate directly to Nordau’s definition, such as groundlessness or professional instability because those meanings have been analyzed above.

Consistently with Berg's thesis, it seems at first that all five semantic domains in table 2a have essentially negative meanings. In the first domain, *luftmentsh* is associated with the idea of shady business and idleness, i.e. with occupations that are on the fringes of legality and morality. *Luftmentshn* were commonly understood as unscrupulous traders, or fake beggars, who lived from scams and deserved moral blame. Hence the strongly negative meanings of the German words associated with “*Betteljudentum*” (literally, Beggar Jewry), such as “Schnorrer” or “Schacher”, a 19th century term for “a specific Jewish type of commerce, with the pejorative sense of haggling, huckstering” (Penslar, 2001, 45-46).¹⁵

The second semantic domain is built upon four words in Yiddish that have very close meanings: *farmitler*, *mekler*, *hendler*, *kremer*. A *mekler* is a broker, but in many contexts this word is quite similar to a *farmitler*, which refers to a mediator, intermediary, go-between or middleman. *Hendler* (merchant) and *kremer* (shopkeeper) are also often taken as synonyms for various “intermediating” activities. Like many of his contemporaries, Leshchinsky regarded these go-between professions as unproductive and too widespread among Jews.

Leshchinsky derived substantive forms such as “*kremeray*” or “*farmitleray*”, which are generic pejorative terms for these unproductive commercial activities. Leshchinsky’s statistical analyses frequently distinguished between a “productive element” including workers in the industry and agriculture, liberal professions and employees on the one hand, and “air-livelihoods” or “unproductive element” on the other hand, made of “*kremer* and *hendler*”, and also referred to as “idler-ish and middleman-ish element” (*farmitlerishe un leydikgayerishe element*; Leshchinsky, 1928b, 35 and 52). As a general rule, when commenting on the evolution of Jewish employment structure, Leshchinsky considered the gradual extinction of this “airy”

¹⁵ For another illustration of that association between *luftmentsh* and *Schacher*, see for instance Zinberg, 1929, 50.

and unproductive element as a positive evolution, suggesting that Jews were no longer a “nation of middlemen” (*folks farmitler*; Leshchinsky 1925b, 89).¹⁶

The designation *luftmentsh* also related to the semantic domain of wandering and floating (third row on table 2a). This theme can have favorable connotations, especially in discourses pertaining to art and culture: for instance, in an article entitled “George Steiner, Grand Seigneur and *Luftmentsch*”, Claudio Magris writes that Steiner “is one of the last masters at ease in universal literature; [...] he is uprooted, a wanderer, who lives in his intelligence and sensitivity the harsh Kafkaesque truth of the Diaspora” (Magris, 2003, 20). Some of Leshchinsky’s early work framed wandering as negative, such as his critique of Jewish immigrants’ concentration in the less mechanized branches of capitalist societies, and particularly in the sweatshop system. In *The Jewish Worker in London*, Leshchinsky argued that Jewish immigrants were relegated to the lowest stratum of their new country, and were thus pushed to emigrate: hopeless wandering entailed a self-perpetuation of poverty (Leshchinsky, 1907, 33).

In the fourth semantic domain, several words have with the Yiddish suffix “akh/ekh”, which conveys smallness, as in “*kremerlakh*” (small shopkeeper). In Yiddish, the suffix often implies affection, as in “*kinderlekh*” (little ones, children). But this was not the case in Leshchinsky's writings. Leshchinsky was one of the major defenders of “non-proletarianization theory”, which stated that the major drawback of Jewish economy in the Diaspora was the inability to “proletarianize”, i.e. to become factory workers (Gutwein, 1990; Vallois, 2021c). In Leshchinsky's Marxist perspective, the future of capitalist economy belonged to the large-scale, highly concentrated, mechanized industry. Associating *luftmentshn* with words such as

16 See also Leshchinsky 1912b, 6; 1932, 30; 1950, 124. Conversely, Leshchinsky interpreted as a negative evolution the opposed tendency, i.e. the return to “air-businesses” in interwar soviet Russia (e.g., Leshchinsky, 1925b, p.90), or in post-war US (Leshchinsky 1948, 75).

“kremerlakh” (*small shopkeeper*) was therefore a way of pointing out their economic insignificance, powerlessness, and backwardness.

The last semantic domain gathers expressions which suggest, as exemplified in the syntagms “*farmitler natsie*” (middleman nation) or “*famitler neshome*” (middleman spirit), that there was something inherently “Jewish” about this airy behavior, that it belonged to the Jews specifically, as a kind of “inherited psychology” or “middleman inheritance” (*farmitler yerushe*). Leshchinsky's writings, however, display much inconsistency in this domain. On the one hand, Leshchinsky explicitly and strongly opposed explanations based on race and “Volkpsychologie”, i.e. explanations grounded on the idea that nations have “collective spirits” (Leshchinsky, 1923, 1). Leshchinsky never used the German expressions of (Jewish) “commercial spirit” (*Händlergeist*) or “haggling nation” (*Schachervolk*), which were at the time commonplace designations in the antisemitic German literature, and had very strongly negative meanings (Vallois, 2020b).¹⁷ Leshchinsky refused the idea that Jews had been a “commercial nation” since ancient times (Leshchinsky, 1912, 5) and mocked the notions of “Jewish trade genius” and “Semitic trading instinct” (Leshchinsky, 1906, 25). Yet on the other hand, he used very similar expressions, such as “middleman spirit” or “air-spirit”, which seem to indicate that there was indeed in his eyes such a “*makler-psychology*”, an “airy” inclination of the Jewish worker. This is further confirmed by the following opposition that Leshchinsky drew between the mentalities of Jewish and non-Jewish workers:

“For the manufacturer, [...] the mass of non-Jewish peasants, with their sane bodies, their primitive psychology [...] is a lot cheaper and more convenient than the mass of petit-bourgeois Jews [...] with their weak bodies and excited nerves, with their higher standard of living and sophisticated mind, [...]with their spiritual agility [*neshome rirevdikayt*] and psychological activity, with their effort to free themselves from the yoke of labor and reach for themselves the status of owners

