

ANTI-SEMITISM AND PROGRESSIVE ERA SOCIAL SCIENCE: THE CASE OF JOHN R. COMMONS

BY

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This paper explores John Commons's views toward Jews in order to assess whether his published writings contain assertions that today would be stigmatized as anti-Semitic. The evidence we provide shows that Commons's racial characterization of Jews was framed within a broad and indiscriminate xenophobic framework. With other leading Progressive Era social scientists, in fact, Commons shared the idea that the new immigration from eastern and southern Europe would increase competition in the labor market, drive down wages, and lead Anglo-Saxon men and women to have fewer children, since they would not want them to compete with those who survive on less. Within this general xenophobic context, Commons developed assertions regarding immigrant Jews that show traces of explicit anti-Semitic accusations.

I. THE ISSUE

Melvin W. Reder's 2000 paper, "The Anti-Semitism of Some Eminent Economists" (Reder 2000), had the unquestionable merit of tearing the veil of silence surrounding a topic that had (and still has) deliberately received inadequate attention by the community of historians of economic thought at large. In that article, Reder faces the question of what he defines as "ambivalent anti-Semitism" and whether it is a term that can be applied, to a different extent, to John M. Keynes, Joseph A. Schumpeter, and

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Friedrich von Hayek. Reder's contention is that all these individuals had expressed attitudes that today would be stigmatized as anti-Semitic. The adjective "ambivalent" becomes crucial for Reder's case, for it allows those people alleged to be anti-Semitic to be close to certain Jews and even to count Jews among their closest friends—as Keynes, Schumpeter, and Hayek clearly did in their professional and personal lives. In commenting upon Reder's claim and the several reactions it triggered, E. Roy Weintraub poured more oil on the fire, suggesting that Reder's proposed characterization of ambivalent anti-Semitism "could well describe many of the past intellectual 'giants' in economics" (2003, p. 686; see also Weintraub 2012).

The present writers do agree with Weintraub and feel confident enough to add a fourth name to the triumvirate of twentieth-century economists discussed by Reder: that of the leading American institutionalist John Roger Commons.¹ While one may well question whether or not Commons belongs to the Olympus of "past intellectual giants in economics," there appears to be valid reasons to review in some detail his published views towards Jews. In his recorded reminiscences, Mark Perlman—the son of Selig Perlman, Commons's celebrated student and colleague at Madison—affirms that his father was deeply irritated by what he perceived as Commons's veiled hostility towards Jews, an attitude that conditioned the course of their friendship. Mark Perlman, for instance, reports his father's embarrassment when he had to bring his parents to Greenbush, the "ghetto or Jewish section of Madison," after the collapse of their economic activity in Russia. This made him appear to his mentor not only as a Jewish immigrant with "a Yiddish accent" but, even worse, as a "poor Russian Jew rather than as an intellectual Russian Jew" (Fink 1991b, pp. 512–513). Mark Perlman also points out that two other Jewish students—William Leiserson and David Saposs—were part of Commons's inner circle, the famous "Friday nighters" who would regularly meet once a week at the Commonses' house (Fink 1991b, p. 517; see also Rutherford 2006). Both Leiserson and Saposs, however, were more "Americanized" and drawn away from religious practice than Perlman, and this made them more "acceptable" to Commons's eyes. The final rupture between Commons and Selig Perlman happened in 1931 when, at one of the usual Friday-night meetings, Commons publicly announced that Edwin Witte had been appointed his successor at Wisconsin. As Mark Perlman reports: "At that Friday night, Commons gratuitously said in my father's presence and in the presence of my father's new wife (my father had just remarried), that Witte was coming into the department as his successor because he did not want Perlman to be his successor." In the following passage, Mark Perlman cautiously (but still significantly) adds: "Now, his [Commons's] grounds for saying that, my father thought, were unadulterated anti-Semitism. I suspect that the grounds were more complex. For instance, my father had never had the public service activity life which Witte had had" (Fink 1991b, p. 521).

We are well aware that Mark Perlman's recollections about his father—as all oral history sources—must be taken *cum grano salis*. Nonetheless, they cast a somewhat dark shadow on Commons and provide a pertinent rationale for investigating whether

¹Commons, who was born in 1862, was considerably older than Keynes, Schumpeter, and Hayek, and may be properly defined as a "turn-of-the-century" rather than a twentieth-century economist. It should be taken into consideration, however, that his major writings, including the ones under scrutiny in this article, appeared during the first decades of the last century.

Commons's putative anti-Semitism was to some extent also reflected in his published writings. The aim of this paper is to accomplish this task. It is important to point out from the outset that our scrutiny of Commons's views is based here only on two sources: a "Special Report on Immigration and Its Economic Effects" drafted for the Industrial Commission in 1901, and a series of articles published in 1903–04 in the *Chautauquan* magazine under the title "Racial Composition of American People," later published in slightly altered form as *Races and Immigrants in America* (1907a). While the racist implications of these contributions have been analyzed in some detail (Cherry 1976, 1989; Leonard 2003; Ramstad and Starkey 1995), their explicit anti-Semitic character has been ignored or simply relegated to passing comments (Fink 1991a; Solomon 1972). Moreover, Yngve Ramstad and James L. Starkey—the authors who have most systematically dealt with Commons's racial theories—deliberately left Commons's report for the Industrial Commission out of the picture, on the ground that they could not find "any facts or analysis in the report specifically pertaining to the Negro 'race' or even a hint of the racial analysis he would be forwarding in 'Racial Composition'" (1995, pp. 53–54). It is our contention, instead, that Commons's report contains several ambiguous passages regarding Jews as a race and that, as far as a proper assessment of his anti-Semitic views is concerned, it should be considered as an *unicum* with his later *Chautauquan* articles.

Before launching into the discussion, a few preliminary considerations are worth making. First, in order to assess Commons's attitude toward Jews, a workable definition of "anti-Semitism" is needed. The term "anti-Semitism" is ambiguous and has been used with a variety of meanings, making it difficult to employ without a series of qualifications that cannot be discussed adequately here. A plain and rather comprehensive definition of "anti-Semitism" that can be found in the literature describes it as "an attitude of hostility toward Jews as such, i.e., not towards a particular Jew, and not towards a number of people who, apart from having an attribute that arouses hostility, also happen to be Jewish. The hostility ... must be associated definitely with the quality of being a Jew" (Carlebach 1978, p. 348). In this case, "anti-Semitism" is loosely conceptualized as hostility directed against Jews *qua* Jews and includes all forms of anti-Jewish actions and beliefs ranging from mere irritation to raging hatred. An equally comprehensive but more cogent definition—the one that will be adopted here—is provided by Helen Fein. According to Fein, "anti-Semitism" can be defined as a "persisting latent structure of hostile beliefs towards *Jews as a collectivity*, manifested in *individuals* as attitudes, and in *culture* as myth, ideology, folklore, and imagery, and in *actions*—social or legal discrimination, political mobilization against the Jew, and collective state violence—which results in or is designed to distance, displace, or destroy Jews as Jews" (Fein 1987, p. 67; emphases in original). This notion transcends the intra-individual dimension of anti-Semitism (an aspect that concerns our discussion only marginally) and emphasizes the social totality of a phobia and its multi-layered dimension. Fein's definition, in fact, reflects the insight that the phenomenon of anti-Semitism is not merely a matter of personal beliefs but involves a more complex network of "myth, ideology, folklore, and imagery," which finds expression in individual attitudes but also, and more importantly, at the cultural, and social or institutional level.

It is also worth pointing out from the outset that, although Commons remains the primary focus of this study, other Progressive Era authors will also be dealt with in

order to analyze their possible influence on Commons and to place his views concerning Jews in proper historical context. Likewise, in addition to the central theme of anti-Semitism, other related issues, mostly associated with Progressive Era debates on immigration, will be incidentally discussed or simply touched upon. As documented in a series of seminal works by Thomas C. Leonard (2003, 2005, 2009), these debates made consistent use of a hierarchical ontology of human nature in order to affirm the inherent inferiority of certain nationalities or ethnic groups. Pre-existing prejudices were bolstered by “the increasingly systematic use of a biological, deterministic discourse to explain and to remedy, often using racial categories, the root causes of economic problems, especially labor and immigration.” Cloaked in a mantle of respectable science, Progressive Era racial rhetoric was instrumental to “buttress the reformist thought and legislation that was so characteristic of the time” (Leonard 2003, p. 688). Hostility toward Jewish immigration, mostly from Russia and Poland, was part of this general discourse.

