

The *Luftmentsh* as an economic metaphor for Jewish poverty: a rhetorical analysis

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Abstract. “*Luftmentsh*”, literally “air-person”, is a Yiddish word which is used to refer to beggars, petty traders, peddlers and various kinds of paupers. The word appeared for the first time in Yiddish literature in the 1860's, began to be used in political and economic discourse in the 1880's-1890's, and is now part of economic popular culture. This article proposes a rhetorical analysis of the word *Luftmentsh*, considered as an economic metaphor for Jewish poverty. The air-metaphor in Yiddish offers an interesting case-study of a direct metaphorical transfer from literature to economic discourse. Our study thus contributes to the existing literature on economic metaphors in the history of economic thought. We also aim to deconstruct the various and often ambivalent attitudes associated with the designation *Luftmentsh* and its linguistic derivatives in economic discourse. We show that the economic character of the *Luftmentsh* popularized an influential yet ambivalent image of Jewish masculinity at work.

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Introduction

“*Luftmentsh*” (plural *Luftmentshn*) is a compound word in Yiddish, which breaks into “*luft*”, meaning “air”, and “*mentsh*”, meaning “man”, “person”, or “human being”.¹ These two compounds have Germanic roots so the expression is almost identical in the German “*Luftmentsch*”.² Literally, a *Luftmentsh* is an “air-person”. The word has been used to refer to Jewish petty traders, peddlers, beggars, and all kinds of 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 related to wandering and traveling, notably in the case of peddlers who were traveling around from place to place. More importantly, the “air” metaphor implied poverty, that faced a very large part of Jewish populations in Eastern Europe at the time. *Luftmentshn* lived *from* the air in the sense that they had almost no means of subsistence, “air” being in this sense understood as a synonym for void or absence.

The word *Luftmentsh* appeared originally in the Yiddish literature of the second part of the 19th century. Desanka Shwara identifies its first use in an 1865 novel by Mendele Moykher Sforim, entitled “Fishke the Lame” (Mendele [1865] 1940), which is a love-story between two beggars, the blind Hodel and the lame Fishke (Shwara, 2003, p.93). At the time, poverty was central of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. 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 Shwara, 2003, p.91). But as notes Shwara, if “*Luftmenschen* is a designation on the one hand for a particular segment of the poor among the east European Jewish population ; [...] on the other hand, the *Luftmensh* is the romanticized, transfigured designation for people who have become resigned to poverty” (Shwara, 2003, p.217). In other words, the expression *Luftmentsh* was not merely a descriptive term for the dire economic straits of the Jewish population, but also involved the attribution of esthetic and poetic value to poverty and meaningless economic activity. Beyond literature, the theme of “floating Jews” became a central component of Jewish art in general, most famously in the paintings of Marc Chagall.³

Yet Jewish art was not purely laudatory toward Jewish poverty. Another important aspect of Jewish artists' attitude toward poverty was irony. Most novelists writing about *Luftmentshn* were

1 These various translations for *mentsh* raise of course questions pertaining to gender. These questions will be treated later on in this article.

2 The Yiddish *Luftmentsh* is actually a transliteration in Latin character of the original word written in Hebrew characters. In this article, we use the YIVO system of transliteration (or romanization), as supplemented recently by Bleaman (2019).

3 On the theme of “floating Jews” in Marc Chagall's paintings, see Berg, 2008, 54-57; Goldberg, 2003; Harshav, 1994, 2006.

indeed satirists, and the characters they created were first and foremost conceived to be comic and laughable. 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 is quite different from the previous examples. Unlike small-town peddlers and beggars, Menahem-Mendl is indeed a “speculator”, who decided to leave his *shtetl* of Kasrilevke, to make a fortune in big cities. He dabbles unsuccessfully in various hazardous 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 ridicule and naive character, who is constantly mocked and criticized by his more “grounded” wife Sheyne-Shendl, who stayed in their *shtetl* and despises the air-activities of her husband (Aleichem, [1896] 1911).⁴

Irony did not imply contempt though. These descriptions of *Luftmentshn* can frequently be understood as self-reflexion of the authors about themselves, about their own fragility and powerlessness (Berg, 2008, p.205). Sholem Aleichem for instance lost all 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”.⁵

Things changed in the 1880's-1890's when the designation *Luftmentsh* began to be used in political and economic discourse. The expression was used by authors who were not anymore exclusively novelists or writers (or merely readers and day-to-day Yiddish speakers) but also political activists, reformers, economists and social scientists. In his book entitled “*Luftmenschen – History of a metaphor*”, Nicolas Berg argues that this evolution changed the meanings associated with the expression.⁶ While the air-metaphor was at the beginning a self-ironical theme in Yiddish literature, it then became the object of a social discourse concerning the productivity of Jewish labor. The word *Luftmentsh* acquired mostly negative meanings, the main issued being to turn these *Luftmentshn* into more socially-productive activities. This entailed the disappearance of the self-ironical attitudes and positive cultural appreciations regarding Jewish poverty (Berg, 2008, pp.85-152). Similarly, Shwara critically analyzes how *Luftmentshn* were being accused of being “happy beggars”, who did not try hard enough to escape poverty, and “preferred walking and hanging around rather than working” (Shwara, 2003, pp.218-219).

4 See for instance this typical mockery from Sheyne-Shendl to her husband: “I was not used with my father to this kind of air-livelihood [*luft-parnos*]. Like Mama used to say -my she lives long- “from air one only gets cold”” (Aleichem, [1896] 1911, p.15).

5 Quoted in Goldberg, 2003, p.120.

6 German title: “*Luftmenschen*” – *Zur Geschichte einer Metapher*.

This article focuses on the utilization of the word *Luftmentsh* in economic and statistical discourse in the first part of the 20th century. We analyze in details the transition from Yiddish literature to economics and statistics: what the latter did -and did not- borrow from the former, and how. This will allow us to discuss Berg's and Shwara's argument concerning the loss of ironical and positive content in the rhetoric of economic “productivity”. From the perspective of the history of economic thought, this paper contributes to the large body of existing literature on economic metaphors. The air-metaphor in Yiddish offers an interesting case-study of a direct metaphorical transfer from literature to economic discourse, and thus helps to understand how and in which sense economics can be understood, as Deirdre McClosley once suggested, as a “literary genre” and a form of story-telling (McCloskey, 1984). From the larger perspective of intellectual history, this article contributes to the study of what has turned to be a central figure of economic popular culture. This paper provides a critical reflexion of this figure and aims to deconstruct the various and often ambivalent attitudes associated with the designation *Luftmentsh* and its linguistic derivatives.

Our analysis is based almost entirely on the works of Yakov Leshchinsky.⁷ A first reason is that Berg and Shwara themselves build their argumentation about economic and statistical discourse on the basis of (some) Leshchinsky's writings. Focusing on this particular author will thus allow us to discuss and confront more directly the thesis of Berg and Shwara, who implicitly consider Leshchinsky's writings as representative for Jewish economic thinking about the Jews at the time. This supposition can be regarded as reasonable in regards of the central role that Leshchinsky indeed had within “Jewish statistics” or “Jewish social science”.⁸ Much of the research published in this particular domain in the first part of the 20th century related one way or another to Leshchinsky's various activities. He was first responsible for much of the field's institutionalization: he edited and co-edited several journals of Jewish statistics, and directed the Economic-Statistical Department of the Jewish Scientific Institute (YIVO), that was created in Vilna in 1925. Leshchinsky was also very influential through his numerous personal works. He spent his almost-60 years prolific career collecting data about Jewish communities throughout the world. As notes his

7 On the life and works of Leshchinsky, see Dinur, 1960; Manor, 1961; Alroey, 2006; Estraiikh, 2007; Brym, 2018. As points out Gennady Estraiikh, Leshchinsky's name is spelled variously in English: Leshtshinsky, Leschinsky, Leshchinsky, Leshtsinsky... (Estraiikh, 2007, p.215). In this article, I chose to use the spelling “Leshchinsky”, which is, as argues Robert Brym, “phonetically closest to the Yiddish and the Russian” (Brym, 2018, p.xv). It is also the spelling used by the historian Jonathan Frankel in his influential *Prophecy and politics: socialism, nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917* (Frankel, 1984). It should be noted though that both Alroey and Estraiikh use “Lestschinsky” following the Library of Congress.

8 “Jewish statistics” or “Jewish social science” refers to the important development of statistical publications about Jewish population in the second part of the 19th century and early 20th century, and more generally to the intellectual enthusiasm for statistics among Jewish intelligentsia at the time. The movement began to institutionalize in the 1900's, with the creation of associations and specialized journals. In this article, the expressions “Jewish statistics” and “Jewish social science” will be used as synonyms. On the history of Jewish statistics, see Hart, 2000; Vallois, 2020a.

biographer Alexander Manor, Leshchinsky was himself like “a research institute” (Manor, 1961, p.119); he published more than 25 books and hundred articles (Dinur, 1960, p.7). Last but not least, Leshchinsky played a pivotal role in mediating ideas, methods, statistics between Germany and Easter Europe, since he was one of the rare Yiddish-speaking authors with extensive contacts in the German Jewish community (Kuznits, 2014, p.37; Vallois, 2020a).

1. Transfiguration of a popular character: Max Nordau's 1901 discourse and its influence on German-Zionist economists

Many -if most- authors using the word *Luftmentsh* in the 20th century actually ignored its exact origin. As note both Shwara and Berg, a common mistake in this regard consisted in locating the creation of the expression in Marx Nordau's famous discourse at the Fifth Zionist Congress in Basel (Shwara, 2003, pp.92-93; Berg, 2008). On the 27th december 1901, Nordau, one of the most prominent leader 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, pp.117-118)⁹

According to Nordau, the first characteristic of *Luftmenschen* was that they were *Beruflosen*, “without trade or occupation”, and this situation resulted in poverty. This idea entailed some form of apologetic defense against antisemitism. As argued Nordau later on in his discourse, antisemites used to accuse Jews of being a people of merchants, 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 any form of large-scale capital businesses (Nordau [1909] 1923, pp.118-119). But the main implication of this situation according to Nordau was the necessity of economic “productivization” of the

⁹ The quote is taken from the original copy of the discourse in German, but I borrowed its English translation from Lederhändler, 2009, p.133.