17 German economist Werner Sombart provides a good illustration of the pejorative meanings associated with the notion of *Händlergeist*; see in particular his 1915 *Händler und Helden* (Sombart 1915, esp. 14).

managers, with their dangerous aspiration to become independent and to organize themselves [...] independently” (Leshchinsky, 1931, 70)

There is here no explicit reference to the word *luftmentsh*, or to related expressions with a “luft” component. However, Leshchinsky combines in this portrait several elements of the classical image of the *luftmentsh*, notably the idea of physical weakness, which can be found in Nordau’s description. Leshchinsky’s novelty here, relatively to Nordau, is to introduce into this portrait a psychological component, the desire to rise socially, which can be related to the character of Menahem-Mendl. From Leshchinsky’s perspective, this particular mentality is different from the alleged “Jewish commercial spirit”, but it entails negative economic dispositions: desire to move beyond physical labor and an excessive sense of independence that is incompatible with factory work.

These psychological portraits of Jewish and non-Jewish workers were a recurrent theme in Leshchinsky's works (Leshchinsky, 1913; 1916a, 165; 1933, 201). Leshchinsky thought nonetheless that this “mentality” or “spirit” could change. Writing about the economic situation of Jews in Vilna, for instance, Leshchinsky rejoiced over a “revolution in the spirit of the nation”: a new “Jewish psychology” had appeared, Leshchinsky argued, and “it is nowadays badly considered to be an idler, to know nothing, to be a *luftmentsh*” (Leshchinsky, 1933, 174-175). Such an attitude was typical of social reformers who wanted to “regenerate” and productivize, Jewish workers and to change their supposed “airy” mentality. This is consistent with Berg's and Schwara's views about Leshchinsky as a typical example of the “productivization” agenda and discourse. Both Berg and Schwara base their arguments about Leshchinsky on one of his articles, written in German and published in 1916 (Schwara, 2003, 218-219; Berg, 2008, 87-88). In this article, Leshchinsky wrote that Russian Jews

“still suffer from the last residuals of the earlier “*Luftmenschen*” and “Walking-stick Jews” (*Spazierstockjuden*) [...] ; there are still with us many “joyful paupers” and “funny beggars”, who live from scams, from the air, for whom “hanging-around-the market” is a profession; social beings, who “float in the air”, economic

fantasies of a Menahem-Mendels' kind – a historical aftermath [...]. The national psychology has so much changed, that the “joyful paupers” and “funny beggars”, who once in the Jewish communities were very well considered and used play the role of economic cult characters, so to speak, have lost completely their appeal and thus their joyfulness” (Leshchinsky, 1916b, 233)

In the same paragraph, Leshchinsky refers to *Fishke the Lane*, a famous novel by Abramovitsh about the life of an itinerant Jewish beggar. His invocation is, however, far from the novel's self-ironizing tone and sense of benevolence toward paupers. This quote illustrates “productivization” discourse on Jewish paupers, with its associated moral condemnations: *luftmenschen* run shady businesses (they “live from scams”), they chose their own poverty (they are happy paupers), they unduly benefit from cultural approval, their economically-backward mentality will disappear with modernity. The designation “Walking-stick Jews” is worth noting, because similar expressions appears in Yiddish in conjunction with the word *luftmentsh*: *shtekele dreyer* (Malach, 1939, 22) or *dreyen mitn shtekele* (e.g., Tenenbaum, 1952, 123), literally turning or rotating with [walking] sticks. As in Nordau's portrait, these expressions refer to vagrancy, wandering, groundlessness, since the verb *dreyen* can be translated as coming and going, being restless—and a *dreyer* in Yiddish is a swindler or schemer.

Yet in our opinion, Leshchinsky's 1916 article is not representative of the rest of his writings. The overall tone of the article differs from other Leshchinsky's works published in Yiddish statistical and economic outlets. It was written in a specific context, for a specific audience: it was published in *Der Jude*, a literary review led by Martin Buber, then an important figure of the German-Zionist intelligentsia. Our analysis shows that there was much more ambivalence in Leshchinsky's discourse than what Berg and Schwara suggest.

This ambivalence is particularly discernible in the above-mentioned psychological portrait of the Jewish worker. Some of the drawbacks that Leshchinsky attributed to the Jewish labor force could also be deemed positive qualities, including the ideas of intellectual “agility” (*neshome rirevdikayt*) and entrepreneurial spirit. When writing about the economic situation of

Jews in Poland in 1931, Leshchinsky praised Jewish manufacturers in Bialystock precisely for these qualities. The city's garment industry was in crisis during the interwar period, which led to the collapse of a large number of important German companies. Unlike Germans, many Jewish factory owners successfully maintained their businesses and, according to Leshchinsky, "a central factor was psychology" (Leshchinsky, 1931, 83): facing a fall in demand, Jewish manufacturers had adapted and innovated to find new prospects, especially in foreign markets. Their (relative) success was due to "their intelligence, their energy, their agile spirit [*rirevdikn gayst*], and their entrepreneurial dexterity" (Leshchinsky, 1931, 80).

This case also shows that the small scale of Jewish economic activities, which Leshchinsky regarded as a problem, could also offer some advantages. Unlike Germans who owned large businesses, and therefore needed stability and strict rules, Leshchinsky described Jewish entrepreneurs as more flexible and adjustable because their small business did not require detailed accounting records, which allowed them to take more risks (Leshchinsky, 1931, 80-83). Smaller Jewish capital was "more mobile", Leshchinsky emphasized, and therefore played a major role, both in Western Europe and in Russia, in the major innovations of the 19th century, especially in railroads and in the funding of large banks (Leshchinsky [1950] 1960, 101-104). Mobility and scientific innovation also suggest positive connotations of the air-metaphor, such as associations with flying or steam (cf. Berg, 2008, 59-60).