Finally, it should be noted that no attempt is made to assess the potential connection between Commons’s religious beliefs and his views towards Jews. As noted by Leonard Dinnerstein (1994, p. 58), Progressive Era anti-Semitism in large part stemmed from “the concept of racial superiority that developed out of America’s Christian heritage” along with “the idea that emphasized the responsibility of Anglo-Saxon Americans to effectuate God’s will and remake the world in its image.” In this connection, Commons described himself as a “hybrid of Quaker and Presbyterian” (1934, p. 16), and his work has been correctly associated with the Social Gospel reformist agenda (Bateman 2003). Our analysis of Commons’s writings on racial issues, however, has not revealed any direct sign of religious animosity towards Jewish (but also Catholic) immigration. Even so, of course, we cannot deny the possibility of a more indirect religious component in his ambiguous treatment of Jews.

The present paper is organized as follows: the second and third sections document Commons’s view towards Jews as presented in his investigation for the Industrial Commission and in his “Racial Composition” series, respectively; the fourth, fifth, and sixth sections discuss other views on Jewish immigration, which are to be found in the socio-economic literature of the period; the seventh section pulls together some final considerations.

II. THE INDUSTRIAL COMMISSION REPORT

In the fall of 1900, Edward Dana Durand, later Director of the US Census Bureau, asked Commons to finish for him a report on immigration and its effect on labor unionism for the US Industrial Commission.² Commons, who had been dismissed the previous year from Syracuse University, immediately accepted. To gather the necessary knowledge of the facts, Commons traveled around the country for six months, investigating first-hand the working conditions of immigrants in urban sweatshops. For this tour, as Commons states in his autobiography (1934a, pp. 68–69), he needed “an interpreter who knew economics.” He found him in Abram Bisno, a Russian Jewish immigrant

²Durand had been a student of Commons’s at Oberlin.

at the age of twelve, who “had grown up in the American sweatshops of the clothing trade.” “Bisno,” Commons states, “opened up a new world for me, not only in the life of the immigrant but also in economic theory—Karl Marx and trade unionism”(ibid.).

Commons’s investigation, “Immigration and Its Economic Effects,” was published in 1901 as part III of volume XV of the Reports of the Industrial Commission. Most of the report consisted of a detailed presentation of the facts as to who immigrated, in what numbers, and when. Its overall tone was openly hostile to immigration. In the section “General Statistics of Immigration and Foreign-Born Population,” Dana Durand adhered to Francis Walker’s (1891) famous thesis that immigration causes “race suicide,” because the poor immigrants drive down wages and the native worker responds by restricting fertility.³ “It is a hasty assumption,” he stated, “which holds that immigration during the Nineteenth Century has increased the total population” (1901, p. 277). Commons (1901, p. 304) followed Dana Durand and argued that immigration affects the level of wages in two ways: first, by “an oversupply of labor,” and, second, by “the displacement of higher standards by lower standards of living.” These claims, however, could not find any empirical support, since available data (drawn from the bulletins of the Department of Labor for the years 1870 to 1898) revealed that “immigration ... is not a leading cause affecting wages of American labor” (1901, p. 308). This led him to conclude, in a quite cautious fashion: “[i]t is possible, of course, that the presence of immigrants in large numbers may prevent wages from reaching as high a level in time of prosperity as they otherwise would reach, but this cannot, in the nature of the case, be demonstrated” (1901, p. 309).

Detailed case studies devoted to specific industries were also discussed. What mainly concerns us here is the chapter “Foreign-Born Labor in the Clothing Trade,” in particular section II, where Commons discusses the sweatshop as a form of productive organization. There, Commons (1901, pp. 319–320) defined the “sweating system” as a “system of subcontract” where competing manufacturers give work to the lowest bidding contractors, who make their profit from the margin between the contract price and the lowest possible labor costs. Such a system of contracting and subcontracting dramatically degraded working conditions: contractor shops located work in the homes, while strict piece-rate payment systems forced workers into competition with one another. Moreover, as Commons (1901, p. 320) pointed out, the subcontracting itself rendered the workers more vulnerable: “[i]n the factory system the workmen are congregated where they can be seen by the factory inspectors and where they can organize or develop a common understanding. In the sweating system they are isolated and unknown.”

Of central import in the present instance is that Commons came to see the sweatshop as reflective of some distinct “racial” characteristics of immigrants. Commons’s targets were the eastern European Jews—the group who had virtually monopolized the garment industry and the sweatshops. In his report Commons explained that the Jew is physically unfit for manual labor and agriculture, while “his instincts lead him to speculation and trade.” His “individualism” makes him unsuitable for the “life of a wage-earner” and especially for the discipline of the modern American factory (1901, p. 325). Instead, Jews seem willing to accept the uncivilized conditions of the sweatshop

³The expression “race suicide” was later introduced by Ross (1901).

because of its lack of control and lax discipline. Let us indulge in a few quotations from Commons's report in order to illustrate the point:

It is possible that the racial characteristics of the Jew have entered as a factor in bringing about the above mentioned results. The Jew likes to be "his own boss," even if it is merely in name; from the operator and tailor he becomes a contractor, and from the contractor he becomes a small merchant manufacturer, working for jobbers and wholesalers until in time he becomes a jobber and wholesaler himself. While this is true of other nationalities to some extent, it is very largely true of the Jews.... (1901, p. 323)

This characteristic of the Jew shows itself in his irritation under the discipline of the factory. He is willing to work long hours, but does not like to have anyone dictate the time when he shall begin work or stop work. He does not like to be driven nor have his attention called to the fact that he has not made much work. He wants to have freedom. This he usually has in the contractor's shop. He is very nearly "his own boss;" he can smoke, talk, run around, stay at work an hour longer, come in an hour earlier, or come later. The conditions of sweatshop employment which favor this are piecework, with an almost complete absence of factory regulations and factory management. The contractor's shop is a sort of ideal worked out by this individualistic people, which holds out a fair hope to everybody of some day becoming his own boss, and, to a certain extent, of being his own boss while still at work in the shop. (1901, pp. 346–347)

The Jew was also seen as exceedingly ambitious and always eager to rise to the position of employer. "[I]nstead of trying to raise the standard of living in the trade," Commons stated, "he will try to leave the trade and throw his lot in with people whose standard of living is somewhat higher." In this way "his commercial instinct militates continually against making active efforts to better the conditions of his trade" (1901, p. 327). Commons even blamed the Jews' supposed racial inclination to speculation and trade, rather than the effects of unrestrained competition, for the proliferation of strict piece-rate payment systems and the lengthening of working days in the sweatshops:

One reason why piecework and high speed have become the framework of the contractors' shops is probably because the Jewish people are peculiarly eager to earn a big day's wages, no matter at what sacrifice. The Jewish workman is willing to work very hard for this, and does not want to have it said that there is a limit to his earning capacity. It is the desire of the Jew to have his employment so arranged that he can speculate and bargain upon his earning capacity, and can make use of the seasons. Piecework gives him that opportunity. (1901, p. 346)

Commons's description of Jewish attitudes is characterized by an ambiguous blend of cultural and "racial" considerations—a point that will be discussed below. On the one hand, for example, we find Commons (1901, p. 320) explaining the success of the Russian Jew in the clothing industry, not merely in terms of his proclivities, but as the consequence of his "willingness to change the mode of production by using the sewing machine and division of labor against which the native tailor showed a decided aversion." Similarly, in some places (1901, p. 325), he imputes the Jews' preference for the sweatshop to its flexible schedule that, differently from the factory system, allows them to work on Sundays while keeping Saturdays idle. On the other hand, as shown

in the passages quoted above, Commons's insisted reference to Jews' specific instincts and innate propensities seems to suggest an unequivocal racist mentality.