Luftmenschen: “it is clear, that the first task of Zionism must be [...] to make them economically more competent” (Nordau [1909] 1923, pp.129). Last but not least, Nordau associated closely the air-metaphor with the idea of groundlessness (*Bodenlosigkeit*):

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

Nordau's discourse epitomizes the classical stance of early German Zionism toward *Luftmenschen*. “Air” was understood as groundlessness and intended as such as a negative attribute: it implied lack of both a land of their own (literal sense), and of “a solid economic base”. This conception relates to the political goals of Nordau's Zionism: the creation of a Jewish State, and the “productivization” of Jewish labor, with a strong priority given to agricultural work. It should be noted that 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, pp.113).

Nordau's discourse 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. Ruppin was one of the major actor in the fulfillment of Nordau's epistemic agenda regarding Jewish statistics. Shortly after Nordau's discourse, 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, p.181)¹⁰

Here Ruppin explicitly attributes the creation of the word *Luftmensch* to Nordau, and his description is obviously inspired by the latter's discourse, especially the idea of living “on a day-to-

¹⁰ This quote is identical in the 1911 second edition of Ruppin's book, which is more frequently referred to (Ruppin, 1911, p.55).

day basis". What is also interesting is that Ruppin further developed Nordau's conception -consistently with his agenda- 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, p.181).

Written in German, Ruppin's *The Jews of To-day* had an important 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 when writing: "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, pp.14-15).

As a general rule, after Nordau's discourse and its popularization by Ruppin, most economists and statisticians understood the word *Luftmensch* in German as a synonym for lack of profession, or professional instability. As such, the notion of *Luft*-activities raised a problem of classification for statisticians, because such *Luftmenschen* had no precise and definite professional affiliation. In his 1913 *Le Juif Errant d'aujourd'hui* (The wandering Jew of Today), the demographer Liebmann Hersch considered that "*Luft-menschen*" were "individuals who were formerly petty traders and have been forced to leave their commercial activities, or people who were inclined to turn back [to their former occupation] at the first occasion, but were prevented to do so by the circumstances; in other words, they are former petty traders or people who might became once again [petty traders]" (Hersch, 1913, pp.120-121).

More straightforwardly, professional instability translated in statistical terms through the classification of *Luftmenschen*, as Ruppin suggested, in the residual categories of professional censuses and surveys, such as "independent workers", "independents without profession", "workers of different kinds", and other miscellaneous classifications. This is the case for instance in a 1907 article about the professional structure of Jews in Galicia by Jacob Thon, who observed: "the percentage of Jews without profession (*ohne Berufsangabe*) is very high. Here the highly prevalent "*Luftmenschentum*" and economic misery of Galician Jews find an eloquent expression" (Thon, 1907, p.119).

In this last example, "*Luftmenschentum*", i.e. the substantive form of *Luftmenschen*, which could be (literally) translated as "Luftmensch-hood", seems to be only a catchword for misery and lack of profession. The air-metaphor could thus be regarded as what Maurice Lagueux calls "dead

[economic] metaphors”. According to Lagueux, a dead metaphor is a metaphor “which no longer works as metaphors” because everybody understand that it does not have to be understood literally. For instance, “the expressions “liquid money” or “liquid assets” have a metaphorical origin” but “should not be taken “literally””; they are for this reason dead metaphors (Lagueux, 1999, p.11-17). Lagueux further argues that most metaphors in economics are dead and not anymore “suggestive literary tropes”. For this reason, they do not affect significantly economic theory (Lagueux, 1999, p.6).

It seems indeed, as Berg suggests, that the poetics and esthetics of poverty essentially disappeared in the transition from Yiddish literature to the above mentioned economic and statistical sources. In Lagueux's perspective, this would entail a disappearance of the rhetorical underpinnings of the word *Luftmensch*, and thereby a clarification of its meaning through a logically articulated doctrine. Such a doctrine was provided by the classical stance of early German-Zionism toward “unproductive labor”. From this perspective, *Luftmensch* was framed as an essentially negative designation, and it was used to point out the attention of social reformers on the necessity of “grounding” more firmly the Jews on the earth, both in the political (through the creation of a State of their own) and economic sense (with the shift toward agricultural work).

2. *Luftmentshn*, Lumpenproletarians and the rhetoric of unproductiveness

Yakov Leshchinsky probably knew Nordau's discourse at the Fifth Zionist Congress in Basel. He did not participate to this Congress but was elected a Warsaw delegate to the next one, also in Basel, in 1903 (Manor, 1961, pp.42-43; Estraiikh, 2007, p.217). In any case, Leshchinsky was familiar with Zionist literature in general, and he sometimes used the word *Luftmentsh* in a sense that seems close to Nordau's description, for instance when speaking about the “miracle-livelihood” (*nisim parnosos*) of the Galicians Jews (Leshchinsky, 1928c, p.58). Nonetheless, an important difference between Leshchinsky and early German Zionists was that the former wrote mainly in Yiddish.¹¹ As we shall see later on, he was also very knowledgeable about Yiddish literature. As a result, Leshchinsky attributed a more complex set of meanings to the designation *Luftmentsh*, though the overall sense of the expression remained consistent with the general idea of unproductiveness and professional instability.

¹¹Leshchinsky wrote in many languages, Yiddish being the most important. But a significant part of his writings are also in German, in Hebrew, especially in the later part of his career in the post-WW2 period. Less frequently, he also published in Russian, English or French. For a bibliographical survey of Leshchinsky's works, see Glikson, 1967.

In Yiddish, the air-metaphor generates a whole range of expressions that are derived from the original *Luftmentsh*. This is also possible in German: we have seen the occurrence of “Luftmensch-hood” (*Luftmentschtum*), and Nordau also spoke of a “*Luft-nation*” (*Luftvolk*) in the sense that “many *Luftmenschen* together make up a *Luft-Nation*”. (Nordau [1909] 1923, pp.118). But the range of derivatives is larger in Yiddish, as indicates table 1 below, that lists the various expressions derived from the air-metaphor in Leshchinsky's works.

Expression	English translation	Language	References
<i>Luft hakhnoses</i>	Air-incomes	Yiddish	1921, <i>Yidishe 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 spekulatsie 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 luftmasses</i>	Petty-bourgeois air-masses	Yiddish	1921, <i>Yidishe Literatur</i> , 19.
<i>Anshei ha-avir</i>	Air men	Hebrew	1960 [1950], <i>Ha-Tefutsa</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 “Luftmentsh” metaphor

Several expressions in German were derived from *Luftmensch*; the German word was also found to be used in English publications (e.g., Leshchinsky, 1948, p.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 indicative. Some expressions such as “air-businesses” (*Luftgesheftn*) were indeed very frequent, and the two references given in table 1 are only given as illustrations. The high frequency of these expressions suggests that the air-metaphor in Leshchinsky's writings was more than a simple catchword or a synonym for poverty, but was rather part of the basic economic vocabulary in Yiddish. This pervasiveness of the metaphor relates to what Willie Henderson calls the “generative aspect of the metaphor”, which leads to “the development of a routine vocabulary for handling economic ideas” (Henderson, 1994, p.358).

Another important characteristic of the air-metaphor in both Leshchinsky's writings and Yiddish literature is that *Luftmentsh* and its derivatives are often used in enumerations, for instance in the sentence: “a large number of *Luftmenschen*, beggars, peddlers, and domestic servants turned

to productive work” (Leshchinsky, 1932, p.39). In a restricted sense, this suggests that *Luftmentshn* are a specific type of Jewish paupers, different from beggars, peddlers, and domestic servants. Leshchinsky's use of the word sometimes points in that direction, for example when he distinguishes in the social structure of the traditional Jewish society 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, pp.25-29). But in a larger sense, the word *Luftmentsh* was the most general designation for all of his types of paupers. As notes Shwara, this designation was essentially a miscellaneous category, which “can only be understood as a mass, not as individuals [...]. It belongs to every age class, to both sex, to sick and healthy, to educated and non-educated, to religious and secular people” (Shwara, 2003, p.221). Leshchinsky frequently employed the air-metaphor in this general sense, opposing in his statistical analysis all kinds of productive occupations to “air-livelihoods”.

This allows us to consider that the word *Luftmentsh* is semantically close to the other designations with which *Luftmentsh* is related in enumerations. For instance, “beggar” can be regarded as a form related to *Luftmentsh*. This is what Rafael Alejo calls “terminological chains” in his analysis of the “container metaphor” in economics. Similarly to his approach, we analyzed these chains to identify the main semantic domains related to the air-metaphor in Leshchinsky's writings (Alejo, 2010).¹² Table 2a below lists these semantic domains and their related expressions. The complete list of occurrences and expressions is given in table 2b in the appendix.

¹²Alejo does not use the expression “semantic domain” but “conceptual metaphor” in his article (Alejo, 2010, p.1139).

Semantic domain	Expressions	English translations
Middleman	<i>Farmitler, farmitlerishe elementen, farmitler natsie, kleinhändlerisch-vermittlerischen Traditionen [German], farmitleray kremeray,, farmitleray psikologie, farmitler yerushe, farmitler klas, makler, maklergeist, 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
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], sarsour, sarsourot 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
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 ressources	<i>Kremerlakh, Luftmentshelekh, hendlerlakh, meklerlakh, stam mark-yidn, kaptsn, sihul-maamad [Heb], frohliche Arme und lustige Bettler [German]</i>	Small shopkeepers, small Luftmentshn, small merchants, small middlemen, simple market Jews, pauper, someone lacking of social status, joyful pauper and funny beggar
Jewish spirit	<i>Farmitleray psikologie, farmitler yerushe, farmitler natsie, kleinhändlerisch-vermittlerischen Traditionen [German], hendlerish-meklerish Yidntum, natsionale meklerishe neshome, Handel Khush, farmitleray, maklergeist, 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 “Luftmentsh” metaphor

It should be noted that our method of identification relies necessarily on intuition and cannot pretend to perfect accuracy. We did not keep every single terms that appeared in conjunction with the air-metaphor in enumeration, but only the most frequent and significant ones. 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, p.171). Yet the overall idea was to build what Daniele Besomi calls a “metaphorology” of the *Luftmentsh*, i.e. to distinguish the main conceptual meanings associated with the air-metaphor (Besomi, 2019).