Also, this idea of smallness significantly tempered the Marxist accusation of being unproductive bourgeois. The Soviet literary critic Max Erik, for instance, saw in the character of Menahem-Mendl a condemnation of the petty bourgeoisie and its "stubborn efforts [...] to make it into the bourgeoisie, to achieve the latter's unfulfilled capitalist dreams" (Erik, 1986, 24). The whole point of Sholem Aleichem's novel, however, was to show the permanent failure of these *luftmentshn* to "make it" into the bourgeoisie: they were neither true proletarians, nor were they real capitalists because they lacked capital. A Yiddish journalist wrote for instance

that most Jewish immigrants to Argentina were “workers and *luftmenshn*”, and not *gevir* [eminent, wealthy men] because they did not bring any capital with them (Chanin, 1942, 167).

Leshchinsky also thought that commerce might be somewhat productive as an economic activity. He recognized that sharing and distributing merchandise fulfilled a socially useful function (Leshchinsky, 1931, 33-34). What was pejorative in terms such as “*makleray*” (middleman-hood) was not the function of intermediation *per se*, but the excessive concentration in these activities. In other words, it was a matter of degree.¹⁸

Last but not least, Leshchinsky attributed positive value to wandering. He was concerned not with Jewish immigration as such but rather its lack of organization, which resulted in Jews overcrowding the sweatshops of the main immigration centers. Properly led and structured, immigration could lead to upward social mobility, as we shall see later in greater details.

Leshchinsky's multivalent usage of the designation *luftmentsh* can be further illustrated through his use of the closely related Marxist term *lumpenproletarian*. It first appears in his 1906 *The Jewish Worker in Russia*, where Leshchinsky refers to a short story by Sholem Aleichem, *An Easy Fast*, in which the hero, Chaim Chaikin, suffers from extreme poverty. Having no job and no food, he decides to make the best out of his poverty by declaring fast days (Sholem Aleichem [1912] 1917). Leshchinsky, who was himself a Marxist, takes Chaikin as a figure of the “hungry proletarian”, i.e. a *lumpenproletarian* who is to be blamed for his lack of political consciousness (Leshchinsky, 1906, 4-5).

Leshchinsky also uses the word *lumpenproletarian* when speaking of the “reserve army” of unemployed and underemployed Jewish workers (Leshchinsky, 1906, 9; 1907, 15 and 30). Leshchinsky's use of the designation *Lumpenproletarian* should come as no surprise. The

18 In the same 1931 book on the economic situation in Poland, Leshchinsky proposed different empirical criteria to estimate the number of individuals that a country should employ in professions of intermediations (Leshchinsky 1931, 33-48).

Marxist concept of *Lumpenproletarian* seems conceptually and linguistically very close to the notion of *Luftmentsh*. Both words originally came from Yiddish and German literature, before penetrating social and economic discourses. Similarly to the air-metaphor, the term *Lump*, defined as “a poor, miserable person”, can be used in combination with many other terms (e.g., *Lumpenhund*, *Lumpenpack*, *Lumpenvolk*; Bussard, 1987, 679).¹⁹ Both *Luftmentsh* and *Lumpenproletarian* appear frequently in loose enumerations (Bourdin, 2013, 43; Thoburn, 2002, 439), as in Marx’s famous reference in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* to “the whole of the nebulous, disintegrated mass, scattered hither and thither, which the French call *la bohème*”.²⁰ The idea of “*la bohème*” recalls the “airy” livelihood, and by the 20th century refers to someone living on the margins, defying rules, and not caring about the future.

There is another interesting association between the German *Lump*, which also means rag, and *shmates*, the Yiddish for rag, old unworthy pieces of clothing, which were seen as central and symbolic attributes of *luftmentshn*.²¹ Dealing with *shmates* and similarly reviled items such as herring was seen as typical “air-businesses.” For instance, when Leshchinsky described the young Jews in Vilna in 1933, he wrote: “they have the greatest aversion for air-livelihoods [...]; it is impossible for them to get settled at the local market with *shmates* or herring [...]. They want to learn a profession, the hardest work, but they abhor the market, the small-shop, the *shmates*-livelihood” (Leshchinsky, 1933, 175). More fundamentally, as for Marx, the *Lumpenproletariat* was a “passive decaying matter of the lowest layers of the old society”; therefore both *luftmentshn* and *lumpenproletarians* are essentially unproductive classes.²² Hence Bussard's description of the *Lumpenproletariat* as “parasitical group [which] was largely the remains of older, obsolete stages of social development” (Bussard, 1987, 677)

19 This definition of *Lump* is taken from Theodor Heinsius's 1818 German dictionary, quoted in Bussard, 1987, 679.

20 Quoted in Thoburn, 2002, 439.

21 Draper (1972) suggests nonetheless that the original root is *Lump* meaning “knave”, and not *Lumpen* meaning “rag” and “tatter”.

22 Quoted in Bussard, 1987, 675.

could also apply to *luftmentshn*. Last but not least, Marx related the *Lumpenproletariat* to the idea of financial speculation and money-lending (Huard, 1988, 13), in ways that recall Sholem Aleichem's Menahem-Mendl.

In his book *Language culture, theory and practice*, the Soviet linguist Elye Spivak proposed to modify the Yiddish lexicon according to the Marxist-Leninist doctrine, replacing for instance “mister” [*her*] by either “comrade” or “bourgeois”, and “*luftmentsh*” not with *lumpenproletarian*, but with the close designation of “declassified person” [*deklasifirter*] (Spivak, 1931, 106). Spivak's proposal did not succeed, for many reasons, but it is significant to note that a Marxist author such as Leshchinsky did not use the designation *lumpenproletarian* more often: apart from the very few occurrences that we quoted previously, we find only one occurrence of the term *lumpenproletarian* in later works (Leshchinsky, 1926, 69). This non-existent or weak relation between the words *luftmentsh* and *lumpenproletarian* can be explained by the purely negative connotations that the latter term conveys, at least in Marx's usage. The *Lumpenproletariat* can play no positive roles in history because it has no class-consciousness, and is always prone to reaction (Bussard 1987, 677; Thoburn 2002, 444). Robert Bussard argues that Marx's (and most Marxists') contempt for *Lumpenproletarians* reflect “an attitude of condescension, combined with aversion and even fear, towards certain elements of the lower classes” (Bussard, 1987, 688). This is an important difference from the *luftmentsh*. Unlike the *Lumpenproletarian* who does not belong to the real proletariat, a *luftmentsh* remains a *mentsh*, i.e. in Yiddish an honorable person.