As importantly, Commons's analysis contains also a thinly veiled normative message. Commons, in fact, regarded the sweatshop as the center of a rising immigrant economy, threatening to undermine not only the wages and the well-being of "American" workers, but also the stability and efficacy of the union movement. Accordingly, Commons argued that the Jew's individualistic and uncooperative (but also abstract and metaphysical) nature would weaken the development of permanent unions. Also in this case, we cannot forbear from quoting the relevant passage at full length:

The problem has been the nature of the Jew himself. The Jew's conception of a labor organization is that of a tradesman rather than that of a workman. In the manufacture of clothing, whenever any real abuse arises among the Jewish workmen, they all come together and form a giant union and at once engage in a strike. They bring in ninety-five percent of the trade. They are energetic and determined. They demand the entire and complete elimination of the abuse. The demand is almost unanimous and is made with enthusiasm and bitterness. They stay out a long time, even under the greatest of suffering. During a strike, large numbers of them are to be found with almost nothing to live upon and their families suffering, still insisting, on the street and in their halls, that their great cause must be won.

But when once the strike is settled, either in favor of or against the cause, they are contented, and that usually ends the union, since they do not see any practical use for a union when there is no cause to fight for. Consequently, the membership of a Jewish union is wholly uncertain. The secretary's books will show 60,000 members in one month and not 5,000 within three months later. If, perchance, a local branch has a steady thousand members from year to year, and if they are indeed paying members, it is likely that they are not the same members as during the year before. A German union, on the contrary, will have the same members year after year, well or ill, with little change. The Jew joins the union when it offers a bargain and drops it when he gets, or fails to get, the bargain.

The Jew is also exceedingly abstract and metaphysical and greatly interested in general principles. His union is always, therefore, except in time of a strike, a forum for the discussion of socialism and the philology of the labor movement. The socialist element acquires control when the workingmen stay away from the union, and they urge an organization devoted mainly to propaganda on the principles of solidarity of all labor, without much attention to trade differences. The Jewish labor press, pamphlet, and speakers, nearly all recruited from the socialists, have continually engaged in these discussions, neglecting the formation and straightening of their unions. These statements are substantiated again and again in the history of the trade in New York. It is a saying on the East Side that there is always a strike going on somewhere. (1901, pp. 327–328)

Such a description of Jewish attitudes towards unions did not pass unnoticed. Writing in 1904, Harvard's railroad economist William Z. Ripley observed that the condition of trade unionism in the garment and cigar-making industries "plainly reflects certain racial peculiarities of the Jews." Drawing almost verbatim upon Commons's "excellent report on immigration," Ripley reiterated that the "Jewish conception of organization is that of a tradesman rather than a workman" and that the

“Jew will join a union only when there is a bargain directly in sight in the shape of material advancement.” Differently from Commons, however, Ripley concluded with a word of optimism, observing that “the Jews are rapidly learning, under the leadership of peculiarly able men; and no more splendid service in uplifting the lot of the lowly can be found than that rendered by the warfare of the United Garment Workers of America against the sweatshops” (Ripley 1904, pp. 302–303; see also Pope 1905, pp. 213–214).

III. RACES AND IMMIGRANTS IN AMERICA

In 1902, after his work for the Industrial Commission had ended, Commons accepted a position with the National Civic Federation (NCF). It was Ralph M. Easley—then secretary of the NCF—who personally invited Commons in, and initially put him to work on taxation problems. Subsequently, Easley moved Commons to work together with Samuel Gompers (Commons 1934a, p. 82; Gonc 2002, p. 759). While working for the NCF, Commons wrote a series of nine articles that appeared during 1903–04 in the *Chautauquan* magazine under the heading “Racial Composition of the American People.” These articles, which drew extensively on the investigation Commons had prepared for the Industrial Commission, were subsequently republished, with only minor modifications, as the volume *Races and Immigrants in America* (Commons 1907a). We will refer throughout to *Races and Immigrants* rather than to the “Racial Composition” articles.

Races and Immigrants reflected the general tenor of hostility toward immigration we have found in the Industrial Commission report. Commons embraced the Immigration Restriction League (IRL) plan to amend the immigration and contract-labor acts of 1891 requiring all persons over fifteen years of age entering the United States to read and write the language of their native country or any other language.⁴ His proposal, however, exempted “wife, children, parents, or grandparents of those who are admitted” (1907a, p. 234). Commons joined his voice to that of Prescott F. Hall—founder and executive secretary of the Immigration Restriction League—and held that the least-desirable foreign elements were illiterate and that a simple, non-discriminatory, literacy test would allow the weeding out of “those races whose standards are lowest” (1907a, p. 149).⁵ The test was primarily intended to limit the number of eastern and southern European immigrants. Drawing upon Hall’s estimates (1906), Commons affirmed:

⁴Economist Edward Bemis is the originator of the literacy test. See Higham (1969, p. 101).

⁵In 1906, Hall—who has been described as “an anti-Semitic lawyer with a love for the music of Richard Wagner and the writings of Houston Stewart Chamberlain” (Spiro 2009, p. 197)—published his controversial *Immigration and its Effects Upon the United States*. The book was received in the academic literature of the period with some harsh criticisms, both on methodological and policy grounds; see, for instance, Willcox (1906). In 1907 Commons decided to review Hall’s volume in the pages of the *Charities and the Commons*, a reformist periodical closely affiliated with the Social Gospel movement. In his review Commons overtly took Hall’s side. “Altogether,” he affirmed, “the book stands out as the most important contribution that has been made to the study of this most important American problem” (1907b, p. 504).

it would exclude only 1 in 200 of the Scandinavians, 1 in 100 of the English, Scotch, and Finns, 2 or 3 in 100 of the Germans, Irish, Welsh, and French; but it would exclude one-half of the South Italians, one-seventh of the North Italians, one-third to two-fifths of the several Slav races, one-seventh of the Russian Jews, altogether one-fifth or one-fourth of the total immigration. (1907, pp. 234–235)

As we learn from Barbara Solomon (1956, p. 132), Commons himself testified in Congress in support of a literacy test a number of times as a representative of the IRL.⁶

Beyond these considerations, Commons's main objective in *Races and Immigrants* was to investigate whether and to what extent "non-English" immigrants possess the capacity for acquiring the personal characteristics needed to assimilate into American ways of democracy and cooperation. "We are trying to look beneath the surface," he wrote (1907a, p. 5), "and to inquire whether there are not factors of heredity and race more fundamental than those of education and environment." It was Commons's determination to provide an "objective" answer to this question that accounts, in Ramstad and Starkey's judgment (1995, p. 8), for the particular manner in which "theories" and "evidence" about racial stocks are introduced and utilized over the course of *Races and Immigrants*. Commons himself warned the reader that he was utilizing the term "race" in a "rather loose and elastic sense," and that he would consider "only those large and apparent divisions which have a direct bearing on the problem of assimilation" (1907a, pp. 12–13). What concerns us here is his treatment of Jewish immigrants. First of all, Commons affirmed that human population may be divided into "five great racial stocks," all of which are now represented in the United States: 1) the Aryan, within which he distinguished several branches including the Greeks, Latins, Slavs, Celts, and Teutons, the latter in turn divisible into the Germans, the Scandinavians, and, above all, the English; 2) the Semitic; 3) the Mongolian, from which the Magyar, the Chinese, and the Japanese are derived; 4) the Negro; and 5) the Malay. As to the Semitic race, differently from other authors of the time, Commons emphasized its common roots with their Aryan "cousins." As he put it:

In the fertile valleys of Mesopotamia and the Tigris the Semitic race had separated from its cousins, the Aryans, and one remarkable branch of this race, the Hebrews, settling on a diminutive tract of land on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean and finally driven forth as wanderers to live upon their wits, exploited by and exploiting in turn every race of Europe, have ultimately been driven forth to America by the thousands from Russia and Austria where nearly one-half of their present number is found. (1907a, p. 15)

In a following sentence, Commons (p. 16) insisted that while the Aryan, the Semitic, and the Mongolian races "had in early times met one another and even perhaps had sprung from the same stock," there seemed to be "no traces of affiliation with the black race."

