Anticolonial Orientalism: Perets Hirshbeyn’s Indian Travelogue

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Abstract: This article inscribes Eastern European Jews into the study of (anti)colonialism and Orientalism by analyzing the 1929 India travelogue by Yiddish writer Perets Hirshbeyn. I show how the context of Jewish modernization movements affected the portrayal of “oriental” Asia in Hirshbeyn’s travel writing. I approach Hirshbeyn’s narrative from the perspective of Cultural Studies and critically explore his self-placement between belonging to the West and identifying with the Orient. Hirshbeyn’s narrative includes a strong anti-colonialist tone, which is often juxtaposed with his Orientalist argumentation. At the same time, Hirshbeyn traffics in paternalistic, orientalizing language and mobilizes it to draw analogies between oppressed Jews and oppressed Indians. Hirshbeyn’s perception of the social situation in colonized India was, I argue, conditioned by the Jewish context in Eastern Europe. I suggest that Hirshbeyn, a progressive Eastern European Jew who spent several years in the United States, was an ambivalent actor who transgresses the binary power relations between British colonizers and subordinated native Indians. As a whole, this article deepens our understanding of the relations between colonialism, Orientalism, and Jewishness in Yiddish literary culture.

In July 1927, the Yiddish writer Perets Hirshbeyn sailed into the Indian city of Kolkata (then Calcutta). For seven months he traveled through northern India, visiting Bengal, Delhi, Agra, the Himalayas, and Mumbai (then Bombay). Hirshbeyn, who gained fame as a Yiddish playwright, devoted a significant part of his life and much of the 1920s to traveling around the world. He visited Argentina twice and traveled to such countries as China, Japan, Australia, South Africa, Soviet Russia, and Palestine. Hirshbeyn wrote several insightful travel diaries, as well as numerous travel articles that regularly appeared in periodicals in two of the most important centers of Yiddish culture at that time: New York and Warsaw. At the end of the 1920s, Kletskin's publishing house in
Vilna published a number of Hirshbeyn’s travelogues, including his 1929 Indye: fun mayn rayze in Indye (India: From My Travels to India).

Born in Kleszczele in the Polish-Lithuanian borderlands in 1880, Hirshbeyn was an advocate of modern and progressive secular Yiddish culture. In addition to a progressive approach to literature and theater, his essays, memoirs, and speeches explore such concerns as proletarian struggles, women’s rights, youth education, and Western oppression in colonized Africa and Asia. The latter forms the main subject of Hirshbeyn’s Indye. The present article reads Hirshbeyn’s Indye from a perspective informed by the critical study of colonialism and Orientalism. Analyzing Hirshbeyn’s travel impressions, I explore the ways in which the Jewish writer shaped both by Eastern Europe and America participates in Western Orientalist conceptualizations of India. Simultaneously, I study how Hirshbeyn draws a parallel between two oppressed nations—the first, Indian, and the second, Jewish—in order to give voice to an explicitly anti-colonialist critique.

To situate this study, my work begins with an overview of Jewish, and specifically Yiddish, travel literature, especially as it promulgates Orientalist assumptions. Against that background, I then turn to Hirshbeyn’s book in detail, dividing my discussion into three parts: The first examines Hirshbeyn as an anti-colonialist actor who sharply criticizes Great Britain and its colonial policy in India. The second presents Hirshbeyn as an Orientalist who traffics in language that essentializes India as fanatical and primitive. The final section explores Hirshbeyn’s tertiary, ambivalent subject-position as a Jewish critic of British colonial policy, a position that places him between the British colonizer and Indian subject and leads to the uncomfortable convergence of anti-colonialist rhetoric and Orientalist essentialism.

Whereas the intersection of Jewishness, Orientalism, and colonialism has been addressed to a certain extent by scholars, it is usually limited to the study of Zionism as a colonial movement, the analysis of ethnic tensions in Israel, or explorations of the role of German or British Jews in constructing local colonial discourses. Aspects of the Eastern European Jewish view of the Eastern world have not yet been sufficiently studied. As

1 Following Edward Said, I understand Orientalism as a set of simplistic beliefs attributed by the West to the countries of Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East (the world regions understood as lying to the East of Europe) and constructing them as exotic, backward, or fascinating. I perceive the Orient as a social and cultural construct of Orientalism, rather than a defined geographic location. Later in the text, “the Orient” appears without quotation marks.