It is true that the word *luftmentsh* is, as Dara Horn points out, “considerably closer to insult than compliment” (Horn 2008), and there is no doubt that Leshchinsky understood it to have pejorative connotations. Yet we have seen that its meaning was highly ambivalent and complex. More importantly, Leshchinsky's attitudes toward *luftmentshn* were not reducible to

pure contempt, which was typical of some previous and contemporary social reformers, enlightened Jews (*maskilim*) and other advocates of productivization.

4. The *luftmentsh* as a figure of Jewish masculinity

In the first section of this article, we discussed the gendered assumptions of the *luftmentsh* figure in Nordau's description and early Zionist discourse. In this case, the *luftmentsh* was clearly identified as a male character, though a feminized one: it offered indeed a counter-model to the Zionist ideal of a "muscular masculinity". The gender of that Jewish character was less evident in Yiddish literature and Yiddish economic publications. At first sight, it could be said that the figure of the *luftmentsh* has no gender. In Yiddish, *mentsh* means "man", which can also be understood in the universal sense of "human being". Leshchinsky imagined the "air-mentality" as a general feature of Jewish economic life, although, as we have suggested, he assumed economic life to be a properly masculine endeavor.

Yet of course "man" is not a gender-neutral designation, even when it is intended to refer to men and women. To our knowledge, the expressions "*luftfroy*" or "*luftvayb*", i.e. literally "air-women", do not exist. Unlike her artist husband, Bella Chagall, for instance, did not describe herself in similar terms as a floating character. In her memoir, the religious teacher and the synagogue attendant might be seen as *luftmentshn*, but not her (Chagall, 1962). And as Dara Horn argues, "a *luftmentsh* is always a man". Horn describes a related masculine character of *luftmentshn*, which resulted from the male privilege to study in Ashkenazi Jewish culture, where the idea "of study of Torah for its own sake, was something to which every man, rich or poor, was expected to aspire." Jewish men were able to conduct an air-life because they had "grounded wives" who supported them (Horn, 2008). This *luftmentsh* was not identical to the one critiqued by Nordau, Ruppin, and others, but they shared the economic trait of non-productivity, and they both rendered less visible women's economic roles.

These economic underpinnings are reflected in the main popular embodiments of *luftmentshn* in the Yiddish literature. The best example is Sholem Aleichem's *Menahem-Mendl*, which is structured by a gendered opposition between the “airy” character of Menahem-Mendl and his firmly “grounded” wife Sheyne-Shendl. Another good illustration of this gendered opposition is provided by the characters of Benjamin, Sendrel and their wives in Abramovitsh’s classical novel *The Travels of Benjamin the Third*.

Leshchinsky also viewed *luftmentshn* as a masculine phenomenon, even though this assumption was implicit. A first justification for this interpretation comes from his conception of women's employment. Like many Jewish social scientists at the time, Leshchinsky had conflicted attitudes toward women's employment. On the one hand, it was seen as necessary and positive, because it was consistent with the objective to “productivize” Jewish population, and to adapt to modern economic life (e.g., Leshchinsky, 1903, 28). From that perspective, Leshchinsky regularly rejoiced over the participation of women to particular industries or trade, such as the tobacco industry in late 19th-century Poland (Leshchinsky, 1931, 150).

But at the same time, Leshchinsky viewed women, as well as children, as competitors for men on the labor market. This was especially true in sweatshop industries, in which Jewish immigrants were overcrowding, and where the massive presence of women and children corresponded with extremely low wages for men and terrible socio-economic conditions (Leshchinsky, 1906; 1907). Leshchinsky also regarded the larger proportion of women Jewish immigrants as a collective burden: the typical Jewish immigrant arrived in the US with his wife and children, had to support them, therefore could not take the risk to go for entirely new economic activities, and turned to the sweatshop as a default choice (Leshchinsky, 1911a). Leshchinsky also considered women’s work as the consequence of poverty and pointed out that in more affluent households women did not have to work (e.g., Leshchinsky, 1903, 28). As a

general rule, in his demographic analyses, Leshchinsky considered that men of working age were the “most productive and skilled element” (e.g., Leshchinsky 1930, 22, 1925a, 53).

Women's employment raised also important issues related to demographic decline, which was a widely shared preoccupation among Jewish social scientists at the time (Hart, 2000; Vallois, 2021a). In an article on the Jews in Germany, Leshchinsky argued that a major cause of the diminishing rate of Jewish natality in Germany was the fact that “the Jewish woman has to participate in the economic struggle for life [...]. There is no doubt that the Jewish woman is responsible for a large part of this sin” (Leshchinsky, 1912a, 5).

Blaming women's morality and employment for demographic decline was very common among Jewish social scientists at the time, especially in the writings of such authors as Arthur Ruppin or Felix Theilhaber (Hart, 2000; Vallois, 2021a). It would be difficult and of dubious utility to determine whether Leshchinsky had more or less misogynist views on the subject. What seems specific to Leshchinsky is that, relative to other specialists of Jewish statistics, he said very little, as if the subject itself did not interest him much. This relative silence is significant because women's employment was a common feature of Jewish economic life in Eastern Europe, and a crucial component of household income (Hyman, 1955; Glenn, 1991, 8-49). Both in Eastern Europe and in immigration countries, women represented a significant part of the overall Jewish workforce (Bender, 2004), especially in the garment industry (Green, 1998). Women played also an important political role in the Jewish labor movement. They constituted a large part of the Bund's membership in Eastern Europe.²³ In the United States, women worked at the forefront of the garment industry's major strikes in 1909–1913 (Glenn, 1991, 167–205; Bender, 2004).