Having established his own taxonomy of races, Commons went on to describe the distinguishing attributes of each different stock. His characterization of the Jewish or

⁶In addition to Commons, other prominent social scientists of the period, such as Richard T. Ely, Jeremiah W. Jenks, Edward A. Ross, and William Z. Ripley, offered on several occasions their names and talent to the IRL cause.

Semitic race presents no particular novelty and substantially follows the same line of stereotyping arguments advanced in the Industrial Commission report (1907, pp. 81–82, 94, 133). Commons also insisted on the idea that the emerging of the sweatshop system in the United States was largely due to the influx of Jewish immigrants and to their racial inclinations.⁷ There is one passage, however, that deserves our attention:

It should not be inferred that the Jews are a race of pure descent. Coming as they do from all sections and nations of Europe, they are truly cosmopolitan, and have taken on the language, customs, and modes of thought of the people among whom they live. More than this, in the course of centuries, their physical characteristics have departed from those of their Semitic cousins in the East, and they have become assimilated in blood with their European neighbors. In Russia, especially in the early centuries, native tribes were converted to Judaism and mingled with their proselytes. That which makes the Jew a peculiar people is not altogether the purity of his blood, but persecution, devotion to his religion, and careful training of his children. (1907a, pp. 93–94)

Commons's words reproduced above reveal again his ambiguity in proposing a notion of race wherein the biological component of a certain stock also captures its socially or morally salient qualities. Such an ambiguity becomes manifest when Commons, after having included the Semites in his taxonomy of races, affirms that Jews should not be considered as a "race of pure descent," arguing that "which makes the Jew a peculiar people is not altogether the purity of his blood, but persecution, devotion to his religion, and careful training of his children." In order to resolve this apparent contradiction, it is necessary to consider that between the 1880s and 1910s, ideas about race were fluid and, for many aspects, difficult to categorize. The bulk of Progressive Era social scientists discussing immigration was, in fact, neither strictly "genetic racialist" nor "environmentalist"—with the former term denoting those emphasizing the role of hereditary traits in determining whether a group was assailable or not and the latter denoting those emphasizing social and institutional factors (Cherry 1976). As noted by George W. Stocking (2001, p. 8), the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries' prevailing conception of race included "numerous elements that we would today call cultural; there was not a clear line between cultural and physical elements or between social and biological heredity." Specifically, he continues, it was the widespread acceptance of the Lamarckian hypothesis of the transferability of acquired characteristics that made the notion of "race" so opaque and elusive: "Lamarckianism [sic] made it extremely difficult to distinguish between physical and cultural heredity. What was cultural at any point in time could become physical; what was physical might well have been cultural" (Stocking 2001, p. 14). Culturally conditioned behavior patterns would thus tend to become part of the "genetic" endowment of subsequent generations in the form of innate tendencies or proclivities.

⁷For instance, in one salient passage Commons stated: "But ambition has its penalty. It is equivalent to an increase in the supply of labor. As an ambitious proprietor the increase goes into his permanent property, but the ambitious wage-earner accepts a lower rate of pay. His fellows see the reduction and go still lower. The see-saw continues until wages reach the level of necessities, and there is nothing left for ambition. The Jewish sweat-shop is the tragic penalty paid by that ambitious race" (1907a, p. 148).

According to Stocking, thus, the Progressive Era's prevailing uses of "race" denoted groups with socially relevant differences of character, morality, and intelligence that were both *hereditary* and *changeable*.⁸ We find Stocking's analysis convincing and, albeit mostly centered on anthropology, also pertinent to the racial discussions taking place within the economic and sociological camps. Indeed, it cannot be denied—as ably documented by Thomas C. Leonard (2003, 2009)—that many Progressive Era thinkers rejected immigration on strictly eugenic grounds; i.e., on the basis of the threat it imposed to the quality of American racial stock. On the other hand, it is also true that many other figures of the time argued that customs and institutions, as parts of the external environment, could react upon the new immigrants' inherited racial traits, so as to facilitate their assimilation into American society. In this connection, Commons clearly affirmed that differences in hereditary racial mental structure are both the *cause* and the *effect* of differences in social customs and institutions. Accordingly, he distinguished between "inferiority" and "backwardness"; i.e., "between that superiority which is the original endowment of race and that which results from the education and training which we call civilization." Significantly, Commons added: "while there are superior and inferior races, there are primitive, medieval, and modern civilizations, and there are certain mental qualities *required for* and *produced by* these different grades of civilization (1907a, pp. 210–211; emphasis added). Commons admitted that in the case of "inferior races"—a label he reserved for those races originated from the "two belts of earth between the tropics of Capricorn and Cancer and the Arctic and Antarctic circles" (1907a, p. 213)—their innate mental qualities may prevent a complete and successful assimilation, independently of the extent of immersion in the American "environment."⁹ On the other hand—and this is what mainly concerns us here—even though Commons repeatedly argued that the "civilizations" of south and central Europe were "backward" and that Jewish immigration from these nations was increasingly from the undesirable lower strata of society, he made a special effort to emphasize that Jewish immigrants from these nations do not come from inferior racial stocks (1907a, pp. 93, 94–95). For backward civilizations, hereditary traits provided a foundation or perhaps a challenge, but not a cage from which one could not escape. Commons made explicit this position when discussing the importance of the union for the assimilation of "backward" adult immigrants. "To them," he held (1907a, p. 220), "the labor-union is at present the strongest Americanizing force." And in describing the attitude towards unions of the various racial groups, he wrote:

The trade-union is often represented as an imported and un-American institution. It is true that in some unions the main strength is in the English workmen. But the majority of unionists are immigrants and children of immigrants from countries that know little of unionism. Ireland and Italy have nothing to compare with the trade-union movement of England, but the Irish are the most effective organizers of the American

⁸On American racial thought during the Progressive Era, see also, among others, Brown (2004), Frankel and Dye (1991), and Piott (2011).

⁹Speaking of inferior races, Commons wrote: "Amalgamation is their door to assimilation" (1907, p. 213). A few pages before, Commons had explained that the term "amalgamation" "may be used for that mixture of blood which unites races in a common stock;" while "assimilation" refers to "that union of their minds and wills which enables them to think and act together" (1907, p. 209).

unions, and the Italians are becoming the most ardent unionists. *Most remarkable of all, the individualistic Jew from Russia, contrary to his race instinct, is joining the unions.* (1907a, p. 153; emphasis added)

This passage represents a significant retreat from the position Commons had held in the Industrial Commission report, and it bears witness to his belief that, in spite of their inherited racial “instincts,” Jewish immigrants can in all likelihood be fully “Americanized” so long as their new environment includes the necessary social institutions for their assimilation.

IV. WILLIAM Z. RIPLEY AND EDWARD A. ROSS

The discussion of Commons’s treatment of Jewish immigration does not exhaust our task. The next issue, to be dealt with in the following sections, is to investigate whether Commons was a “man of his times”; i.e., whether and to what extent Commons’s stereotypical characterization of Jews was shared by other academic writers of the time. The starting point of our (by no means exhaustive) survey is William Z. Ripley, whose *Races of Europe* (1899) was probably the most influential American work on race during the early years of the last century. Ripley (1899, pp. 32–33) began asserting the Jews provide “the best illustration of the greater force of religious prejudice to give rise to a distinct physical type.” Social ostracism, largely based upon differences of belief, has in fact contributed “to keep them truer to a single racial standard, perhaps, than any other people of Europe.” According to Ripley (1899, p. 373), racial traits explained why Jews everywhere tended to congregate in cities and invariably displayed a strong aversion to agriculture, manual labor, and “physical exercise or exertion in any form,” preferring “to live by brain not brawn.” Ripley rejected strictly environmentalist arguments like those advanced by Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu (1895), who attributed these common characteristics of the Jews to the medieval prohibition of land ownership or their segregation in the ghetto.¹⁰ “To us,” Ripley explained (1899, pp. 373–374), “it appears to be too constant a trait the world over, to justify such an hypothesis.”