3 One important corrective approach is visible in the article by Magdalena Kozłowska, “East sees east: the image of Jews from Islamic countries in the Jewish discourse of interwar Poland,” Middle Eastern Studies 54 (2018): 114-127. Also, Kathryn Hellerstein initiated important research on Eastern European Jews and Asia; see, for instance, Kathryn Hellerstein, “China in Two Yiddish Translations: Ethnographic and Modernist Appropriations” in Catriona MacLeod
Derek Penslar and Ivan Davidson Kalmar note, for German Jews, the idea of the oriental was already embodied in the Ostjude. In the Western European Jewish context, Jews of Poland and Russia were both reviled and revered as “traditional.” Anti-Jewish policies in Eastern Europe defined the Jews as an undesired and unmodern group, with a status lower than that of the ethnic majorities in Poland, Hungary, or Russia. Consequently, for some Eastern European Jews, acculturation was a mechanism for claiming a higher social status and access to Western modernity. Moreover, we can think about the modernization of Eastern European Jewry as a colonial project in which Jews of Western Europe were modernized first, and which then spread to Eastern Europe as a form of colonial cultural expansion, thus defining Eastern European Jews as colonized. As Homi Bhabha writes, colonial subjects often define their selfhood through the same set of discourses as their oppressors. Some members of the Eastern European Jewish cultural elite absorbed Orientalism as a part of a broader idealization of “Westernness” or “modernity.”

I suggest that Hirshbeyn’s Indian travelogue is located in an in-between space, shaped both by Western Orientalist discourse and by the marginality attached to the Jewish minority in Eastern Europe. Eastern European Jews were thus not only on the receiving end of orientalization, but were also its agents. I follow, in this respect, Magdalena Kozłowska’s study which argues that the strategies of representation that Polish–Jewish journalists employed to describe the Jews of Islamic countries borrow from the way the Jews of Eastern Europe were perceived in Western Europe. She underlines that, finding themselves in between modern and traditional identification, Polish–Jewish journalists decided to ensure their belonging to the world that they saw as civilized by transposing concepts they knew from the European hierarchies. This approach allows us to see the relationship between the Jews of Europe’s East and the Eastern world from a much more complex perspective.

Hirshbeyn’s status as an “imperfect” (both Jewish and Eastern European) representative of the West complicates hasty judgments that would see in him a typical Western Orientalist simplifying the realities of the East. It is also helpful to note here that Hirshbeyn’s approach to India was refracted through his experiences as an Eastern European Jew. Even though Hirshbeyn had lived in New York for several years before arriving in India, he asserted that he was not American; “Ikh bin gor nit keyn amerikaner,” he would state at the beginning of his travelogue. As John Efron has

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4 Ivan Davidson Kalmar, Derek Penslar, Orientalism and the Jews, Introduction, XVIII.
7 Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), 121-132.
8 Kozłowska, “East sees east.”
9 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 48.
argued, Jewish Orientalism was entangled with cultural anxiety and a sense of inferiority and did not always share imperial triumphalism.\(^{10}\) Hirshbeyn’s approach to India echoes Efron’s arguments. His Orientalism was inflected by an Eastern European Jewish perspective that identified with the colonial subject’s desire for equality, social progress, and emancipation of the oppressed, while at the same time participating in a Western European colonialist discourse.

**Eastern European Jewry and the Question of the Orient**

The Eastern European cultural background that shaped Hirshbeyn’s visions of India was informed by the dominant trends in Western European colonialist and orientalizing thought of the era. English and French texts dealing with the Orient were often translated into Polish beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and published in integrationist Jewish journals such as the Polish-Jewish *Irzaelita.*\(^ {11}\) Many of these texts thematize histories and cultures of Arab countries, while texts referring to India appeared only later and often cast India in an Orientalist light. In 1935, the Polish translation of *India: Land of the Black Pagoda* (1931) by Lowell Thomas was published, followed by a translation of *A Passage to India* (1924) by E. M. Forster in 1938.\(^ {12}\) Thomas’ book cast India as otherworldly and the “strangest of all the lands on this Earth,” whereas Forster’s book in a fictionalized form depicts conflictual relations between the British and the Indians.\(^ {13}\) Besides the translations into Polish, Polish Jews could shape their perception of the Eastern world through texts in Yiddish. In 1925, Aleksander Zyskind Kohn translated into Yiddish a book by John Hagenbeck that promised to include “extraordinary experiences” from India and contemporary Indonesia.\(^ {14}\) B. Ejsurowicz of Warsaw travelled to India in the mid-1920s and upon his return to Poland visited diverse cities holding in Yiddish lectures on India. In Biała Podlaska he talked about the “prophets of the East” (*nevi'im fun mizrekh*) and in Zamość about “the land of a legendary reality,” whereas his Warsaw talk dealt with the relations between the British and the Indians.\(^ {15}\) Travel literature became an important arena for negotiating Eastern Europe’s relation to the East.