In the rare occasions where Leshchinsky discussed the issue of women employment specifically, his views suggest that he saw the subject as entirely different from the one of men's

²³ See the estimations in Peled, 1989, 41; Glenn 1990, 38.

employment. Both Jewish men and women needed to be “productivized”, yet this objective raised separate issues. As seen earlier, Leshchinsky argued that Jewish workers suffered from their “airy” mentality, their greater petty-bourgeois ambitions, relatively to non-Jewish workers. This recurring portrait was formulated in gender-neutral terms.²⁴ However, in an article on “the Jews in Warsaw”, he proposed a similar comparison between Jews and non-Jews for women workers specifically. In this study, Leshchinsky observed that the proportion of Jewish domestic servants had substantially diminished and proposed two explanations for that phenomenon. Jewish women, argued Leshchinsky, have greater aspirations than non-Jews, and cannot therefore not compete with the latter, who are willing to work for lower salaries and lower conditions. This interpretation in terms of a “desire to rise” is consistent with Leshchinsky’s usual portrait of the Jewish worker (cf. *supra*), even though the sector, domestic service, was here considered as specific to women. Leshchinsky’s second explanation, nonetheless, was that Jewish women, unlike Jewish men, prefer to work in the fabrics, even for lower salaries, rather than staying in domestic service. According to Leshchinsky, this tendency in women employment was not specific to Jews but could be observed in all countries of “higher culture” (Leshchinsky, 1937, 166).

The idea of a specific Jewish economic “type”, a Jewish mentality at work, therefore applied to men only. In other words, the *luftmentsh* remained a male character. This interpretation has two important consequences. First, the *luftmentsh* should be conceived as an image of Jewish masculinity, and not an image of the Jewish worker or pauper in general. As argues Sarah Imhoff, “we must study men as men, not as the default representatives of humanity or of Jewishness” in order to challenge “the idea that gender equals women or that women have gender and men do not” (Imhoff, 2019, 75 and 80). Jewish masculinity refers to the historical models for Jewish men.

²⁴ As a general rule, and besides a very few exceptions (e.g., Leshchinsky, 1937, 66), Leshchinsky used the gender-neutral word worker (*arbeter*) and not female workers (*arbetorins*).

The most familiar of these models are the feminized and weak Jewish man of antisemitic discourse, and the strong Jews of “muscular Jewry” (*mukeljudentum*) of Zionist discourse (Imhoff, 2017, 62). Between these two models, the *luftmentsh* offers an alternative image for Jewish men: involved in shady business yet fulfilling important economic functions, selfish yet undertaking, physically weak yet agitated, undisciplined yet intellectually agile, antisocial yet socially useful.

The strength of this model lies perhaps in its ambivalence. The *luftmentsh* conveyed negative meanings, and worked as an anti-model. However, the “air-mentality” also entailed creativity, intellectual agility, and artistic genius. Such qualities, if properly managed, could lead to socially useful activities. He was a feminized Jewish male, but could be masculinized. Simultaneously repulsive and attractive, the *luftmentsh* provided a perfect identification model. In any case, it remained a model identification for men.

5. Methodological epilogue - Between self-critique and antisemitism

In 1901, industrial economist John R. Commons published “Immigration and Its Economic Effects,” a report for the U.S. Industrial Commission. In it, he explained connections between Jews and worrisome economic trends.

[The Jew’s] physical strength does not fit him for manual labor. His instincts lend him to speculation and trade. His individualism unsuits him for the life of a wage-earner, and especially for the discipline of a labor organization (p.325).

Probably the Jewish immigrant changes his standard of living soonest. When the Jew wants to make more money, he will leave his former occupation as operator or baster, etc., and will become a contractor or storekeeper. So that instead of trying to raise the standard of living in the trade, he will try to leave the trade and throw his lot in with people whose standard of living is somewhat higher. In this way his commercial instinct militates continually against making active efforts to better the condition of his trade (p.327).

The Jew is also exceedingly abstract and metaphysical, and greatly interested in general principles. His union is always, therefore, except in time of a strike,

a forum for the discussion of socialism and the philosophy of the labor movement (p.327).

Commons's descriptions may strike modern readers as antisemitic—and in fact, they have struck some scholars as such (Fiorito and Orsi, 2016). But they also sound quite similar to both the economic and literary discourse we have seen coming from Jews like Leshchinsky and many other Zionists or Yiddish writers. They describe the same features in their descriptions of Jewish workers: physical weakness, a special taste for speculation, a lack of discipline, a higher standard of living, and excessive intellectual development.

What, then, is the difference between the ways Commons and Leshchinsky characterize Jews with respect to economics? Should we deem Commons's work antisemitic while saying Leshchinsky's is not simply because one is Jewish and the other not? We argue that the figure of the *luftmentsh* demonstrates the deep complexities of determining when and how negative images of Jews might be deemed antisemitic, especially in an age where race science and racist depictions crossed throughout scientific disciplines.

In the remainder of the current section, we do not exhaustively discuss Commons's alleged antisemitism.²⁵ We merely invoke a comparative perspective on his report to draw a few general principles regarding antisemitism and the relationship between facts, fictions and fantasies in the history of economic thought. Rather than offering specific criteria—or even making pronouncements about who or what is antisemitic—we use the *luftmentsh* to show how economic and literary discourse circulated images of Jews that could be used toward both Jewish self-critique and antisemitism.

Analyzing differences and similarities of Commons and Leshchinsky—or Yiddish literature and Commons-style economic writing—help illustrate this complex picture. One major

²⁵ In particular, we will analyze neither Commons's later writings on Jews in *Races and Immigrants in the USA* nor his personal relationship with Selig Perlman. Both topics are discussed by Fiorito, Orsi, and Chasse in their articles.

similarity is the belief in an essential difference of Jewish economic behavior. The Yiddish literary critic Yekhiel Yeshaye Trunk wrote that Menahem Mendl was “a human symbol of Jewish existence”; his story represented “the tragic saga of the Jewish people” (Trunk, 1944, 179). Trunk’s interpretation was not, of course, accepted as universal truth. There is no doubt, however, that Sholem Aleichem’s anti-hero inspired to many Yiddish-writing economists the idea of a specifically Jewish mentality and behavior, a “Menahem-Mendl” economic type. Beyond the case of Leshchinsky, that idea was particularly influential among left-wing Zionists and played a central role in the debate over Jewish “non-proletarianization” in the early twentieth century. In tsarist Russia, Jews were indeed mostly concentrated in petty trade and craft production. The theory of Jewish “non-proletarianization” claimed that Jews in Eastern Europe were unable to integrate large-scale industry and form a proletarian class because they lacked a territory of their own. As in Nordau’s case, the notion of Jewish “groundlessness” served as a political justification for Zionism: according to these Russian Marxist Zionists, socialists and proletarian goals required a form of territorial autonomy, whether in Palestine or elsewhere (Vallois, 2021c).