Ripley (1899, p. 373) went on to portray the Jews mostly in terms of bodily characteristics, rather than inherited instincts or proclivities, tending to assume that racial mental differences were related to racial physical differences. European Jews were described as undersized and, more often, “absolutely stunted.” “Narrow-chested and deficient in lung capacity,” he insisted, Jews were “distinctly inferior to Christians in lung capacity, which is generally an indication of vitality.” This physical degeneracy—an “acquired” characteristic caused by unfavorable “sanitary and social environment”—over time had become an inherited “unalterable characteristic of this peculiar people.” Such a physical fragility notwithstanding, Ripley noted, Jewish people show a high

¹⁰In his *Israel Among the Nations* (1895), Anatole de Leroy-Beaulieu had argued that insofar as there is a distinctively Jewish type manifesting itself in specific physiological and psychological features, it has been solely the result of the conditions under which the Jews lived during the Middle Ages and down to the disappearance of the ghettos. Race has nothing to do with this result, and the religion of the Jews enters as a factor only because it formed part of the conditions in question.

birth rate and a low death rate that place them well above the average. As he put it in a passage that caught Commons's attention:

Suppose two groups of one hundred infants each, one Jewish, one of average American parentage (Massachusetts), to be born on the same day. In spite of the disparity of social conditions in favor of the latter, the chances, determined by statistical means, are that one-half of the Americans will die within forty-seven years; while the first half of the Jews will not succumb to disease or accident before the expiration of seventy-one years. The death-rate is really but little over half that of the average American population. (Ripley 1899, quoted in Commons 1907a, p. 95)

This favorable condition was ascribed to the Jews' sanitary meat inspection, and their sobriety, temperance, and self-control. In spite of these common traits, however, Ripley reached negative conclusions as to the racial purity of the Jews. A study of skull measurement, in fact, showed that Jews from various areas of the world were more similar in cephalic shape to their non-Jewish neighbors than to each other, thus dismissing the hypothesis of an homogeneous Jewish stock of Semitic descent. Ripley held that the great majority of Jews residing in Europe showed signs of extensive intermixture with other European stocks of lighter complexions, and showed scant resemblance to modern-day Arabs, who were thought to retain the African traits of the ancient Semites. How, then, could the persistence of certain characteristic facial features of the Jews be explained in the presence of a lack of racial uniformity? The answer was found in "artificial selection," which Ripley considered "operative as ever only in those physical traits which appeal to the senses" (1899, p. 398). Artificial selection in a socially or geographically isolated community occurs when the choice of the sexual partner is exercised in accordance with certain standards of attractiveness that had become generally accepted in that community. Artificial selection was seen as a consequence of the Jews' "consciousness of kind," a collective identity awareness, which in turn was derived "from the circumstances of social isolation, dependent upon the dictates of religion" (1899, p. 398). All this led Ripley to conclude:

The Jews are not a race, but only a people, after all. In their faces we read its confirmation: while in respect of their other traits we are convinced that such individuality as they possess—by no means inconsiderable—is of their own making from one generation to the next, rather than a product of an unprecedented purity of physical descent. (1899, p. 400)

Commons's contention that "Jews are not a race of pure descent" appears thus to be in line with Ripley's main conclusions.¹¹

Another Progressive Era social scientist who extensively dealt with racial issues was Edward A. Ross. Like Commons, Ross had studied economics under Richard T. Ely's tutelage at Johns Hopkins University, and it was the Ely connection that eventually

¹¹Albeit phrased in "scientific" terms, Ripley's analysis was not immune to xenophobic contaminations. Anti-Semitism, he argued, originated primarily from the legitimate fear that western Europe would eventually be submerged by these undesirable immigrants. Ripley warned that this had also become an American problem: "This great Polish swamp of miserable human beings, terrific in its proportions, threatens to drain itself into our country as well, unless we restrict its ingress" (1899, p. 372).

brought both Commons and Ross to the University of Wisconsin, in 1904 and 1906, respectively. Compared with Ripley's, Ross's characterization of the Jews seems to lean more markedly toward an overt environmentalist approach. Writing in 1902 in the pages of the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Ross, who by that time had shifted to sociology, expressed his appreciation for Leroy-Beaulieu's "brilliant success in using isolation as the key to the Jewish enigma." While the "vulgar" persisted in regarding the racial traits of the Jew as unmalleable to the influences of cultural environment, he asserted, Leroy-Beaulieu "perceived that the Jews are not a race, but a people," and made a special effort to explain "how their characteristics have risen naturally from work and surroundings" (1902, p. 103). Accordingly, Ross then went on to explain the characteristics of the Jews as the consequence of the medieval restrictions that confined them in the ghetto, and of the Mosaic law that separated them from the Gentiles by "a fence of rite and ceremonial observance." As he put it:

The Jew has an incomparable value sense because for generations he was forced into trade and money changing. He esteems learning because the distinction of the scholar was open to him, but not that of the warrior or statesman. He clings to his religion as all dispossessed peoples cling to the rock of ancestral tradition amid the devouring waves of assimilation. He has his passions and impulses under prudent control, as happens always with unwarlike people long schooled in trade, city life, and money dealings. He lacks in sense of honor because the impulses radiating from chivalry had no access to him. He takes to ruse and hypocrisy because so long treated as a social pariah. If he has a double code of ethics, it is because persecution has developed in him an intense tribal consciousness and a vivid sense of difference from Christians. He has the domestic virtues because family life has been his refuge from the injustices and insults of social life. The Jew is, then, a product; and many of the peculiarities charged to his Semitic blood will disappear with the complete disappearance of the conditions that produced them. (1902, pp. 103–104)

Ross further elaborated his views as applied to the "East European Hebrews" in 1914. Albeit more environmentally oriented than Ripley's and Commons's, Ross's discussion of Jewish features exhibits the same tendency to confuse social and physical heredity, and to assume some degree of physical inheritance of complex cultural characteristics. For instance, writing about the tendency of Jewish workers to live in crowded urban centers, Ross wrote: "Centuries of enforced Ghetto life seem to have bred in them a herding instinct. No other physiques can so well withstand the toxins of urban congestion" (1914, p. 145). Similarly, he considered equally complex traits of the "Jewish mind," such as intellectuality, tenacity of purpose, or even the gift for mathematics, as to be carried in the "blood," if only as instincts or temperament proclivities. Speaking of the Jews' alleged "abstractness," Ross observed that "to the Hebrew things present themselves not softened by an atmosphere of sentiment, but with the sharp outlines of that desert landscape in which his ancestors wandered" (1914, pp. 159–160). Like Commons, Ross emphasized the malleability of Jewish traits under the influence of the new American environment, but at the same time he placed a clear ceiling upon America's capacity to assimilate eastern European Jewish immigrants: "No doubt thirty or forty thousand Hebrews from Eastern Europe might be absorbed by this country each year without any marked growth of race prejudice; but when they come in two or three or even four times as fast, the lump outgrows the leaven, and there will be trouble" (1914, p. 165).

In spite of this concession to the possibility of amalgamation, Ross's 1914 treatments of eastern European immigration contained grains of explicit anti-Semitic hostility. Ross affirmed that roughly "one-fifth of the Hebrews in the world are with us," although his estimates were later proved to be without foundation.¹² America, he lamented, "is coming to be hailed as the 'promised land,'" while "Zionist dreams are yielding to the conviction that it will be much easier for the keen-witted Russian Jews to prosper here as a free component in a nation of a hundred millions than to grub a living out of the baked hillsides of Palestine" (1914, pp. 143–144). Ross also indulged in some typical anti-Semitic stereotypes. In his opinion, for instance, "[n]one can beat the Jew at a bargain, for through all the intricacies of commerce he can scent his profit" (1914, pp. 147–148). As evidence, he pointed out a greater tendency among Jewish immigrants to maximize their gain in all transactions, ranging from Jewish students badgering their teachers for higher grades to Jewish poor attempting to get more than the usual charitable portion. As to business practices, Ross reported:

It is charged that for personal gain the Jewish dealer willfully disregards the customs of the trade and thereby throws trade ethics into confusion. Physicians and lawyers complain that their Jewish colleagues tend to break down the ethics of their professions. It is certain that Jews have commercialized the social evil, commercialized the theatre, and done much to commercialize the newspaper. (1914, p. 153)

Ross even accused the Jews of being the organizers and financiers of the "systematic campaign in newspapers and magazines to break down all arguments for restriction and to calm nativist fears." He explained:

Hebrew money is behind the National Liberal Immigration League and its numerous publications. From the paper before the commercial body or the scientific association to the heavy treatise produced with the aid of the Baron de Hirsch Fund, the literature that proves the blessings of immigration to all classes in America emanates from subtle Hebrew brains (1914, pp. 144–145).¹³

While it is true that Jewish organizations like the Baron de Hirsch Fund did oppose immigration restriction, Ross's characterization of pro-immigration activism as an exclusively Jewish movement appears to be clearly denigratory in intent.