Although Polish and Polish-Jewish travelers did not have the support of colonial powers behind them, their travelogues are often filled with concepts and ideas borrowed

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10 John M. Efron, “Orientalism and the Jewish Historical Gaze,” in *Orientalism and the Jews,* 80-81, 93.
11 Kozłowska, 116. Analogous texts also appeared in the Yiddish channels, though much later, in the 1920s and 1930s.
15 Posters and leaflets, National Library of Poland, files: DŻS IK 2f, DŻS XVIIC 1c.
from German, English, or French travel texts.\textsuperscript{16} While Eastern Europe (and Poland within it) was orientalized and identified by the colonizing West as the “wild East,” this did not prevent but rather inspired Polish and Polish-Jewish travelers’ exoticization of the non-European.\textsuperscript{17} Eastern European travel writers projected the imagined superiority of the West over the East, constructing the peoples of Asia or Africa as wild, backward, unusual, or even non-existent before their colonization. For instance, Shulim Gottlieb was convinced that “strange customs” ruled in Egypt and referring to the job prospects that Jewish immigrants might encounter in Africa, argued that the black Sudanese were not “developed enough” to do the jobs usually performed there by the whites.\textsuperscript{18} Gottlieb’s remarks included the Eastern European Jews within the category of white and Western people. As Izabela Kalinowska writes, Polish travelers to the East were in the process of negotiating their own cultural identity, and many of them referred to the East to assert their westernness.\textsuperscript{19} Orientalist elements in Hirshbeyn’s India narrative follow this same tendency and indicate that he was likely exposed to this category of publications written by both Jewish and non-Jewish authors.

Beyond this travel literature context, Hirshbeyn’s worldview was also molded by the ideological currents then popular among Eastern European Jews. Although, as Yiddish writer Melekh Ravish recalls, Hirshbeyn was outraged when readers attributed a “partisan character” to his texts, his socio-political attitude is clearly visible when his works are read almost a century later.\textsuperscript{20} Hirshbeyn was influenced by both the Haskalah—the Jewish Enlightenment, which sought to include Jews in European modernity—and Jewish socialism. As a teenager, Hirshbeyn lived in Vilna, then a major center for the Jewish workers’ movement. In 1893, Jargon Committees were established in Vilna that popularized Yiddish literature, created libraries, and propagated socialism in Yiddish.\textsuperscript{21} As Adi Mahalel points out, in the 1890s much of Yiddish literature was associated with Jewish political radicalism and the proletarian movement, and took on the character of “protest literature.”\textsuperscript{22} The central role of socialist agitation in Vilna’s Jewish public life and hopes related to the 1905 revolution in Russia had a crucial

\textsuperscript{16} This attitude is well visible in Mieczysław Lepecki’s texts on Latin America and Africa: \textit{Na podbój Amazonki} (Conquering the Amazon), Warsaw, 1928 or \textit{U wrot tajemniczego Maghrebu} (At the Gates of the Mysterious Maghreb), Warsaw 1925.


\textsuperscript{19} Izabela Kalinowska, \textit{Between East and West: Polish and Russian Nineteenth-century Travel to the Orient} (Rochester: Rochester University Press, 2004), 68.


influence on the formation of Hirshbeyn’s socialist views, which were later voiced in his literary works as well. He saw himself as a *keler-meshoyrer* (cellar poet), giving a voice to the suffering of the poor, and cooperated with local Bundist and socialist Zionist publishers.23 Among other means, Hirshbeyn supported the socialist cause by donating royalties from his lectures to secular schools maintained by the Bundist TSYSHO (Central Jewish School Organization).24

Hirshbeyn’s identification with socialist ideas of liberation is well visible in his 1926 text “Kind, kapital, un fabrik” (Child, Capital, and Factory), where he criticizes child labor in China and the exploitative social order stabilized in China through Western capital.25 His other text, “Neger in di Dorem Shtatn” (Negroes in the Southern States), further strengthens his preoccupation with the experience of the subaltern.26 Many of Hirshbeyn’s texts from the 1920s were concerned with the new society emerging in communist Russia.27 The unjust political and economic order that Hirshbeyn criticized in the context of China, the United States, and Eastern Europe was maintained through discrimination and exploitation which, at the beginning of the twentieth century, were addressed by the socialist movement. Jewish socialism, traceable in Hirshbeyn’s reasoning, was to a great extent an emancipatory movement and its universalism suggested solidarity with the oppressed around the world.28 Karl Marx already in the 1850s condemned British colonialism in India, whereas the Bund in interwar Poland defended the right of Palestinians to organize against the Jewish colonization.29

Rooted in these ideas of liberation, Hirshbeyn, in diverse geographical contexts, was a self-appointed ally of the disenfranchised and a propagator of emancipatory ideologies and socialist ideals of social transformation. His *Indye* shows that he was not reluctant to identify himself with the oppressed Indians and used his status as an

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27 YIVO Archive, Perets Hirshbeyn Papers, folders 124 and 125.