Leshchinsky had been himself a major contributor to these debates. Like Leshchinsky and Nordau, theoreticians of Jewish non-proletarianization considered that the lack of a “solid economic base” was responsible for the distinctiveness of Jewish economic behavior. Khaim Dov Horovitz, who is usually regarded as having elaborated the first version of the theory in 1902, drew an economic portrait of the Jews, which was very similar to both Nordau’s description and Sholem Aleichem’s novel, even though he did not name explicitly these references. Horovitz defended the idea that Jewish existence had always depended on external circumstances and, therefore, that Jews tended to wait for “economic miracles,” hence the predominance of a Jewish “commercial spirit” over productive activities that naturally inclined Jews toward speculation (Horovitz 1902a, 123). Dependence upon miracles and external

circumstances also meant professional instability and agitation: “all the Jews took their chance in all economic activities that exist in the world, jump from one activity to another, without finding a moment of rest in their lives [...]”(Horovitz, 1902a, 116).

Borochov, one of the most influential leaders of Marxist Zionism, explicitly quoted Nordau’s discourse (cf. *supra*) and argued that the Jews’ estrangement from the soil and nature explained why “Jewish economics is said to be an air-economy [*luft-virtshaft*], and why Jewish economic life is an air-life [*luft-lebn*]” (Borochov [1916] 1919, 8). Borochov also proposed moral portraits of the Jewish worker very similar to Leshchinsky’s, such as the following excerpt:

A Jew, possessing meager means, often decides to become a boss “on his own” [...]. The Jew possesses a stronger entrepreneurial spirit. He refuses to remain a proletarian [...]. This desire to achieve “success” is a deeply ingrained characteristic of the Jewish laboring masses [...] and furnish the explanation for the instability of the Jewish laboring masses. (Borochov, [1916] 1919, 5).

It is not difficult to see that all of these descriptions reactivated antisemitic tropes about the alleged unproductivity of the Jews, their inclination for speculation, and in particular the often-made association between ambition and excessive selfishness (e.g. Horovitz, 1902b, 333; 1902c, 401), which is strongly reminiscent of the long-standing Christian accusations of greed, avarice and materialism (Penslar, 2000, 13). Beyond left-wing Zionism, the problem concerns more generally the productivization discourse: as Berg notes, the “attempt to productivize Jewish labor goes back to an old classical Christian literature; it has become a constant *topos* of the largely antisemitic texts and from 1900 on it started to be increasingly shared by Jews” (Berg, 2008, 90). In our context, both Jewish and non-Jewish economists largely agreed on one aspect of the Jewish problem: both groups used the narrative of “degeneration” that Presner identifies in Zionist discourse. Presner has shown how the Zionist ideal of the “muscle Jew”—a counter-image to Jews’ alleged physical and moral weakness in the Diaspora—internalized

many antisemitic stereotypes about Jewish degeneracy and took clear inspiration from the fascist fascination with “sane” and strong bodies. (Presner, 2007, 17).

It should be noted that the *topos* involved in the *luftmentsh* character is a rather specific case in antisemitic discourse. Since the 17th century, anti-Jewish economic rhetoric had traditionally blamed the Jews for being either extremely poor, economically worthless, or either extremely wealthy and powerful (Penslar, 2000, 11-49). The image of the “floating Jews” in in an intermediate position between these two extremes. A *luftmentsh* such as Menahem-Mendl is a speculator who wishes to accumulate wealth very quickly, notably on financial markets, but he is different from the classical characters of mostly Jewish bankers and usurers that are to be found, for instance, in the stock exchange novels of the 19th century (Ingrao, 2017), because he never succeeds. A *luftmentsh* is ambitious, but he constantly fails and remains poor. In that regard, this character is close to other types of Yiddish popular culture, notably the *nebbish*, commonly defined as “an innocuous, ineffectual, weak, helpless or hapless unfortunate [...] a Sad Sack. A loser” (Rosten, 2003, 264); and the *schlemiel*, “that force of nature that always manages to make the situation worse when he was only trying to help” (Caplan, 2016, 139).

Internal Jewish discourses of unluckiness, failure and weakness do not mean, however, that the representation of Jews as *luftmentshn* is immune to antisemitism. This appears clearly when considering the influence and pervasiveness of that image among non-Jews, and more specifically in the social and political discourse against sweatshops in the early twentieth century. Particularly in England and the United States, the sweating system’s rise in the Progressive Era was firmly associated with Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Social reformers and economists like Commons tended to blame Jews for the sweatshop’s social problems (Bender, 2004) and used images similar to Leshchinsky: Jews were seen as physically weak, feminized yet individualistic and ambitious workers, incapable of joining the more masculinized and collective workplace of the fabric (Bender, 2004).

However, we can note significant differences of the context of Commons's work and economists publishing in Yiddish. Unlike Commons and other non-Jewish social reformers, Leshchinsky and most Yiddish-writing economists eschewed the language of race in their portraits of Jewish workers. They regarded Jews' alleged inaptitude for industrial work as grounded not in racial traits but, rather, in a national struggle and a lack of territorial autonomy, while non-Jewish activists stressed race as sweatshops' underlying cause (Bender, 2004, 44). This difference explains why the economic character of the *luftmentsh*, though mostly negative, did not include the "most lurid images of Jewish racial inferiority" or the anxiety about Jewish immigrants' "germs" and "smell and filth" that appeared in the anti-sweatshop campaign (Bender 2004, 49).²⁶ This is not to say that Jews did not engage in racial depictions of Jewishness. They did (Goldstein, 2006). And not all racializing descriptions of Jews were necessarily racist.