Consistently with Berg's thesis, it seems at first sight that all five semantic domains in table 2a have essentially negative meanings. In the first domain, *Luftmentshn* 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*”. The designation *Schacher* for instance was a negative term used in the 19th century to refer to “a specific Jewish type of commerce, with the pejorative sense of haggling, huckstering” (Penslar, 2001, pp.45-46).¹³

The second semantic domain is built upon four words in Yiddish that have very close meanings in Leshchinsky's terminology : *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.¹⁴

Leshchinsky derived substantive forms such as “*kremeray*” or “*farmitleray*”, which are generic pejorative terms for these unproductive commercial activities. This relates to an opposition that Leshchinsky frequently made in his analyses of professional statistics 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 unleydikgayerishe element* ; Leshchinsky, 1928b, p.35 and p.52). As a general rule, when commenting the evolution of Jewish employment structure, Leshchinsky considered the gradual extinction of this “airy” and unproductive element as a positive evolution, suggesting that Jews were not anymore a “nation of middlemen” (*folks farmitler* ; Leshchinsky, 1925b, p.89).¹⁵

13 *Schacher* was also claimed to come from Hebrew *miskhar*, which means traffic, commerce (Penslar, 2001, pp.45-46).

14 Sholem Aleichem for instance mocked his character Menahem Mendl, who pretended to “have found [...] an honorable livelihood, which means I have become a middleman [*mekler*]”, while observing that “I am not the only [*mekler*] here in Yehupets. There is -God forbid- a large number of middlemen, middlemen for sugar, stocks, grains, silver, buildings, real estate, wood, machines, wooden beam, manufactures, workshops, railroads, for everything a mouth can say and a heart desire, there is a middleman. No business can be done without a middleman” (Sholem Aleichem [1896] 1911, p.70, 74).

15 According to Leshchinsky, such a productivization process had occurred in a particularly vivid manner in early 19th century Germany, where “*Luftmenschen* had been increasingly implied in the circle of productive work” (Leshchinsky, 1932, p.30). As wrote Leshchinsky in Hebrew in a serie of articles published in the journal *Ha-olam*, “German Jewry left progressively the field of haggling economy (*sarsurot ha-kalkalit*) and entered the field of productive economy” (Leshchinsky, 1912d, pp.5-6). Still in Hebrew, Leshchinsky also observed a more limited yet significant “diminution in the number of declassed individuals and *Luftmenshn*” in 19th century tsarist Russia (Leshchinsky, 1950, p.124). Conversely, Leshchinsky interpreted as a negative evolution the opposed tendency,

The more or less “airy” nature of the Jewish economy often related to metaphors of health and disease, which are quite common in economic discourse, especially when speaking of crises as “pathologies” (Arrese and Vara-Miguel, 2016). Here the health metaphor applied in conjunction with the air-metaphor to the employment structure. Conversion of *Luftmenschen* to productive work favored, argued Leshchinsky, the “healing” of Jewish social structure (Leshchinsky, 1932, pp.39-40 ; see also Leshchinsky, 1916b, p.235), whereas the “abnormal and hunchbacked social structure” of Polish Jews was said to reflect their excessive concentration in air-professions (Leshchinsky, 1928b, p.29).

The air-metaphor also related to the semantic domain of wandering and floating (third row on table 2a). This theme can have favorable connotations as a general rule, 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 mast master at ease in universal literature ; [...] he is uprooted, a wanderer, who lives in his intelligence and sensitivity the harsh kafkaian truth of the Diaspora” (Magris, 2003, p.20). Such artistic appraisal of wanderers was not to be found in Leshchinsky's writings, especially in the early ones, in which he regretted that Jewish immigrants concentrated in the less mechanized branches of capitalist societies, and particularly in the sweatshop system (*shvits-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 potentially emigrating masses: hopeless wandering entailed a self-perpetuation of poverty (Leshchinsky, 1907, p.33).

In the fourth semantic domains, several words end up with the Yiddish suffix “akh/ekh”, which conveys the smallness or smaller degree of the object named, as in “*kremerlakh*” (small shopkeeper). In Yiddish, the suffix often implies an affectionate and kind attitude, as in “*kinderlekh*” (little ones, children). But this was not the case in Leshchinsky's writings. Leshchinsky was indeed one of the major defender of “un-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.¹⁶ In Leshchinsky's Marxist perspective, the future of capitalist economy belonged to the large-scale, highly concentrated, mechanized industry. Associating *Luftmentschn* to words such as “*kremerlakh*” (*small shopkeeper*) was therefore a way of pointing out their economic insignificance, powerlessness, and backwardness.

i.e. the return to “air-businesses” in interwar soviet Russia (e.g., Leshchinsky, 1925b, p.90), or in post-war US where “the process of productivization [had] now been reversed” (Leshchinsky, 1948, p.75).

¹⁶Leshchinsky's un-proletarianization theory also relates to his pessimistic view on Jewish immigration (cf. supra). It would be beyond the scope of this article to examine in details the content of this theory. On this matter, see Gutwein, 1990, 1994 ; Frankel, 1994 ; Vallois, 2020b.

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*). It should be noted though that Leshchinsky's writings display much inconsistency in this domain. On the one hand, Leshchinsky explicitly and strongly opposed explanations based on race and “Volkspychologie”, i.e. explanations grounded on the idea that nations have “collective spirits” (Leshchinsky, 1923a, p.1). He rejected the notion of a “moralistic Jewish spirit” or any form of such “mystical mind” of the Jews (Leshchinsky, 1922, p.15). 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.¹⁷ Leshchinsky refused the idea that Jews had been a “commercial nation” (*am ha-miskhar*) since Ancient times (Leshchinsky, 1912, p.5), mocked the notions of “Jewish trade genius” (*handels-geni*) and “Semitic trading instinct” (*semitisher handler instinkt* ; Leshchinsky, 1906, p.25). Yet on the other hand, he used very close 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 used to draw 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, their insignificant needs and even more insignificant aspirations, is a lot more cheaper and 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 familiarity with the mechanism of the company, with their easiness to grasp the spring-movement of this mechanism, 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 managers, with their dangerous aspiration to become independent and to organize themselves [...] independently” (Leshchinsky, 1931, p.70)

The air-metaphor is here not explicit, but this quote can easily be related to the theme of an

¹⁷On these two expressions, see Vallois, 2020c. German economist Werner Sombart provides a good illustration of the pejorative meanings associated with the notion of *Händlergeist*. In his 1915 *Händler und Helden* (Merchants and Heroes), Sombart uses the expression *Händlergeist* to characterize the shortcomings of the English “spirit”, with its excessive individualism and utilitarianism : “I understand the notion of *Händlergeist* as this world view, which approaches life with this question : what can life give me ; which also regards the totality of existence on earth as a sum of commercial businesses, that every one concludes with maximal benefit for oneself” (Sombart, 1915, p.14). Such a mercantile and material worldview could never, in Sombart's perspective, attain the heights of (German) high culture : “no work of art can be born from *Händlergeist*” (Sombart, 1915, p.50).

“air” mentality, that would be specifically Jewish. While the more “grounded” non-Jewish labor force is praised for its stability and predictability, Jews are blamed for their “airy” nature, i.e. for elusive and intangible attributes such as lack of discipline, “spiritual agility”, intense psychological activity, excessive self-consciousness and sense of independence. This psychological portrait of Jewish and non-Jewish workers was a recurrent theme in Leshchinsky's works and appears similarly, with only minor variations, in several other writings (Leshchinsky, 1913 ; 1916a, p.165 ; 1933a, p.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 (*gayst*) of the nation” that happened in this “middleman class”: a new “Jewish psychology” had appeared, argued Leshchinsky, and “it is nowadays badly considered to be an idler, to know nothing, to be a *Luftmentsh*” (Leshchinsky, 1933a, pp.174-175). Yet in the end, such an attitude was quite typical of social reformers who wanted to “regenerate”, i.e. productivize, Jewish workers and to change their supposed “airy” mentality. This is consistent with Berg's and Shwara's views about Leshchinsky as a typical example of the “productivization” agenda and discourse. Both Berg and Shwara base their argument about Leshchinsky on one of his article, written in German and published in 1916 in Martin Buber's review *Der Jude* (Shwara, 2003, pp.218-219; Berg, 2008, pp.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” (*frohliche Arme*) and “funny beggars” (*lustige Bettler*), 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 [...], that Mendele has so rightfully and artistically characterized : “A Jews hears hardly, even in agony, something about business (*Geschäft*), he comes alive and even the angel of death cannot take him” (“Fischke der Krumme”). These social, more exactly antisocial element, for whom science has no name [...], do not however nowadays have anymore the first role in Jewish life [...]. Even 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, p.233)

This quote provides indeed a good illustration of “productivization” discourse on Jewish paupers, with its associated moral condemnations : *Luftmenschen* run shady businesses (they “live from scams”), they are to blame for their own poverty (they are happy paupers), they unduly benefit

from culture appraisal, their economically-backwarded mentality will disappear with modernity. Though he refers his argument to *Fishke the lame*, Leshchinsky seems far from the self-ironical tone and sense of benevolence toward paupers of this novel. His take on *Luftmenschen* as “antisocial element” who are responsible for their own misery sounds actually much closer to antisemitic tropes. In this regard, Leshchinsky is no exception toward a general rule that concerns productivization discourse: as notes Berg, 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, p.90).