29 Ashutosh Kumar, “Marx and Engels on India,” *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 53 no. 4 (1992), 493-504; Nathan, Cohen, “The Bund’s Contribution to Yiddish Culture in Poland Between the Two World Wars,” in *Jewish Politics in Eastern Europe: The Bund at 100*, Jack Jacobs ed., (Palgrave: Basingstoke, 2001), 120. To be sure, socialism also had its pro-colonialism facets, such as when it argued for a “positive colonial policy” which was supposed to lead the colonized nations to “maturity” and future independence.
outsider, removed from Indian-British tensions, to advocate for an Indian socialist agenda. The ideas Hirshbeyn suggested were likely partially influenced by Rabindranath Tagore’s arguments, which called for social change in India, but did not completely disavow Western influence. Both Hirshbeyn and Tagore tried to convey a positivist, anti-nationalist message, one which was supposed to voice the interests of the oppressed.\textsuperscript{30}

\textbf{Hirshbeyn the Anti-Colonialist}

The central axis of Hirshbeyn’s travelogue is anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist. He views the British Empire’s global dominance as profoundly oppressive, both economically and culturally. Hirshbeyn, in the anticolonial spirit, criticizes colonialism in and of itself as the European effort to rule and exploit the world. He describes the violent rivalry between colonial powers as a “velt-farkhapenish”—a “snatching up” of the pieces of the world.\textsuperscript{31} Hirshbeyn criticizes the European desire “to hear only its own voice,” to the exclusion of colonial subjects.\textsuperscript{32} Hirshbeyn also lists several cases of British imperialism destroying the countries under its rule. For example, he accuses the East India Company, representing the English government in India as early as the beginning of the seventeenth century, of participating in the African slave trade while destroying Indian society. Hirshbeyn also accuses England of developing the opium trade as a means of “poisoning” East Asian social infrastructures and thereby opening the way to easy conquest. These references historicize colonialism and define it as politically, economically, and culturally destructive At the same time, Hirshbeyn is convinced that in the twentieth century there will be a breakthrough in which colonialism will be defeated and discrimination will come to an end. Hirshbeyn writes: “Is there another way to connect nations with one another, to connect one human with another? Hands [of the East and West] are already stretching out. The hand of India is arising from the sea of oppressed masses.”\textsuperscript{33} Hirshbeyn further depicts the colonial system as something that does not belong in the modern world and envisions colonial subjects eventually rejecting its dominance. He also criticizes England for cultivating the colonial discourse in the West, helping to construct the Orient as a wild, unknown, and dangerous space, writing:

The imperialist countries spread fear of the Orient. [This is] in order to be able to continue the armament. People [in the West] are afraid that one day the revolt will come and the nations of the Orient will wake up and rise with vengeance

\begin{thebibliography}{1}
\bibitem{spivak99} Postcolonial scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who criticizes Foucault and Deleuze for “investing masses with the revolutionary force” and “valorizing the oppressed,” would probably criticize Hirshbeyn for trying to inspire or defend the Indians. In Spivak’s understanding, an intellectual such as Hirshbeyn cannot claim to represent the oppressed, even less so if he comes from the “outside.” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, \textit{A Critique of Postcolonial Reasons. Towards a History of the Vanishing Present} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 269.
\bibitem{hirshbeyn1} Hirshbeyn, \textit{Indye}, 255.
\bibitem{hirshbeyn2} Hirshbeyn, \textit{Indye}, 160.
\bibitem{hirshbeyn3} Hirshbeyn, \textit{Indye}, 164-165.
\end{thebibliography}
against white men and the West. Therefore, [the colonial countries demand that] the Orient must be kept down, in oppression, as long as it is possible.\textsuperscript{34}