Moreover, Leshchinsky and other Zionist economists on the one side and authors such as Commons on the other side reached opposed political conclusions in their studies. Both sides—except for Borochoy—agreed that the Jewish character severely impeded the social organization of labor. But Commons, like many Progressive Era reformers, advocated for strict immigration restriction, while Labor Zionists sought, on the contrary, to increase, organize, and "concentrate" migration in a given territory. That is, Commons sought to solve the problem by keeping Jews out of his country, but Zionists sought to solve the problem by uplifting and regenerating Jews.

These comparisons illuminate a recent dispute in the history of economic thought between Luca Fiorito and Cosma Orsi who argue Commons is antisemitic and Dennis Chasse who argues the opposite (Fiorito and Orsi, 2016; Chasse, 2018). Similarities between Labor

²⁶ The situation was different for German Jewish authors such as Nordau or Ruppin, who fully embraced the idea of a "Jewish race". On the influence of race theory on Jewish social scientists in this period, see Efron, 1994; Hart, 2000; Vallois, 2021b.

Zionists' and Commons's descriptions of Jewish workers do not invalidate Fiorito and Orsi's general argument about Commons's antisemitism. However, as Presner has shown, they confirm that Jews can also internalize and be influenced by anti-Jewish stereotypes. Chasse seems to have ignored this basic principle. In his response to Fiorito and Orsi, Chasse points out that Commons, in preparing his report, spent six months with Abram Bisno, a Jewish garment worker and union leader. Chasse repeatedly asks in his article, "How can Commons be accused of anti-Semitism by using the words of a Jewish union leader?" (Chasse, 2018, 424, 426–427). Thus, he implies that Jews' negative descriptions of Jews must be self-contradictory.²⁷ However, both Jewish and non-Jewish authors can share similar prejudices and influence each other. Though Commons and other Progressive Era social scientists were unlikely to have read economic pamphlets in Yiddish, Yiddish-writing economists were likely inspired by non-Jewish social science. In his *Jewish Worker in London*, for instance, Leshchinsky quoted Webb's survey of London's Jewish community, which included similar comments about Jews' "mental agility," "trained intellect, admirably adapted to commerce and finance," and "lack of social morality," which she suggested was responsible for their concentration in the sweating system (Webb, 1889, 586–589; Leshchinsky, 1907, 17–18).

Chasse also strives to demonstrate that many of Commons's arguments against Jewish and non-Jewish immigration were "reasonable" and grounded in concrete observations. For instance, he cites the idea that immigration was pro-cyclical or that it complicated labor organization among workers of many nationalities (Chasse, 2018, 423). Chasse also considers some of the terms Commons used to have had no negative sense. For example, he discusses the

²⁷ More generally, an important drawback to both Fiorito and Orsi's and Chasse's articles is their neglect of the literature on Jewish history. In particular, they seem to ignore the study of the writings of Bisno—who played a central role in their controversy—in relevant and well-known studies of the secondary literature (e.g., Bender, 2004; Goldstein 2006, 82) and, therefore, to miss important information—notably the fact that Bisno had, previously to Commons's report, testified to the US House of Representatives on the sweating system, as he wrote about later in his memoirs.

word “individualism,” which was not “synonymous with ‘selfishness’ or ‘uncooperativeness’” and had no “pejorative sense” (Chase, 2018, 426).

Chasse’s reading overestimates the degrees of consistency and coherence in these alleged characters of the Jewish worker. We have shown the fundamental ambivalence of Leshchinsky’s attitude toward *luftmentshn*. As Leshchinsky wrote himself, the Jewish desire to rise -perhaps the most ambivalent attribute of the *luftmentsh*- “can be either an inclination to evil [*yeytser-hore*] or inclination to good [*yeytser-hatov*]” (Leshchinsky, 1938, 180). Similar ambivalence appears in Nordau’s discourse too. Even though the *Luftmensch* offered a mostly negative counter-image, Nordau, like many German Zionists at the time, simultaneously glorified the authenticity of these poor Eastern European Jews (Presner, 2007, 4). Also, Nordau considered his reflection on *Luftmenschen* as an apologetic defense against antisemitism. As he argued in his 1901 discourse, antisemites accused Jews of being a merchant-people, masters of capital and international trade, while the vast majority of the Jewish population that lived in Eastern Europe at the time, i.e. *Luftmenschen*, was actually employed in petty trade, and was largely excluded from large-scale capital businesses (Nordau [1909] 1923, 118-119).

These paradoxes and contradictions are, again, consistent with Presner’s observations on “Muscular Judaism” as a “deeply conflicted ideal” (Presner 2007, 17). Fiorito and Orsi are aware of antisemitism’s often conflicting and contradictory nature, referring to the notion of “ambivalent antisemitism” that was first popularized in the history of economic thought by Melvin Reder’s article about John M. Keynes, Friedrich Hayek, and Joseph Schumpeter (Reder, 2000). Yet their approach is still morally framed at the individual level. They treat antisemitism as a set of personal beliefs and prejudices by a single author. They seek to determine whether Commons is among the famous economists who held morally reprehensible ideas about Jews, and do not analyse how these ideas eventually interacted with his economic thinking.

The corpus of economic writings on the *luftmentsh* character suggests that this repertoire of anti-Jewish economic tropes cannot be well understood as private, personal obsessions among individuals who were—aside from these prejudices—“great economists.” Though vague and mutable, these images of the Jewish worker were extremely influential, and they echo throughout social science. These images’ pervasiveness illustrates what Presner calls the “intersectionality of discursive formations,” multiple economic, statistical, eugenic, and aesthetic discourses that “related to and build off one another” (Presner 2007, 19). Uses of the word *luftmentsh* in economic discourse referred simultaneously to a statistical category and a fictionalized character. Hence, “fictionalized” images of Jewish economic behavior should not be regarded as undesirable, separable by-products of economic and statistical thinking. Rather, they were part of this thinking. Our case study shows that a seemingly neutral economic-statistical descriptors entails much of the complexity which is usually attributed to literary characters, and thus establishes the difficulty—if not impossibility—of distinguishing anti-Jewish prejudice from “sound” economic thinking. Therefore, in our opinion, studying the origin and diffusion of these images, tracking their transformation from one group of authors to another, between Jews and non-Jews, offers a more promising approach to show how economic representations of Jews generally informed the history of economic thought.²⁸

²⁸ For a recent illustration of this approach, see Trivellato 2019 and also the 2015 mini-symposium on antisemitism and economic thought in *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology*.