Yet in our opinion, Leshchinsky's 1916 article is not representative of the rest of his writings. It was probably 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.¹⁸ The overall tone of the article sounds much different from other Leshchinsky's works published in Yiddish statistical and economic outlets. Our analysis shows that there was much more ambivalence in Leshchinsky's discourse than what Berg and Shwara suggest.

This ambivalence is to be found in particular in the above mentioned psychological portrait of the Jewish worker. It can easily be seen that some of the drawbacks that Leshchinsky attributed to the Jewish labor force could actually be turned into qualities, especially the ideas of intellectual “agility” (*neshome rivevdikayt*) 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. There had been in the interwar period in this city a severe crisis in the garment industry, which led to the collapse of a large number of German companies, who used to be the largest and most important ones. Contrary to the German, many Jewish factory-owners maintained successfully their businesses and, according to Leshchinsky, “a central factor was psychology” (Leshchinsky, 1931, p.83): facing a fall in demand, Jewish manufacturers had been much more inventive and adaptative to find new prospects, especially in foreign markets. Their (relative) success was due to “their intelligence, their energy, their agile spirit (*rivevdikn gayst*), and their entrepreneurial dexterity” (Leshchinsky, 1931, p.80).

This case also shows that the small size of Jewish economic activities, which were regarded by Leshchinsky as an important drawback, could also offer some advantages. Unlike Germans who owned large businesses, and therefore needed stability and to obey strict rules, Leshchinsky described Jewish entrepreneurs as more flexible and adjustable because their small business did not require, as in the “old-time commercial fair” (*eyvik yarid*) to keep accounting records and this

¹⁸It should be noted though that the article was first published in Yiddish in the monthly literary review *Di Yiddishe velt*.

allowed them to be much more risk-taking (Leshchinsky, 1931, p.80-83). The smaller Jewish capital was “more mobile”, emphasized Leshchinsky, and therefore played a major role, both in Western Europe and in Russia, in the major innovation of the 19th century, especially in railroads and in the funding of large banks (Leshchinsky, [1950] 1960, pp.101-104). This appraisal can be further related to the positive connotations that the air-metaphor implies in general in the domains of science and techniques (e.g., through the association with flying or steam, cf. Berg, 2008, pp.59-60).

Leshchinsky did not consider neither that commerce was an absolutely unproductive economic activity. He recognized that sharing and distributing merchandises fulfilled a socially-useful function (Leshchinsky, 1931, pp.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.¹⁹ Last but not least, Leshchinsky attributed a positive value to wandering. He was concerned actually 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.²⁰

Leshchinsky's ambivalence toward the designation *Luftmentsh* can be further illustrated through his use of the closely related Marxist term *Lumpenproletarian*. In his early writings, Leshchinsky does not refer to Jewish paupers much as *Luftmentshn* but rather as *Lumpenproletarians*. The first occurrence of this expression is to be found in his 1906 *The Jewish worker in Russia*. In this book, Leshchinsky refers to a short novel 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] 1949). Leshchinsky takes Chaikin as a figure of the “hungry proletarian”, i.e. a *Lumpenproletarian* who is to be blamed for his lack of political consciousness: “today's Jewish *lumpenproletariat* dreams about a paradise where one needs not work and nothing is wanting. The father of both of

19 For instance, in the same 1931 book on the economic situation in Poland, Leshchinsky raised the question of whether there were too many Jews involved in the commercial sector in Poland. While noting that this problem could not receive a definitive solution, Leshchinsky proposes different empirical criteria to estimate the adequate number of individuals that a country should employ in professions of intermediations: e.g., amount of sales in domestic markets, relative size of the industry, comparison with developed countries, development of transport facilities (Leshchinsky, 1931, pp.33-48).

20 Leshchinsky regularly praised German Jews for having initiated such a process in the 19th century, when pioneering the immigration movement toward America (Leshchinsky, 1929a, p.54; Leshchinsky, 1932, pp.42-43). As acknowledged Leshchinsky himself in 1933, when reflecting on his early works, he remained faithful during his whole career to the “emigration doctrine” (*emigratsie gedank*), i.e. to the idea that leaving Europe was the sole solution for Jewish socio-economic problems (Leshchinsky, 1933a, p.12). This was indeed clearly stated in his early publications (e.g., Leshchinsky, 1906, p.10; Leshchinsky, 1911d) as well as in his last ones (see in particular the conclusion of *Nudei Israel*, literally *Wandering Israel*, Leshchinsky, 1945, pp.153-154).

these “socialist” fantasies is one and the same. His name is hunger. [...] even if they amounted to 99 % of society they would not be able to realize the socialist ideal [...] because the sociopolitical environment in which Chaim Chaikin lives is weak, insignificant, and of little value” (Leshchinsky, 1906, pp.4-5).²¹

Leshchinsky also uses the word *Lumpenproletarian* in various contexts when speaking of the “reserve army” of unemployed and underemployed Jewish workers (Leshchinsky, 1906, p.9; 1907, p.15, p.30). We find only one occurrence in later works (Leshchinsky, 1926, p.69). Leshchinsky's use of the designation *Lumpenproletariat* should come as no surprises. Contrary to the vast majority of German Zionists, Leshchinsky was indeed a committed Marxist, at least from an intellectual and theoretical perspective. He remained faithful to material historical explanations, and stuck to the idea that proletariat and the large industry were the major driving forces of economic modernity.

The Marxist concept of *Lumpenproletarian* seems also both 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*, *Lumpengesindel*, *Lumpenpack*, *Lumpenvolk*; Bussar, 1987, p.679).²² Both *Luftmentsh* and *Lumpenproletarian* appear frequently in loose enumerations (Bourdin, 2013, p.43; Thoburn, 2002, p.439), as did Marx famously in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* to refer to “the whole of the nebulous, disintegrated mass, scattered hither and thither, which the French call *la bohème*”.²³

From a conceptual perspective, this idea of “la bohème” strongly reminds the “airy” livelihood. In its modern sense, *la bohème* refers to someone living on the margins, without rules and not caring for the next day.²⁴ There is another interesting association between the German *Lump*, which means rag, tatter and *shmates*, the Yiddish for rag, old unworthy pieces of clothing, which were seen as central and symbolic attributes of *Luftmentshn*.²⁵ Dealing with *shmates* – and other miserable items such as herring- was seen as typical “air-businesses”, and therefore as both real and symbolic attributes of *Luftmentshn*. Leshchinsky for instance, when describing the young

²¹The page numbers in this quote points to the original Yiddish version of the book, but we borrowed Robert Brym's English translation.

²²This definition of *Lump* is taken from Theodor Heinsius's German dictionary of 1818 (the year of Marx's birth), quoted in Bussard, 1987, p.679.

²³Quoted in Thoburn, 2002, p.439.

²⁴It should be noted though that according to Hal Draper, *la bohème* was still understood in the 1840s-1850s in its original sense of villains, wrongdoers. Yet Raymond Huard suggests that the word might have already another (modern) meaning in Marx (Huard, 1988, p.12).

²⁵Draper (1972) suggests nonetheless that the original root is *Lump* meaning “knave”, and not *Lumpen* meaning “rag” and “tatter”.

generation of Jews in Vilna in 1933a, 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 (*shmates-parnose*)” (Leshchinsky, 1933a, p.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 an unproductive class.²⁶ Hence Bussard's description of the *Lumpenproletariat* as “parasitical group [which] was largely the remains of older, obsolete stages of social development” (Bussard, 1987, p.677) could also apply to *Luftmentshn*. Last but not least, Marx related the *Lumpenproletariat* to the idea of financial speculation, the ability of lease and borrow money (Huard, 1988, p.13), which relates to the Menahem-Mendl character.

The word *Lumpenproletarian* conveys nonetheless purely negative connotations, at least in Marx's usages of that term. The *Lumpenproletariat* can play no positive roles in history, because it has no class-consciousness, and is always prone to reaction (Bussard, 1987, p.677 ; Thoburn, 2002, p.444). Robert Bussard convincingly 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, p.688). This is an important difference with the notion of *Luftmentsh*. Unlike the *Lumpenproletarian* who does not belong to the real proletariat, a *Luftmentsh* remains a *mentsh*, i.e. in Yiddish an honorable person, a person to be respected.²⁷ It is therefore significant that Leshchinsky, despite his Marxist framing, did not use the designation *Lumpenproletarian* more often, beside the very few occurrences that we identified. It is true that the word *Luftmentsh* is, as Dara Horn points out, “considerably closer to insult than compliment” (Horn, 2008). There is no doubt that Leshchinsky understood this expression in a pejorative manner. Yet we have seen that its general meaning was highly ambivalent and complex. More importantly, Leshchinsky's attitudes toward *Luftmentshn* was not reducible to pure contempt, which was indeed sometimes typical of previous and contemporaries social reformers, enlightened Jews (*maskilim*) and other advocates of productivization.

²⁶Quoted in Bussard, 1987, p.675.

²⁷Dan Miron writes for instance that Fishke the Lame, hero of the eponymous novel by Mendeleyev, is a cripple but remains in the end a *mentsh*, i.e. “a decent person” (Miron, 2017).

3. The air-metaphor in the context of Leshchinsky's audience

According to Berg, Leshchinsky's discourse of “productivization” marks a radical departure from the original meaning of the word *Luftmentsh* in Yiddish literature. Yet in our opinion, this interpretation underestimates the fundamental continuity between classical Yiddish literature and Leshchinsky's discourse. Berg neglect first a basic observation: Leshchinsky regularly quoted in his writings Yiddish literature associated with the theme of *Luftmentshn*. This was for instance the case in his 1916 article in which he referred to Mendele's *Fishke the lame* (cf. supra). Leshchinsky made also frequent references to Menahem-Mendl, Sholem Aleichem's popular embodiment of the *Luftmentsh*. The reference appeared sometimes through explicit 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 productivization process changed significantly the life of “shopkeepers, merchants and other Menahem-Mendels” (Leshchinsky, 1923a, p.3; see also 1921, p.11; 1930a, p.102; 1945, pp.19-20).