V. BEATRICE AND SIDNEY WEBB

So far we have dealt exclusively with American Progressive Era authors. This, however, should by no means convey the idea that social scientists across the Atlantic were immune to "racialist leanings" such as those discussed above. In this connection, one excellent example of the contrary is provided by Beatrice Webb's portrayal of the Jews of "East London"—the area of the city with the highest concentration of Jewish

¹²See section VI.

¹³In 1891 Baron Maurice de Hirsch, a German-Jewish philanthropist, founded and endowed the Baron de Hirsch Fund in the United States, principally to provide a wide variety of aids to eastern European Jews in the United States.

immigrants and where sweatshops had proliferated. In accordance with the typical stereotyping rhetoric of the period, Russian and Polish Jews were seen to differ from other immigrant “races” in being more clannish, money-loving, dishonest, ambitious, and individualistic. As she put it:

And it is by competition, and by competition alone, that the Jew seeks success. But in the case of the foreign Jews, it is a competition unrestricted by the personal dignity of a definite standard of life, and unchecked by the social feelings of class loyalty and trade integrity. The small manufacturer injures the trade through which he rises to the rank of a capitalist by bad and dishonest production. The petty dealer or small money-lender, imbued with the economic precept of buying in the cheapest and selling in the dearest market, suits his wares to the weakness, the ignorance, and the vice of his customers; the mechanic, indifferent to the interests of the class to which he temporarily belongs, and intent only on becoming a small master, acknowledges no limit to the process of under-bidding fellow workers, except the exhaustion of his own strength. In short, the foreign Jew totally ignores all social obligations other than keeping the law of the land, the maintenance of his own family, and the charitable relief of his co-religionists. (1898a, pp. 44–45; see also 1898b)

There are several interesting parallels between the analyses of Jewish traits advanced by Beatrice Webb and Commons, and this has led an acute observer such as Perlman (1952, p. 306) to imply a possible influence of the former on the latter. Unfortunately, we cannot determine with certainty whether Commons was aware of, and had read, Beatrice Webb’s essays on the East London Jews by the time he wrote the report for the Industrial Commission and the *Chautauquan* article series. What we learn from Commons’s autobiography (1934a, p. 71), instead, is that around 1900 he began to read Sydney and Beatrice Webb’s *Industrial Democracy* (1897) while on his trip to the headquarters of about half of the national trade unions in order to discover the effects of immigration on unionism. As pointed out by Richard A. Gonce, for Commons, that volume turned out to be a “gold mine chock-full of glittering nuggets concerning criticism of neoclassical economic theory, tips about how to collect and sort out evidence obtained by field investigation, a history of British labor unionism, and critical advocacy of industrial democracy” (Gonce 2002, p. 757). What Gonce does not mention is that *Industrial Democracy* also contains some relevant passages devoted to Jewish immigrant workers that might not have escaped Commons’s attention. In one of these passages the Webbs wrote:

The chief importance of the immigration would then lie in its indirect effects on national character and capacity. If the immigrants, like the Polish Jews, brought in a lower Standard of Life, the result might be (besides increasing the overcrowding of the slums) a constant influence for degradation. If, on the other hand, the immigrants, like the Huguenots, introduced a higher Standard of Life, their example might produce a permanent improvement in national character. There is also the obscure question of the effect of the intermixture of races to be considered. (Webb and Webb 1897, p. 744)

Leaving aside the reference to the “obscure question of the effect of the intermixture of races,” it is evident from the above that, like many of their contemporaries (Leonard 2003), the Webbs were assessing the effects of immigration on the labor market in terms of competing classes of workers with different standards of life.

Workers with lower standards of life are disposed to accept lower wages, so that the lowest standard of life determines the prevalent wage and work conditions in each industry. For the Webbs, different races show different standards of life—although they deliberately refrained from investigating the source and nature of these differences (Webb and Webb 1897, p. 697n1). Accordingly, they proposed a “hypothetical” tripartite classification based on the racial group’s willingness to accept a lower (and their ambition to obtain a higher) wage. First, there are those racial groups, epitomized by the “Anglo-Saxon skilled artisan,” who refuse to work below a customary standard of life, but who have no definite maximum; that is, “they will be stimulated to intenser effort and new wants by every increase of income.” Second, there are those races, such as “the African negro,” who show no assignable minimum and a very low maximum; i.e., “they will work ... for indefinitely low wages, but cannot be induced to work at all once their primitive wants are satisfied.” Finally, there is the Jew, who is the sole race in possessing neither a minimum nor a maximum: “he will accept the lowest terms rather than remain out of employment; as he rises in the world new wants stimulate him to increased intensity of effort, and no amount of income causes him to slacken his indefatigable activity.” To “this remarkable elasticity” in standard of life, the Webbs attributed both the wealth and the poverty of the Jews, the “striking fact that their wage-earning class is permanently the poorest in all Europe, whilst individual Jews are the wealthiest men of their respective countries” (1897, pp. 697–698n1).

Commons developed his argument along similar lines, but with one crucial difference in emphasis. Like the Webbs, Commons described the competition among different immigrant groups or “races” as a competition between higher and lower standards of life. For Commons, in the history of American industrial evolution, the Irish had displaced the “educated sons and daughters of American stock” in the textile mills of New England, but were, in turn, supplanted by French Canadians. Then, when French Canadians acquired a higher standard of life, they were replaced by Syrians, Poles, and Italians. Similarly, in the garment industry, the Irish and Germans took the job of more “advanced” English and Scottish tailors. In turn, “Russian Jews” rapidly crowded them out, but their own position seemed now to be threatened by the arrival of Italians (1907a, pp. 151–152). Compared to the Webbs, however, Commons was much more cautious in proposing a strict correspondence between races and standards of life. Racial groups can improve their living standards through assimilation, as in the case of French Canadians described above, while different standards can exist within a single racial stock. More importantly, social institutions such as the trade union can promote cooperation among workers of different nationalities and help overcome “racial hostility.” This led Commons to affirm:

This hostility is not primarily racial in character. It is the competitive struggle for standards of living. It appears to be racial because for the most part races have different standards. But where different races agree on their standards the racial struggle ceases, and the Negro, Italian, Slav, and American join together in the class struggle of a trade-union. On the other hand, if the same race has different standards, the economic struggle breaks down even the strongest affinities of race. The Russian Jew in the sweat-shop turns against the immigrant Jew, fleeing from the very persecution that he himself has escaped, and taking his place in the employment of the capitalist German Jew. (Commons 1907a, p. 115)

Commons's attempt to attenuate the significance of racial traits attracted some criticism from the more biologically oriented writers of the time. According to Charles A. Ellwood, the leading sociologist from the University of Missouri, Commons's contention that "race antagonism springs from economic competition" was not supported by sufficient evidence. "While economic competition undoubtedly intensifies race antagonism," Ellwood wrote, "the researches of race psychologists have shown it to be quite independent of economic conditions in the narrow sense; and this the author also practically acknowledges in his references to the relations between the Indians and the whites" (1908, p. 562).