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Appendix

Expression	English translation	Language	References
<i>Farmitleray</i>	Middleman-hood	Yiddish	1910, <i>Haynt</i> , 01/14, 2.
<i>Kaptsn</i>	Pauper	Yiddish	1910, <i>Haynt</i> , 01/21, 3.
<i>Sarsur, sarsurot kalkalit</i>	Haggler, Haggling economy	Hebrew	1913, <i>Ha-olam</i> , 11/26, 6.
<i>Vermittler- und Tauschvolk</i>	Middleman-and-exchange nation	German	1916a, <i>Fragen</i> , 160.
<i>Markt – und Schankvolk</i>	Market-and-tavern nation	German	1916a, <i>Fragen</i> , 161.
<i>Windberufen</i>	Wind-occupations	German	1916a, <i>Fragen</i> , 165.
<i>Spazierstockjuden</i>	Walking-stick Jews	German	1916b, <i>Fragen</i> , 233.
<i>frohliche Arme und lustige Bettler</i>	Joyful pauper and funny beggar	German	1916b, <i>Fragen</i> , 233.
<i>die, für die das Sichumhertreiben auf dem Markt an sich eine Profession</i>	those, who take “let-oneself-hanging-around the market” as a profession	German	1916b, <i>Fragen</i> , 233.
<i>Maklergeist</i>	Middleman-spirit	German	1916b, <i>Fragen</i> , 233.
<i>das jüdische Handel – und Wandelgenie</i>	the Jewish commercial and wandering genius	German	1916b, <i>Fragen</i> , 233.
<i>Menakhem-Mendl-s, , Menakhem-Mendlim</i>	Menahem Mendel-s	Yiddish	1921, <i>Yiddische literatur</i> , 11 ; 1923, <i>Di oyfgaben</i> , 3 ; 1930, <i>Tsvishn</i> , 102 ; 1945, <i>Ndodei israel</i> , 19-20.
<i>Farmitleray psikologye</i>	Middleman psychology	Yiddish	1921, <i>Yiddische literatur</i> , 11.
<i>Farmitler yerushe</i>	Middleman heritage	Yiddish	1921, <i>Yiddische literatur</i> , 11.
<i>Luftmentshelekh</i>	Small Luftmentshn	Yiddish	1921, <i>Yiddische literatur</i> , 16.
<i>Natsionale meklerishe neshome</i>	National-brokerish soul	Yiddish	1921, <i>Yiddische literatur</i> , 19.
<i>Yarid yidn</i>	(trade) Fair-Jews	Yiddish	1925, <i>Der emes</i> , 55.
<i>Leydik geyer</i>	Idler, loafer	Yiddish	1925, <i>Der emes</i> , 62.
<i>Farmitler natsie</i>	Middleman nation	Yiddish	1925, <i>Ekonomishe lage</i> , 89.
<i>Kleinhändlerisch-vermittlerischen Traditionen</i>	Small-merchant-middleman-ish traditions	German	1926, <i>Probleme</i> , 8.
<i>Farmitler vanderig folk</i>	Middleman-wandering nation	Yiddish	1928, <i>Di entviklung</i> , 1.
<i>Farmitlerishe un leydikgeyerishe elementen</i>	Element made of middlemen and idlers	Yiddish	1929, <i>Di onhoyb</i> , 7.
<i>Kremerlakh, hendlerlakh, meklerlakh</i>	small shoepkeepers, merchants, middlemen	Yiddish	1929, <i>Di onhoyb</i> , 7.
<i>stam mark-yidelekh</i>	Simple market-Jews	Yiddish	1929, <i>Di onhoyb</i> , 8.
<i>Handlerish-meklerish yidntum</i>	Merchant-broker Jewry	Yiddish	1929, <i>Di onhoyb</i> , 9.
<i>Kremeray</i>	Shopkeeping-hood	Yiddish	1930, <i>Der Emes</i> , 206.
<i>Pust-un-pas</i>	Idle	Yiddish	1930, <i>Der Emes</i> , 62.
<i>Handel khush</i>	Commercial talent	Yiddish	1930, <i>Tsvishn</i> , 100.
<i>Kremerlakh</i>	small shopkeeper	Yiddish	1930, <i>Tsvishn</i> , 100.
<i>Schacher Macher</i>	Haggling huckster	German	1932, <i>wirtschaftliche Schicksal</i> , 118-119.
<i>Betteljudentum</i>	Beggar-Jewry	German	1932, <i>wirtschaftliche Schicksal</i> , 17.
<i>Schnorrer</i>	Beggar, parasite	German	1932, <i>wirtschaftliche Schicksal</i> , 39-40.
<i>Hausierer</i>	Peddler	German	1932, <i>wirtschaftliche Schicksal</i> , 39-40.
<i>Farmitler klas</i>	Middleman class	Yiddish	1933, <i>Oyfn rand</i> , 174.
<i>mikakh u-mimkar</i>	Trade, commerce (litt : negociation and selling)	Hebrew	1945, <i>Ndodei israel</i> , 19-20 ; 1912, <i>Ha-olam</i> , 11/26, 6.
<i>Nishul-maamad</i>	Lacking of social status	Hebrew	1960 [1950], <i>Ha-Tefutsa</i> , 124.
<i>Lediggeher und Sterngucker</i>	Idler and stargazer	German	1916a, <i>Fragen</i> , 161.

Table 2-b. Complete list of expressions related to the term “*luftmentsh*” in Leshchinsky’s works