It should be noted though that such designation was very ordinary: many of Sholem Aleichem's popular characters became everyday words in Yiddish (Katz, 2004, p.214). Moreover, one could think that such references were only textual embellishment, i.e. that they were not meant to convey specific literary meaning, and thereby had no influence on the content of Leshchinsky's discourse. Yet this was clearly not the case. Leshchinsky explicitly conceived images and metaphors as “distinctive mode of achieving insight”, to use McCloskey's terms, and thereby confirming the latter's claim that economic metaphors “are not ornamental” (McCloskey, 1983, p.503).

The air-metaphor in Leshchinsky's discourse fulfilled first what Besomi call a “pedagogical function”, i.e. it was intended to “convey meaning by explaining something new by means of something with which the reader is more familiar” (Besomi, 2019, p.361). When Leshchinsky referred to the popular character of Menahem-Mendl in the middle of a long and dull description of professional statistics, it was intended of course to resume, make more accessible and popularize his statistical analyses. In 1925, Leshchinsky published a book entitled “The truth about Jews in Russia”, which was made mostly of quotes from newspaper, and which contained no statistics and numbers. In the introduction, he provided a justification for what was for him -a renowned statistician- a rather unusual approach: “for the people whom this little book is intended, it would have been difficult to delve deep in statistics and numbers. But an image, that speaks to the heart, a fact, that presents itself so easily to common sense – this would certainly be much more obvious and jump out at them” (Leshchinsky, 1925c, p.8).

This pedagogical function has to be understood in the lights of the audience that Leshchinsky was addressing. On the one hand, like many Jewish statisticians, Leshchinsky aimed to reach an academic and highly-educated audience. He strove to build Jewish social science as a respected scientific field, through his activities as journal editor and head of Economic-Statistical Section of the YIVO (Vallois, 2020a). On the other hand, Leshchinsky always intended to reach simultaneously a larger and more popular audience. In the introduction of *Dos Yiddishe Folk in Tsifern* (The Jewish people in figures), one of his main contribution to Jewish demography, he claimed that the book was conceived both as a “handbook” and a “textbook”, that could be used in popular university, evening courses, high-schools, or even by those pursuing “self-education” (Leshchinsky, 1921, pp.6-7). Leshchinsky presented similarly his book on the history of Yiddish literature as a handbook and textbook; hence, as noted Leshchinsky, “the language must be popular and accessible” (Leshchinsky, 1922, p.9).

Leshchinsky reached a large and worldwide audience mainly because of his activities as an economic journalist. His long and successful career in that domain both reflected and benefited from the rise of modern Jewish press, especially in Yiddish. It is indeed in the early twentieth century that Yiddish newspaper began to appear in tsarist Russia alongside those in the state languages, and they quickly reached a very high circulation (Katz, 2004, p.284). Leshchinsky was a regular contributor to the major journals of that period. In 1908-1910, he wrote economic columns entitled “Of Jewish economic life” (*fun yiddishe ekonomishe leben*) in the newspaper *Haynt*, which was one of the two main Jewish daily newspaper and at the center of Yiddish press in Eastern Europe in general (Novershtern, 2020a). In his columns, Leshchinsky provided to his reader popular and accessible explanation about issues such as the role of conglomerates (Leshchinsky, 1908), labor legislation (Leshchinsky, 1910a) or credit institutions (Leshchinsky, 1910b). Leshchinsky had a similar column, under the title “economic reflexions” (*hashkafot kalkaliot*) in the Hebrew journal *Ha-olam* from 1911 on. But Leshchinsky's fame as a journalist came mostly from his writings in *The Forward* (*Forverts*). Founded in 1897 in New York, *The Forward* was the “largest Jewish newspaper in the world for many years”, reaching a daily circulation close to 300,000 in the 1920's-1930's (Novershtern, 2020a). Leshchinsky was a regular and paid contributor to *The Forward* from 1921 until 1956. As a special correspondent in Berlin, he was informing the American Jewish readership about the economic and social situation in Europe, thereby reaching a worldwide audience.

The social context of Leshchinsky's discourse matters because it shows that economic journalists like Leshchinsky and Yiddish writers actually shared a very similar and popular audience. Poets, novelists on the one hand, and journalists, statisticians and social scientists on the

other hand were frequently writing in the same journals. This is particularly true when considering the three authors who are usually regarded as the “triumvirate of great writers” in Yiddish literature, i.e. Mendele Moykher Sforim, Yitshok Leybush Peretz, and Sholem Aleichem (Katz, 2004, p.240; Miron, 1995). These three authors reached critical mass in popular perception in the 1890s, and publishing popular pieces in Hebrew or Yiddish in the 1900s related always one way or another to them. Leshchinsky's first work for instance, *Statistics of a small town*, was published in the Hebrew journal *Ha-Shiloah*, in which Mendele regularly contributed (Leshchinsky, 1903). Leshchinsky then wrote in Peretz's Yiddish-language *Yidishe bibliotek* (Jewish library) his influential *Jews in London* (Estraikh, 2007, pp.218-219).

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, p.214). Aleichem published in particular in *Haynt* the second series of Menahem-Mendl letters (and other novels). In concrete terms, the reader of *Haynt* could read on page 2 of his journal Leshchinsky's weekly economic column, and the next day on the same page, an 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, 1911c). Leshchinsky's above mentioned 1916 article was published originally in *Yidishe Velt*, which offered selections by Peretz, Mendele and Sholem Aleichem (Baker, 2010). As a general rule, Yiddish newspapers in which Leshchinsky was a contributor included poems, literary criticisms, “belles lettres”, but also ethnography, economic analysis as well as journalistic reports. This was notably the case of *The Forward*.

This proximity between Leshchinsky and popular Yiddish writers is further documented by the former's 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 Hofshteyn, Der Nister.²⁸ For most of these authors, there was no clear-cut distinction between journalism and other literary activities. Tsharni for instance was a poet and a journalist ; Bergelson and Asch were known as Yiddish writers but also contributed to *The Forward* in the 1920s-1930s, at the same period as Leshchinsky's. Liessin and Niger wrote their own pieces but were mostly known as influential literary critics and editors of reviews, in which Leshchinsky also contributed. Interestingly, this small circle of writers, editors, journalists, poets also interacted with Chagall, who

28 YIVO Archive. Papers of Jacob Lestschinsky, RG 339, Box 1 Folder 2 (Asch), Folder 7 (Bergelson), Folder 19 (Hofshteyn), Folder 30 (Tsharni), Box 2 Folder 39 (Liessin), Folder 45 (Niger, Der Nister).

was close to Leshchinsky.²⁹³⁰

This particular status as journalist was dictated by circumstances. Most Yiddish writers at the time had no choice but to get a livelihood from journalism (Harshav, 1990, p.165). Similarly, many Jewish social scientists could not obtain academic positions and worked for the press, philanthropic organizations, or as journalists, doctors, lawyers (Vallois, 2020a). One could therefore argue that Leshchinsky's use of the air-metaphor was artificially constrained by his specific readership, and that he could have written otherwise if he had not been forced to work as a journalist. As note Arjo Klammer and Thomas Leonard, pedagogical metaphors “simply serve to illuminate and clarify an exposition and could be omitted without affecting the argumentation as such” (Klammer and Leonard, 1994, p.31). Writers' choices of economic metaphors are influenced by their intended readership, and a narrower range of metaphors is to be found in economic academic corpus than in economic journalism, because writers of research articles and journalism have to assume different levels of understanding in their audience (Skorczynska and Deignan, 2006).

Yet Leshchinsky never not consider the different levels of understanding in his readership as an external constraint on his writings. He constantly viewed his activity as an essayist not only as a way to reach the masses, but also as a basis for his scientific works (Kressel, 1961; Manor, 1961, p.221; Estraiikh, 2007). Leshchinsky used images and metaphors not only to popularize and make his own discourse more accessible, but also treated them as useful resources for economic analysis. This relates to his conception of Yiddish literature 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 economic mentality had been characterized as a “middleman-ish inheritance” (*farmitler yerushe*). This mentality had provided the main material of Yiddish literature, according to Leshchinsky. He distinguished three main periods in the history of Yiddish literature: the golden age of this mentality, as exemplified by Mendele; its downfall, illustrated by Sholem Aleichem; and lastly the apparition of new social classes (Leshchinsky, 1921, pp.18-24).

From this naturalistic perspective, literature could be an important source for economists

29 Chagall illustrated some of these writers' stories and poems, in particular Hofshiteyn's 1922 collection *Troyer*, and Der Nister's 1917 *A mayse mit a hon; dos tsigele* (A Story with a Rooster; the Goat ; Estraiikh, 2010).

30 Leshchinsky seems to have been particularly close to Chagall within this journalistic and artistic intelligentsia, as suggests the following anecdote. In 1939, Chagall wrote a letter to Leshchinsky, in which he complained about Liesin, then editor of the review *Tsukunft*. Chagall had previously agree to send illustrative sketches to be published in *Tsukunft*, but Liesin then refused to send the original back to Chagall after the publication, as they had agreed (according to Chagall). Chagall asked Leshchinsky to intervene on his behalf, as he was close to Liesin (Chagall to Leshchinsky, 1939, YIVO Archive. Papers of Jacob Lestschinsky, RG 339, Box 3 Folder 72).

and social scientists. References to fictional characters such as Menahem-Mendl fulfilled what Besomi calls a “heuristic function”, i.e. allowed to understand “an object by means of a comparison with another, or the transference of a selected set of properties from an object to another” (Besomi, 2019, p.361). In this sense, the air-metaphor operated a transfer from literary portraits to statistical and economic analysis of poverty.