VI. THE DILLINGHAM COMMISSION

A few final considerations should be devoted to the later developments of the debate on immigration and its implications on anti-Semitism. Incidentally, Commons's *Races and Immigrants* was published in 1907, exactly the same year in which Congress formed the US Immigration Commission, also known as the Dillingham Commission. The commission, chaired by Vermont Republican Senator William Paul Dillingham, served to examine numerous questions related to the new patterns of immigration.¹⁴ Its focus was squarely on southern and eastern Europeans and its general approach was unequivocally racialist (Perlmann 2011). The commission's survey classified over ten million individuals, immigrant and native-born, according to their race, "correlating immigrants' 'racial identities' to their industrial occupations, wage rates, children's years of education, union membership, and home ownership, as well as imprisonment, institutionalization, pauperism, and dependency on charity" (Forbath 2013, p. 18). As far as the racial taxonomy of immigrants was concerned, the researchers adopted the "list of races or peoples" already in use at the Immigration Bureau, which included a distinct entry for the "Hebrew" race. The commission found evidence that there was a disproportionate concentration of immigrants in unskilled occupations, specific industries, and geographic localities. As a consequence, it was argued, immigration—especially that from southern and eastern Europe—was adversely influencing wage levels and working conditions, posing a serious threat to the American economy and culture, and should therefore be greatly reduced. Not surprisingly, the publication in 1911 of the commission's final report, which comprised forty-two volumes, gave new vigor to the academic discussion.¹⁵

What is relevant to our discussion is that several Jewish figures came to animate this debate, openly criticizing the commission's approach and main conclusions. In this connection, the contribution of Franz Boas, the eminent Columbia anthropologist of Jewish descent, has received special attention (Morris-Reich 2011; Zeidel 2004).

¹⁴Under the leadership of William Paul Dillingham, the joint House-Senate commission included US senators Henry Cabot Lodge and Asbury Latimer; US representatives Benjamin Howell, William Bennett, and John Burnett; and Charles Neill of the US Department of Labor, economist Jeremiah W. Jenks of Cornell University, and William Wheeler, the California Commissioner of Immigration.

¹⁵After the reports of the Dillingham Commission were released, Jeremiah Jenks, along with his partner W. Jett Lauck, published a book promoting the findings of the commission and stressing the need for a literacy test (Jenks and Lauck 1912).

Boas was among the researchers involved in the commission's survey and his findings explicitly contradicted the commission's overall racist stance. Boas (1912), in fact, demonstrated that careful measurement of the cephalic indexes of migrant children showed dramatic differences between the growth patterns of first- and second-generation children.¹⁶ On this evidence, he argued that European immigrants' head forms were quite plastic and that nutrition and other external conditions determined "racial traits" much more than heredity. If the cranial capacity changed under the influence of a new environment, Boas concluded, the whole bodily and mental makeup of immigrants might change, including those very features thought to measure intelligence and capacity for civilization (Boas 1912).

Boas had trouble convincing the extreme nativists like Hall (1912, p. 677), but his ideas appealed to those who intended to challenge the notion of acquired racial traits. "To attempt ... to establish relative standards of race value, to the detriment of the new immigration," wrote Max J. Kohler in the *American Economic Review* in 1912, commenting upon the commission reports, "is purely unwarranted assumption, especially in the light of Professor Boas' interesting demonstration that even the most pronounced physical indications of race differences, the shape of the skull, are rapidly lost by immigrants born here" (1912, p. 77). Kohler, a pre-eminent Jewish activist and former New York district attorney, attacked the restrictionist agenda supported by the commission and those economists (he also mentions the name of Commons) "with only slight familiarity with this branch of our national history, and still less familiar with the development and extent of our present-day Americanizing agencies, or with the history of the 'new' immigrant races in our midst, whom they distrust" (1914, p. 93). Kohler was joined by Samuel K. Joseph, a Columbia University graduate who had completed his dissertation on "Jewish immigration to the United States" under Boas and Seligman.¹⁷ Like Kohler, Joseph rejected the racist perspective of the commission and argued that the recent Jewish immigration is far more a "family movement" than even the "old immigration" of the past few decades was, that its return movement is smaller than any other, and that it embraces a "larger relative proportion and absolute number of skilled laborers" than is furnished by any other immigrant people, a fact heretofore commonly overlooked (1914, p. 132). Using new data obtained through a series of early Jewish annual reports, Joseph also intended to confute "the general tendency among writers on the subject of Jewish immigration to exaggerate the magnitude of this movement" (1914, p. 91). As an example, he reported Ross's then recently published statement regarding the supposed "emigration of 50,000 Roumanian Jews between January and August, 1900, ... brought about by steamship agents who created great excitement in Roumania by distributing glowing circulars about America" (Ross 1913, p. 196; quoted in Joseph 1914, pp. 106–107). Through his own estimates, Joseph was able to show that only 6,183 Romanian Jews arrived in the United States in the year 1900, and that the total number for the whole period from 1899 to 1910 was less than 55,000.

¹⁶Boas's explicit target were the cephalic indexes that Ripley (1899, p. 37) had defined as "one of the best available tests of race known."

¹⁷Although largely a study in demography, a province of sociology at Columbia, Joseph's dissertation was directed by Boas and Seligman because of the alleged anti-Semitism of Franklin H. Giddings, then the leading sociologist at Columbia (Page 1985, p. 82).

Other attacks on the Dillingham Commission came from Emanuel A. Goldenweiser and Isaac A. Hourwich, two Jewish economists then affiliated to the Census Bureau (Perlmann 2011). Goldenweiser, who authored the commission's survey on urban settlements, announced in 1911, just as the commission's reports were about to appear in print, that his study "strongly indicates that racial characteristics are entirely subordinate to environment and opportunity in determining that part of the immigrant's mode of life which is legitimately a matter of public concern" (1911, p. 222).¹⁸ In a similar fashion, Hourwich (1912, p. 57), who was also involved in the activities of the National Liberal Immigration League, observed, "It would seem as if the investigation of the Immigration Commission proceeded upon the supposition that immigrant races represented separate zoological species." Hourwich addressed directly some of the main charges leveled by Commons against Jewish immigrants. "The sweating system did not originate with the Jewish clothing workers," he asserted, but "it preceded them by more than half a century." Drawing upon the data recently made available by the United States Bureau of Labor, Hourwich was able to provide evidence on "the employment of women in the clothing industry in the first third of the nineteenth century, at the time when the wage-earners were nearly all American-born" (1912, p. 363). As far as the Jews' alleged instinctive tendency to concentrate for work in urban centers, he added, it "is due to the relation of supply and demand in the American labor market, and not to the racial characteristics of the immigrants" (1911, p. 620). Hourwich also contended Commons's claim that the innate inclinations of Jewish workers would constitute a threat for American unionism: "The statistics of the Immigration Commission show ... that trade-unionism is as strong among the immigrants as among the native American workmen" (1911, p. 636). Even more significantly, no line can be drawn in respect of unionism between the "desirable" immigrants from northern and western Europe and the "undesirable aliens from Southern and Eastern Europe." Accordingly, Hourwich documented that the percentage of trade unionists among Jewish workers was 21.4, more than four times that of German workers and almost twice the average percentage for all the "desired" races. "Regardless of the opinions of the Immigration Commission," he was led to conclude, "one thing seems to be well established by its statistics, viz. that there is no causal connection between immigration and the slow progress of organization among the industrial workers of the country" (1911, pp. 637–638).

Quite significantly, Commons did not participate in the discussion triggered by the publication of the commission reports. His discussion of Jewish (and non-Jewish) immigrants in racial terms seems to be confined to the 1901 Industrial Commission report, and to the 1903–04 series of articles later reprinted as *Races and Immigrants in America*. We have searched in Commons's other writings—especially in his later institutionalist works (1924, 1934b, 1950)—for expressions indicating some form of aversion towards Jews or any attempt to characterize them in terms of racial or cultural stereotypes. We must report that we failed to find even a single significant passage

¹⁸The following year, in a paper published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, Goldenweiser (1912b) criticized Walker's race suicide thesis, arguing that the low fertility rate of the old "racial stock" was the consequence of the recent process of industrialization rather than of the new flow of immigration from eastern and southern Europe. See also Kohler (1914).

suggestive of anti-Semitism or racism.¹⁹ Commons's use of racial arguments thus seems to disappear with the fading of the Progressive Era. In this connection, it is enlightening to note that in 1919 Commons expressed his dissatisfaction with then-contemporary attempts to forge a comprehensive industrial psychology based on the notion of "instinct" (Commons 1919)—a term he had indiscriminately used to describe the innate propensities of different racial stocks. Even more significantly, a few years later, in introducing his celebrated *The Legal Foundations of Capitalism*—the work that marked his enrollment among the institutionalist ranks—Commons (1924, p. xxxv) stated that "the aim of this volume is to work out an evolutionary and *behavioristic*, or rather volitional, theory of value" (emphasis added). Albeit quite different from the original version advanced by John B. Watson, Commons's own brand of behaviorism emphasized the role of the institutional framework in determining the "expectational" dimension of human conduct and further distanced him from any crude form of biological determinism (Fiorito 2010).