The air-metaphor performed a rhetorical function too, here not in the exact sense of Besomi as in “persuading the reader by reference to a better established science” (Besomi, 2019, p.361). In our case, the external reference was indeed not exactly a “better established science” but popular literature. Yet Leshchinsky used Yiddish literature to appeal and persuade his large and worldwide audience, and especially to bring his North-American readership (which essentially consisted of Eastern European immigrants) closer to its European counterpart. As Leshchinsky argued himself in his late career, Yiddish literature had played a decisive role in the first part of the 20th century in maintaining a sense of belonging to the “old country”, i.e. Eastern Europe, among Jewish immigrants, and therefore a sense of unity between American and Eastern European Jews (Leshchinsky, 1955, pp.193-212). This was especially important in his activities of special correspondent in Europe for *The Forward*. In many of his articles in that journal, Leshchinsky urged his American audience to worry about the desperate socio-economic situations of their European “brothers” and call for their active implication (e.g., Leshchinsky, 1930a, p.200, p.212; 1933a, p.100-101).

As wrote his biographer, Leshchinsky was not only a scientist, but also an author describing the economic dire straits of the Jews with “lively images, that speak to the heart” (Manor, 1961, p.162). Because of this strong affective component, it seems inappropriate to read Leshchinsky's discourse as a mere application of the productivization *topos* on *Luftmentshn*.

4. Economics as statistical storytelling: the epistemological function of the air-metaphor

We have analyzed thus far the air-metaphor in Leshchinsky's writings, but it would have been more accurate to speak of a “metaphor of metaphor”. A metaphor involves indeed three terms: the source, which is “the object to which the metaphor or analogy originally refers”; the target, “the object to which the comparison is applied”, and the “*tertium comparationis*”, i.e. the restricted “properties of source [which] are transferred or compared to the target” (Besomi, 2019, p.367). When Sholem Aleichem described for instance Menahem-Mendl as a *Luftmentshn*, the source is “air”, the target is Aleichem's fictitious character, and the relevant properties of air that are

transferred to Menahem-Mendl are the ideas of instability, floating, unworthiness, and so forth. The case is different when Leshchinsky wrote, for example, that the number of “Menahem-Mendls” and other *Luftmentshn* is declining, while commenting occupational statistics. Here the metaphor does not directly operate a transfer with “air” as a source, but is actually built on the previous one. As suggests the use of “Menahem-Mendl” as a substantive, Leshchinsky transferred some properties of Aleichem's character (e.g., lack of professional stability, attraction to financial speculation, migration toward large cities) to the statistical category of unemployed or poor Jews. In other words, Leshchinsky used deliberately and explicitly literature as a source to elaborate his own economic metaphors and discourse.

This is important, because McCloskey's claim that economics is “a literary genre” and that economists use “literary devices” has long been controversial (McCloskey, 1984, p.105; 1983, p.499). As notes Lukasz Hardt, “if one stresses the role of metaphors in [...] economics, then one is often accused of promoting [...] the idea that economics is just storytelling devoid of any attempts to discover the real workings of the socio-economic world” (Hardt, 2014, p.256). Literary metaphors are usually regarded as inappropriate ideas in economics (Henderson, 1994, p.361), and Lagueux, for instance, opposes McCloskey's rhetorical analysis on the ground that most metaphors in economics are “dead metaphors”, i.e. lost their literal sense and are no longer read as metaphors (Lagueux, 1999, cf. *supra*). McCloskey herself admits that economists are rarely aware of their own rhetoric and that very few “recognize the metaphorical saturation of economic theories thought to be quite literal” (McCloskey, 1984, p.110).

Things are much different in our case study. Speaking of Jewish paupers as “Menahem-Mendls” entails the explicit and deliberate recognition of the fact that one's own discourse is built on metaphors. More than that, Leshchinsky himself conceived his economic and statistical writings, at least partially, as a form of storytelling and literature. As seen earlier, Leshchinsky regarded Yiddish literature as a form of ethnographic documentation on Jewish economic history (Leshchinsky, 1921); conversely, he saw his own surveys and statistical reports as belonging to the same genre. This conception often took the form of portraits gallery of individuals he met in real life, during his travels, news reports and social surveys. These galleries were inserted between chapters of quantitative analysis, to give more “flesh” to statistics, for example in the tenth chapter of Leshchinsky's 1931 book on “The economic situation of the Jews in Poland”. In this chapter, Leshchinsky wrote a series of individual portraits of Jewish workers in Bialystok's garment industry (Leshchinsky, 1931, pp.83-96). There, he frequently relied on a flowery and evaluative language, and ended up providing picturesque and folkloric portraits, that could almost belong to a Sholem

Aleichem's novel.³¹

These stories usually came from his direct contacts with the residents. As a social scientist, Leshchinsky did not give much details on his methods for running interviews. He expanded much more though about his own perception of the reported events or interviews, often in an emotive and affective tone. For example, in the beginning of a chapter entitled “Jews fainting from hunger in the streets” Leshchinsky confessed that his encountering with a crying beggar in Warshaw kept haunting him at night, and became in his imagination a “symbolic image of Polish Jewry” (Leshchinsky, 1933a, pp.72). This resulted in a classical literary device, in which the third narrator (Leshchinsky as the economist, the journalist) depicts himself as a first narrator (the eye-witness, the interviewer) who is involved in the story.³²

If writing economics and statistics involved a form of story-telling, Leshchinsky nonetheless considered that his descriptions and stories brought directly unbiased evidence and plain truth. In his portrait of an immigrant and former small shopkeeper from Vitebsk, Leshchinsky merely mentioned that he reported the discussion he had “almost word for word, almost totally in his language”, and that he changed some individual names of the protagonists. In a somewhat naturalistic perspective, Leshchinsky considered that truth, evidence came naturally from the interviewee's testimony: “immigrants told [their story] in a simple manner [...] and it comes out of it an image, that reads a lot more clearly and precisely than a thick book” (Leshchinsky, 1920, pp.217-218).

He therefore viewed his “storytelling” as a realistic one. This idea was of course not entirely new. Leshchinsky's “realistic” or “statistical” storytelling belong to a long and old tradition of travelogues and social surveys on poverty. Leshchinsky was influenced by and explicitly referred to the works of explorers such as Benjamin II (Leshchinsky, 1929, p.18 and 61; 1932, p.47), and social investigators such as Charles Booth (Leshchinsky, 1907, pp.10-20), Beatrice Webb (Leshchinsky, 1907, p.17), Andrei Subotin (1931, p.85; [1950] 1960, p.141).³³

This latter influence is important because it is indicative of the proximity between Leshchinsky's writings and Yiddish literature. Subotin was an economist who published in 1888 and 1890 two volumes about Jewish poverty in the Russian Pale of Settlement. Leshchinsky's first publication about his hometown was clearly inspired by Subotin's methods.³⁴ It is interesting to note

31 See for instance his long description of a “64 years old weaver, with a beautiful patialistic beard”, who “still now mumbles a *posek* [verse] or a *memre* [Talmudic aphorism]” (Leshchinsky, 1931, pp.87-88)”

32 Leshchinsky frequently used this device to emphasize the severity of the Jews economic situation: “I have been several times in Poland for the past few years, and [...] I had never seen so much despair and sadness” (Leshchinsky, 1933a, p.72).

33 Benjamin II (1818-1864), originally Israel Joseph Benjamin, was a Romanian traveler. Leshchinsky quoted his travelogue in the US, which was published in 1862 (on Benjamin II, see Berenbaum and Skolnik, 2007).

34 On Subotin's influence on Leshchinsky, see Alroey, 2006, pp.267-269, and p.277.

that Subotin's research were funded by Jan Bloch, a wealthy industrialist, who established a statistical bureau to investigate the socio-economic conditions of Jews the Russian Empire (Polonsky, 2010). The very same Bloch hired the Yiddish writer Peretz to participate to one of his statistical research team in 1890 (Wisse, 2002, p.19). The expedition was a failure, and the research never came out.³⁵ Peretz wrote his “impressions of this journey” shortly after. In the famous letter 12 of that novel, Peretz told his encountering -as a statistician- with an authentic *Luftmentsh* named Leyvi-Yitskhok:

““What is your business?”
"Who has a business?"
"Then how do you live?"
"Oh, is that what you mean? I manage to live, that's all."
"From what?"
"From the good Lord's bounty. When He gives, people have enough to get by."
"God doesn't throw an income down from heaven."
"Yes He does! How should I know where my living comes from?"
[...]
After breakfast I go to the marketplace."
[...]
"Which means that you're a middleman?"
"Is that what I am? Sometimes the chance will come my way, and then I'll buy a little grain for resale." [...]
"And when you haven't?"
"Then I try to get it."
"How?"
"What do you mean, 'how?'” (Peretz [1891] 1920, pp.25-26)³⁶.

An hour later, Peretz finally found out that this Leyvi-Yitskhok is “something of an associate rabbi and arbitrator, a bit of a middleman, in part a merchant, fractionally a marriage broker, and even, sometimes, when the occasion arises, a traveling agent or courier” (Peretz [1891] 1920, pp.25-26). From such absurd discussions with Jewish paupers, Peretz-the-narrator concludes on the absurdity of his statistical inquiry: “statistical science toys with inane numbers” (Peretz [1891] 1920, p.69). As suggests Marc Caplan in his interpretation of letter 12, “the object of satire is [...] turned *not* against the *shtetl*, the extreme poverty which is reflected both in Lyvi-Yitskhok's itinerant work habits and in the punchline of the episode [...], but against the narrator's efforts to measure the *shtetl*'s poverty in statistical scientific terms” (Caplan, 2007, pp.75-76).

Leshchinsky's first published work, *Statistics of a small town*, looked actually quite similar

35 Actually the research was published in Russian shortly after but almost all the copies were destroyed in a fire (Alroey, 2006, p.267).

36 We borrow here the English translation from Wisse, 2002, pp.51-52.

to Peretz's statistical research project. In this monograph, Leshchinsky analyzed and provided statistics about Jewish socioeconomic life in his hometown of Horodihche (now in Ukraine). The opening line of this article sounds much like an echo to Peretz's failure as a statistician: "some wise men refuse any scientific value to statistics, on the ground that it is impossible to get all the answers from the interviewees" (Leshchinsky, 1903, p.18).

Yet unlike Peretz, Leshchinsky argued in favor of statistical inquiries and defend their scientific value on the basis of two related arguments. The numbers brought in this monograph are significant, claimed Leshchinsky, firstly because they describe "typical" cases, and as such, they can be generalized. Horodihche allowed for such a generalization because this town was very similar to a large number of similar cities in South Russia, and therefore its study "will unquestionably do much for our understanding of our people's condition in general" (Leshchinsky [1903] 1960, p.17).³⁷ Leshchinsky invoked regularly this argument in his writings. When bringing for instance individual cases of professional discrimination or business bankruptcies, he claimed that "these are typical phenomena, which repeat themselves from towns to towns, *shtetls* to *shtetls*" (Leshchinsky, 1933a, p.114).

Leshchinsky's second argument in favor of "statistical storytelling" was his deep local knowledge and field experience. This knowledge came sometimes from direct and personal relationships, as it had been the case in his monograph about his hometown: "living in the city for many years helped us a lot" (Leshchinsky [1903] 1960, p.17), and he sometimes mentions that he was personally acquainted with some of the interviewees (e.g., a 10 years old girl, p.23). Similarly, Leshchinsky sometimes used his personal relationship to provide representative case-studies, for instance when describing the activity of a hat shop in Warsaw in which he used to buy merchandises with his relatives (Leshchinsky, 1933a, p.96). More generally, Leshchinsky's field experience came from his numerous travels, that he did continuously during his long career to collect empirical data and write journalistic reports. Between 1897 and 1916, he visited more than 51 Jewish communities, amounting to circa a million individuals (Manor, 1961, pp.119-120).

Leshchinsky can therefore be regarded as a "positivist" inheritor of Peretz's famous *Impression of a journey through the Tomaszow region*. Though he took a different path than Peretz, Leshchinsky saw no definitive boundaries between his own works and "belles lettres", i.e. writing stories and fictions about Jewish economic life. In this sense, the air-metaphor fulfilled an "epistemological function", "by transferring to one process the kind of explanations governing another one" (Besomi, 2019, p.361), i.e. by describing economic phenomena with literary

³⁷ We borrow here the English translation from Alroey, 2007, p.277.

descriptions.

This interpretation is further supported by one of Leshchinsky's chapter entitled "A day in the Old market", that appeared in two of his books (Leshchinsky, 1933a, pp.141-150; 1931a, pp.63-70). This chapter was one of his boldest attempt to write economics as a form of literature, and it was precisely inspired by *A Night in the Old Market*, a symbolist and dark play by Peretz, which takes place at night in a typical marketplace of a *shtetl*. Leshchinsky recalled from this play "a scene in the cemetery with zombies wandering around, chasing each other, jumping over each other", catching something in the air, disappearing..." and claimed that this particular scene reminded him the "air-figures" that he saw "after spending some time in a market in one of the Jewish cities—in Warsaw, Vilna, Bialystok, or Lemberg" (Leshchinsky, 1931a, p.64-65). Leshchinsky then described in details the "poisoned" atmosphere in these markets, and further draw portraits of people in desperate situations. The chapter ends up with a long enumeration of these air-figures, who are said to intoxicate the young generation:

"this social junk, not only social, but also physical, spiritual, moral [...] represents one eighth of Jewish population in large cities! These widows, orphans, old people, thrown-out craftsmen, unemployed without perspectives, physically, mentally and morally cripples, unmarried women, half-idiot young men, homeless from war, impoverished and running out of small towns, victims of physical and economic antisemitism – all this multitude, that flows from the center of the village toward its gutters, which are called "market" [...] is not only a heavy burden for the whole Jewish community, but presents itself as a dangerous and contagious center, that attracts toward him a large number of sane elements, that poisons the atmosphere, in which will grow up a young generation, which contaminate the neighboring social element with the market drug (*mark sam*) and poison of the trade fair" (Leshchinsky, 1931a, p.64-65)

The air-metaphor is here implicitly present through the theme of decay, rottenness, and the "poisoned atmosphere". The chapter begins with a long description of the "pogrom atmosphere", the intoxicating air, in which "the deeper one goes [...] the more difficult it is to breathe [*otemen*]" . This theme of decays and scum also reminds the images associated with *Lumpenproletarians*: figures are referred to as "rag people" (*shmates-mentshn*; Leshchinsky, 1931a, p.65). In the end, this description includes some form of contempt for pauper, especially through the accusation of "poisoning the youth". Yet what is also important in this text is that Leshchinsky intended to provide simultaneously a basic yet effective representation of Jewish poverty -through his estimate of "one eighth" of paupers in the Jewish population- and some kind of literary contribution. There was clearly no romanticization of poverty here: but such a vision of despair, such a social nightmare

is also to be found in Peretz's piece, and this text does entail a form of “aestheticization” of poverty, thereby confirming that Leshchinsky considered his statistical writings as a literary genre.

5. The *Luftmentsh* as a figure of Jewish masculinity

The word *Luftmentsh* in Leshchinsky's discourse was not a dead metaphor, in the sense that it did not provide a stabilized and fixed definition of Jewish poverty. The air-metaphor and its attributes entailed much more complex and fluctuating meanings. As notes Henderson, metaphors are “not a complete mapping of one domain of language upon another”, unlike synonyms or definitions; on the contrary, “useful metaphors extend meanings” (Henderson, 1994, pp.362-363). We have seen how Leshchinsky built on such extensions, for instance through the theme of the “intoxicating atmosphere” and the air-figures of his Peretz-inspired scene at the local market.

Yet economic metaphors cannot extend in any direction. The metaphorical transfer has to be selective to be meaningful, and the author shall suppress aspects that are not or less relevant (Besomi, 2019, p.18). In the air-metaphor, the language already provides a constraint on the metaphorical transfer, and more precisely on the target of the metaphor (Jewish poverty). Obviously, the word *Luftmentsh* comes from Yiddish, thereby suggesting that the metaphor does not apply to any kind of Jewish poverty, but specifically to Jewish paupers from Eastern Europe. Such a restriction on the metaphor's target corresponds indeed to Leshchinsky's intended meaning. A repeated claims in his writings was that the “airy mentality” responsible for *Luftmentsh-hood* was a specific character of Eastern European Jews, and that Eastern and Western European Jewry shall be understood as two separate socio-cultural units (e.g., Leshchinsky, 1926, p.16; 1912b, pp.8-9; 1925b, p.81). As for Jews living outside Europe, for instance in North Africa, they were according to Leshchinsky “very much remote in all respects from European Jews – with regards to the language, the general cultural condition, or the economic situation” (Leshchinsky, 1922, p.172).

However, a “complete mapping” of the metaphor is impossible, and authors cannot eliminate every single non-relevant properties. This is the danger of metaphors: they might entail ideas that are not intended by their authors (Besomi, 2019, p.17). This concerns in particular the idea of “groundlessness” (*Bodenlosigkeit*) in the case of the air-metaphor. As seen in the first section, *Bodenlosigkeit* was a major semantic component associated with the word *Luftmentsch* in Nordau's discourse. From Nordau's perspective, *Luftmenschen* were groundless, in the sense of lacking both a land of their own, and significant involvement in agricultural works. Therefore “productivization” along Zionist lines implied an occupational shift toward agriculture and the

building of a Jewish State.

It would be beyond the scope of this article to delve into Leshchinsky's attitude toward Zionism.³⁸ It is sufficient to note here that Leshchinsky had constantly been very skeptical and critical -if not opposed- toward agricultural colonization as an effective scheme for the “productivization” of *Luftmentshn*, contrary to many of his contemporaries. Whether it had been proposed as an economic and political solution in the past, in the present or for the future, in Germany, Russia or Argentina, Leshchinsky regarded projects of agricultural colonization as strictly inadequate from a purely quantitative perspective: opportunities in agriculture were too few, and could not provide livelihood for hundreds of thousands of *Luftmentshn* and their families (Leshchinsky, 1925c, p.47, pp.63-64; 1950, p.127). There were not enough available lands (Leshchinsky, 1930a, pp.155-166, pp.239-248; 1932, pp.37-38); most Jewish workers had no experience with agriculture, and though professional training was not impossible, it was an extremely slow process (Leshchinsky, 1930a, p.162, p.196). More importantly, from Leshchinsky's Marxist perspective, agrarianism was an absurd ideology, “a really strange phenomenon”: turning to agriculture meant moving in the opposite direction of economic development, which “drove millions from villages to big cities, from agriculture toward urban occupations” (Leshchinsky, 1950, p.130).

In an article entitled “can [agricultural] colonization save the Jews?”, Leshchinsky brought an essentially negative conclusion to this question. Interestingly, he noted nonetheless at the end of the article that colonization might be marginally worthy, if it “could transform a few thousands small shopkeepers and *Luftmentshn* into agricultural workers, [literally] grounded-men (*bodnmentshn*)” (Leshchinsky [1924] 1930a, p.248). This quote shows clearly how the air-metaphor in some sense “betrayed” Leshchinsky's own conception: though he opposed the ideology of agricultural shift, his use of the derivative expression “grounded men” actually implies a passive endorsement of that ideology.

In this sense, the metaphor produces confusion on the author's exact intents and thoughts. But such lack of clarity provides opportunities for interpretations: as note Besomi, “for the historian of ideas this ambivalence is of great interest, for often the set of properties that are (or are not) transferred refers to matters at the core of one's beliefs [...]. Therefore the analysis of metaphorical transfers can help in recognizing hidden assumptions or postulates” (Besomi, 2019, p.17). As far as the air-metaphor is concerned, an important hidden assumption concerns the gender of the *Luftmentsh*. At first sight, it could be said that the figure of the *Luftmentsh* has no gender. According to Leshchinsky, the “air-mentality” was a general feature of Jewish economic life, and he did not

38 On this matter, see Alroey, 2006.

state that it was specifically masculine. In Yiddish, *mentsh* means “man”, which can be understood in the universal sense of “human being”.