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In his autobiography (1934a, pp. 80–81) Commons devoted words of praise to Abraham Bisno and, quite significantly, to his "beloved" Selig Perlman, two Jewish men to whom he felt close personally and professionally. Still, as recounted by Perlman to his son, Commons did not hesitate to express disdain towards Jews on many occasions, both public and private. More significantly, as documented in this paper, in his published writings Commons joined the bulk of Progressive Era social scientists in defining Jews as a race and in stereotyping their behavior in terms of innate traits and inherited propensities. Are we thus facing another case of "ambivalent anti-Semitism"—to go back to Reder's initial expression? Our answer will be articulated in two steps.

First, it appears from our discussion that Commons's racial theorizing, which included the ambiguous positing of a Semitic race, was developed within a generalized xenophobic framework that involved many other leading social scientists of the time. As a significant body of scholarship has argued to varying degree, American preoccupation with race in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries was, in fact, fueled by the arrival of a new wave of immigrants, largely from southern and eastern Europe, who differed noticeably in appearance and customs from the northern Europeans who had preceded them. Between 1881 and 1920, over twenty million immigrants arrived in the United States (Daniels 2004). In 1907, the highest point of this migration stream, over one million people entered the United States, roughly 150,000 of whom were Jewish. Commons questioned whether these new immigrants

¹⁹In 1914 Commons, together with William Leiserson, discussed labor conditions in Pittsburgh in a lengthy essay contributed to Paul U. Kellogg's famous Pittsburgh Survey. Commons and Leiserson examined in great detail Jewish unionism among Pittsburgh bakers and documented its success in increasing wages and reducing working hours. Interestingly, the whole analysis was phrased in non-racialist terms, and particular stress was placed in the cooperative support of Jewish consumers through the practice of boycott. "[T]o the scarcity of workers," they explained (1914, p. 192), "must be added the ease with which the use of the union label can be enforced where consumers are mainly working people. This fact accounts for the strength of the Jewish bakers' union."

coming from countries unused to democracy and self-government could be counted on to uphold the American system, and he did not hesitate to define the question of race suicide as the “most fundamental of our social problems” (1907, p. 201). The overwhelmingly eastern European Jews who arrived in the United States formed one of the largest new immigrant populations, and they certainly played a *major*—but by no means *exclusive*—role in these racial concerns of the time. As correctly pointed out by an early interpreter of Progressive Era debates on immigration, the “uncharitable descriptions of the Russian or Polish Jew involved no more special discrimination than similar denunciations of the southern Italian” (Solomon 1972, pp. 168–169). In this connection, it should be added, our paper has also shown that Commons’s adoption of a racialist perspective, as far as Jews are concerned, did not involve any strict form of biological determinism—and the same can be said, allowing for differences in style and emphasis, of other leading racial authors of the day such as Ripley and Ross. Commons was imprecise and contradictory on how he defined race (his 1907 book was intended for a popular audience) and as a Lamarckian—that is, as one who believed environment affected genotype—he slid back and forth between heredity and cultural explanation. Nonetheless, with the notable exception of “inferior” races, Commons did not attribute to race a major role as an independent causal variable in the explanation of social phenomena. Racial heredity, though it may help to explain certain peculiar features of a population group, was itself ultimately the (implicitly) Lamarckian product of social and environmental forces. Significantly, even Kate H. Claghorn, a well-known Progressive Era paladin of immigrants’ rights and an outspoken opponent to racism, in her unsympathetic review of Commons’s *Races and Immigrants*, was willing to admit that “[i]n respect to European white immigration, instance after instance is given of exceedingly rapid effacement of the original group lines of difference, especially through the work of trade-unions, which have repeatedly shown their power to unite new arrival of different nationalities on a basis of common class interest” (1909, p. 136).

Second, within this general xenophobic context Commons’s stereotyping of Jews contains assertions that do imply specific instances of anti-Semitism. It is not difficult, in fact, to detect in Commons’s depiction of the individualistic, undisciplined, speculative, and metaphysical Jew traces of three of the several historically recurrent anti-Semitic images discussed by Helen Fein (1987): 1) the Jew as a betrayer and a manipulator (the Judas image); 2) the Jew as an exploiter personifying usury or modern capitalism (the Shylock image); and 3) the Jew as a skeptic, an iconoclast, a revolutionary, undermining faith and authority (the Red Jew). But Commons did not limit himself to the proposition of these anti-Semitic figures of the Jew (the cultural level posited by Fein in her definition). While it cannot be affirmed that Commons undertook any specific material action to limit the Jews’ economic, political, or social rights, his hostile beliefs did affect his own views as a social scientist (the social or institutional level of Fein’s definition). Commons’s published opinions on Jewish immigration from eastern Europe were, in fact, clearly intended to distance the Jews from the old-stock Anglo-American “Protestant” values and bloodlines and to discriminate them from the more desirable immigrant races. Accordingly, in this paper we have documented how Commons associated the rise of the contract system and the sweatshop with Jewish racial characteristics. We have also shown how these prejudices led him to the claim, presented in his 1901 Industrial Commission report, that the innate

traits of the Jewish worker would have prevented the establishment of an enduring and effective trade unionism. Commons's conjectures about the future of Jewish unionism were to be falsified quite soon by historical evidence. As ably documented by Nathan Reich (1955), within ten years after the publication of the Industrial Commission report, a series of celebrated mass strikes, known under the name of "The Great Revolt," agitated the immigrant Jewish community. General strikes by shirtwaist makers in 1909–10, cloakmakers in 1910, furriers in 1912, men's tailors in 1913, and others established the unions as powers to be reckoned with in the garment industry in New York and in other Jewish trades. Entering the revolt with 5,000 members in forty-one constituents' organizations, the United Hebrew Trades, a federation of predominantly Jewish unions, claimed 250,000 members and 111 affiliated by 1914. "Jewish unionism had arrived," emphatically concludes Reich (1955, p. 267; see also Soyer 2002). We have seen that by the time Commons wrote his *Chautauquan* articles, then published as *Races and Immigrants in America*, he had somehow changed opinion, acknowledging that even "the individualistic Jew from Russia, contrary to his race instinct, is joining the unions" (1907a, p. 153). But, for the definitive recantation of his original position, we have to wait until 1934, when, in the pages of his autobiography, Commons felt compelled to admit:

I visited with him [Abraham Bisno] in New York one of the garment workers' strikes which occurred at the semi-annual opening of the busy season. It was certainly a mass movement. All of the workers in that branch of clothing were out. Thousands were on an open space, listening to the eloquence of Emma Goldman, while the organizers of the upstart union were negotiating with their employers. He said that within a month these masses would quit paying dues and would begin secretly cutting wages by connivance with their bosses. The union rules would be evaded and the union would dissolve. So it happened, and I reached a conclusion that the individualistic Jew could not maintain a permanent union.

But I was wrong. I had not distinguished between race psychology and industrial psychology, nor between sweatshop psychology and factory psychology. Ten years later, when the factory system was coming into the garment industry, the Jews organized permanent unions and became the leaders of the other races in that industry. (1934a, p. 70; emphasis added)²⁰

Commons's formal disavowal of his beliefs about Jewish workers bears witness to the intellectual honesty of a man who, in his autobiography, declared that "[l]iberty, equality, and defiance of the Fugitive Slave Law were my birthright" (1934a, p. 53). As the evidence provided in this paper suggests, however, in Progressive Era America neither cultural enlightenment nor sincere commitment to social reform would work as effective barriers against prejudicial and mythical notions about Jews.

²⁰It should be noted, however, that Commons's recantation of his racialist views applies only to the Jews. Commons, in fact, did not repudiate the race suicide theory that underwrote his anti-immigrant fervor, and neither did he see fit to repudiate his claims that Blacks and Malays were inherently inferior. Perhaps he did not regard these claims as falsified.

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