Yet of course “man” is not a gender-neutral designation, even it is intended to refer to men and women. It is also further significant that, to my knowledge, the expressions “*Luftfroy*” or “*Luftvayb*”, i.e. literally “air-women”, do not exist. As argues Dara Horn, “a *luftmentsh* is always a man”. According to Horn, the masculine character of *Luftmentshn* results 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”, and therefore “women were expected both to work outside the home and to raise the children so as to allow their husbands the ability to pursue a life of studying Torah”. Jewish men were able to conduct an air-life because they had “grounded wives” who support them: “their intellectual gifts [were] entirely subsidized, both financially and personally, by their wives” (Horn, 2008).

Women's employment was indeed a common feature of Jewish economic life in Eastern Europe, and a crucial component of household income (Hyman, 1955; Glenn, 1991, pp.8-49). These economic underpinnings are reflected in the main popular embodiments of *Luftmentshn* in the Yiddish literature, which were mostly men. The best example is Sholem Aleichem's *Menahem-Mendl*. This novel is structured with a very much gendered opposition between the “airy” character of Menahem-Mendl and his firmly “grounded” wife Sheyne-Shendl.

Leshchinsky also viewed *Luftmentshn* as a masculine phenomenon, even though this assumption was “hidden”, i.e. implicit. A first justification for this interpretation comes from his conception of women's employment. Leshchinsky's reflections on that matter were not particularly original, and reflected many commonplaces that were to be found in early 20th century Jewish statistics (Vallois, 2020a). 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: “women's participation to industry is one of the deepest signs of the economic revolution to come” (Leshchinsky, 1903, p.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, p.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 resulted in extremely low wages for men and terrible socio-economic conditions (Leshchinsky, 1906, 1907). Leshchinsky also regarded the relatively more feminine character of Jewish immigration as a

collective burden: the typical Jewish emigrant 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). 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, 1930a, p.22, 1925a, p.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, 2020a). In an article on the Jews in Germany, Leshchinsky argued that demographic growth and “all these virtues of family life, in which children of Israel have excelled for such a long time, largely depend upon the role of the Jewish woman”. A major cause of Jewish demographic decline in Germany was therefore the fact that “the Jewish woman has to participate to the economic struggle for life [...]. There is no doubt that the Jewish woman is responsible for a large part of this sin” (Leshchinsky, 1912c, p.5).

Blaming women's morality and employment for demographic decline was very common in Jewish social science at the time, especially in the writings of such authors as Arthur Ruppin or Felix Theilhaber (Hart, 2000; Vallois, 2020a). It would be difficult and probably meaningless to determine whether Leshchinsky had more or less misogynist views on the subject. What seems specific to Leshchinsky is actually that he did not say much on the topic as a statistician and a demograph, as if the subject itself did not interest him much (relatively to other Jewish statisticians). In his 1932 *The economic fate of German Jewry* for instance, Leshchinsky dedicated only a very small chapter to the issue of “the Jewish woman in economic life”, in which he provided mostly a few descriptive statistics, without commenting much the observed tendencies (Leshchinsky, 1932, pp.132-139).

Leshchinsky had fragmented and non-coherent views on women's employment, but what matters for us is that he saw the subject as entirely different from the one of men's employment. Both Jewish men and women needed to be “productivized”, yet this objective raised separate issues and problems. While men were said to suffer from their “airy” mentality, their excessive intellectual activities, Jewish women were regarded as insufficiently trained and educated., at a very basic level. The first step of social reform for women, argued Leshchinsky in his study of his hometown, was to provide an elementary school education for girls, since the *kheder* (traditional school) was for boys only (Leshchinsky, 1903, p.34).

Even though he mostly spoke of the Jewish workers *in general*, Leshchinsky implicitly considered that workers were men, and women a very special and marginal case. This suggests that he also regarded the *Luftmentsh* as a male character. This interpretation has two important

consequences. First, the *Luftmentsh* shall be conceived 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, p.75 and 80). Jewish masculinity refers to the historical models for Jewish men. 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, p.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 essentially 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. Simultaneously repulsive and attractive, the *Luftmentsh* provided a perfect identification model. In any case, it remained a model identification for men.³⁹ This gendered aspect of the metaphor has also a consequence for Leshchinsky himself. It can be hypothesized that his conception of the *Luftmentsh* came from a self-projection of his own character or that, conversely, he internalized this model of Jewish masculinity. His life and works can indeed be interpreted as attempts to both identify and escape from this anti-model. Born and raised in a traditional religious environment in his Ukrainian *shtetl*, Leshchinsky was the son of a small shopkeeper. His youth was dedicated to religious studies and helping his father at his shop (Estraikh, 2007, pp.216-217 ; Alroey, 2006, p.276 ; Manor, 1961, p.39). It is highly probable that his family's business was very fragile. In his own description of commercial activities in his hometown, Leshchinsky observed that out of 438 families, only 32 earned a significant incomes, and the rest were in the process of being proletarianized, i.e. forced to leave their small stores (Leshchinsky, 1903, p.24-25), thereby corresponding to Hersch's definition of *Luftmentshn* as petty traders who had been forced to leave their commercial activities (cf. supra).

In 1896, at the age of 20, Leshchinsky left his family, literally in the middle of the night, and went to Odessa. There he lived in poverty while completing his (secular) education. Later on, he

39 Interestingly, Leshchinsky included a woman in his gallery of “air-figures”, inspired by Peretz's night scene at the local market. This woman was a widow with five small children, who could not pay the tax for her small shop, and was therefore threaten to lose her only source of income. Yet in this portrait, the real air-individual was not the poor mother, but her dead husband : “already during his lifetime, she provided the main source of income, because the man studied Torak and taught a little, but earned not much”. Leshchinsky wrote ironically that “he had let her with the children and with the guarantee that they will live together in 120 years in Gan Eden [...]. He is very pious and surely is [...], but the misfortune is, that she is sinful and still lives in this world with her small children” (Leshchinsky, 1931a, pp.66-67).

started his long-time career as political activist, writer, journalist, editor (Estraikh, 2007, pp.216-217 ; Manor, 1961, p.39). This personal trajectory can be read as an attempt to escape the air-livelihood of his parents, and the air-occupations that he later on described critically. Yet living from various writing activities was still a form of airy livelihood.⁴⁰ Leshchinsky's life had been constantly and highly unstable. He had been arrested and expelled many times from Russia or Germany because of his writings, and was constantly traveling from countries to countries for his research.⁴¹

Running away from an airy environment, Leshchinsky turned out to be an airy intellectual. It can be further hypothesized that this anti-model kept haunting him, and that he constantly tried to distance himself from it. He was not indeed any kind of intellectual : he chose to study “grounded” subjects, pertaining to real and daily problems of modern Jewish life, and “grounded” his analyses in statistics instead of speculative theories. It is significant to note that Leshchinsky applied the air-metaphor to his own discourse and intellectual activities, for instance when writing that “the above mentioned image shall not stay hanging in the air (*hengen in di luft*) and be considered as a writer's fantasy, and we shall therefore bring official statistics from the 1897 census” (Leshchinsky, 1955, p.174). As a social scientist, Leshchinsky was interested in empirical data, and spent indeed little time to methodological and theoretical considerations ; he also applied the theme of “productivization” to this particular endeavor : studying Jewish economic history “will be all the more productive and fertile, that the study will not begin with theoretical and conceptual systems and abstract explanations, but will collect the relevant material on Jewish economic life” (Leshchinsky, 1923b, p.37). In the end, Leshchinsky became recognized indeed as a “productive writer” (Meisel, 1926, p.610). Yet one could consider that he remained a *Luftmentsh* his whole life, because he constantly faced professional instability. In 1938, when moving from Germany to the US, he could not get a salaried job at *The Forward*, though he had a successful career as a journalist, in particular in that journal. In the last 20 years of his life, he had therefore to earn living from publishing books, lecturing, or writing for various periodicals (Estraikh, 2007, p.231).

40 Working as a writer was one of the last unsuccessful occupation that chose Menahem-Mendl, the anti-hero of Sholem Aleichem's novel, before immigrating to the US.

41 Reporting on his arrest in Nazi Germany in 1933 in *The Forward*, Leshchinsky recalled that he had already been arrested once in Berlin, ten years earlier for one of his article criticizing the government, and six times in Tsarist Russia (Leshchinsky, 1933b, p.4)

Conclusion

Leshchinsky associated the word *Luftmentsh* with a complex and ambivalent set of meanings. This complexity contradicts the interpretation of his writings as typical cases of a “productivization” rhetoric, that would have entirely erased the legacy from Yiddish literature. In Leshchinsky's writings, the air-metaphor fulfilled pedagogical function : it was part of a rhetorical strategy aimed to address his vast and popular audience. More importantly, Leshchinsky used literary metaphors in his works because he saw no clear distinction between economists, statisticians, and other writers. Literary portraits could be used as ethnographic evidence for economists (heuristic function) ; conversely, economics involved some form of story-telling (epistemological function). In doing so, Leshchinsky transferred into economic discourse many cultural representations, especially pertaining to gender, on Jewish labor. As an economist, he popularized an influential and somewhat problematic image of Jewish masculinity at work, both attractive and repulsive, apologetic and critical, self-ironical and prescriptive.

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>Sarsour, sarsourot kalkalit</i>	Haggler, Haggling economy	Hebrew	1913, <i>Ila-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>froliche 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>Yidishe Literatur</i> , 11 ; 1923, <i>Di oyfgaben</i> , 3 ; 1930, <i>Tsvishn</i> , 102 ; 1945, <i>Ndodei Israel</i> , 19-20.
<i>Farmitleray psikologie</i>	Middleman psychology	Yiddish	1921, <i>Yidishe Literatur</i> , 11.
<i>Farmitler yerushe</i>	Middleman heritage	Yiddish	1921, <i>Yidishe Literatur</i> , 11.
<i>Luftmentshelekh</i>	Small Luftmentsshn	Yiddish	1921, <i>Yidishe Literatur</i> , 16.
<i>Natsionale meklerishe neshome</i>	National-brokerish soul	Yiddish	1921, <i>Yidishe 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 shokeepers, 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 “*Luftmentsh*” metaphor

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