Hirshbeyn goes on to denounce British exploitation of India using the metaphor of a rope binding India’s neck and feet, physically oppressing India and making it reliant on Great Britain’s mercy.\textsuperscript{35} In his view, the British are power-hungry and militant, and they unscrupulously strive to control the whole world. He is outraged at the paternalistic approach that Britain assumes toward India, as well as its efforts to morally legitimate its rule. Elsewhere in the travelogue, Hirshbeyn points to the fatal consequences of colonialism, such as the destruction of local traditions, economic devastation, and conflicts among social groups. Hirshbeyn is surprised by the ease with which Britain imposed a system of subjugation upon India. He writes: “the distant whistle of a warship reminds the Indians of their status.”\textsuperscript{36} In an animalistic comparison, Hirshbeyn sees colonized India as a “nest in which [the British] parasites nested for centuries.”\textsuperscript{37}

British colonization influenced not only the political and economic system of India but also its cultural system and, accordingly, Hirshbeyn occupies himself extensively with the effects of cultural colonization, in particular by commenting on Christian missionaries in India.\textsuperscript{38} Writing about the Himalayas, Hirshbeyn indicates that “the hand of the English reached even here. It is looking for something, grasping around to snatch its share (...) Missionaries of all Christian streams (...) are pumping Christianity into the local population (...).”\textsuperscript{39} He later continues, “introducing religion in the twentieth century is more than stupidity. Especially, as all the oppressed peoples of the East, West and South know, behind the missionaries hide armies, with cannons and rifles.”\textsuperscript{40} Hirshbeyn is aware that Christian missions are closely tied to conquest and exploitation. On the one hand, he admits that missionaries alleviate suffering, but at the same time they force Indians to accept Christianity. Hirshbeyn regards this practice as the “buying of souls.”\textsuperscript{41}

Indeed, Hirshbeyn takes care to depict evidence of Great Britain’s cultural violence mediated through missionizing. In one anecdote, a British missionary woman is

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  \item \textsuperscript{34} Hirshbeyn, \textit{Indye}, 12.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Hirshbeyn, \textit{Indye}, 255-256.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Hirshbeyn, \textit{Indye}, 277.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Hirshbeyn, \textit{Indye}, 232.
  \item \textsuperscript{39} Hirshbeyn, \textit{Indye}, 133.
  \item \textsuperscript{40} Hirshbeyn, \textit{Indye}, 219.
  \item \textsuperscript{41} Hirshbeyn, \textit{Indye}, 220.
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Hirshbeyn’s conversation with the British woman is also not unique in his text. At several points, he encounters British men and women whom he perceives as representatives of a destructive British colonialism. An English owner of a guesthouse in which Hirshbeyn has stopped in the Himalayas warns him, for example, against the “savage peoples” (vilde felker). She then cautions him that, as a foreigner with no experience in India, he would not know how to adapt to the social conditions in India. Indians, the woman argues, “could easily exploit him.” As such, “you cannot allow them much freedom.” The Englishwoman advises Hirshbeyn that “one should not interfere” in a well-functioning colonial system in which the British rule and Indians serve. The woman is convinced that democratization “could harm the breed that serves us so well.”

Like the English proprietor, most Britons Hirshbeyn meets in India are satisfied with the status quo and do not want any democratic changes. The British seem to Hirshbeyn to have a sense of superiority and commitment to what they see as a mission civilisatrice, and are proud of having introduced education and Western customs to Indian society. Elsewhere in the text, Hirshbeyn engages in conversation with a British judge. The Yiddish writer accuses his British counterpart of the “conquest of Canada, New Zealand, Australia, southern and eastern Africa, India, Egypt, and Arabia (...).” Yet, the man does not understand the criticism, convinced that Britain is predestined to

42 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 221-223.
43 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 224.
44 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 141.
45 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 141.
47 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 149-150.
“[control] hundreds of millions of people.” Hirshbeyn's allegations are for the judge both a personal insult and an unjust criticism of Great Britain. Hirshbeyn presents these voices in a clearly negative light and criticizes them as proof of how colonialist reasoning constitutes a part of Britishness.

In addition to its political rule, Hirshbeyn also condemns Great Britain’s symbolic domination of the Indian landscape. For example, Hirshbeyn considers the Victoria Memorial Hall, built in Calcutta to commemorate Queen Victoria, to be a symbol of British power. As Metcalf argues, Victoria Memorial Hall was erected in the neoclassical style, fashionable in contemporary Britain, thus marking the cultural and architectural dominance of the metropolis over colonized India. It was a projection of European style onto India. The massiveness and beauty of the building were intended to confirm the affiliation of India with the British Empire. When Hirshbeyn visits the site, however, he is confused to see a plaque that informs visitors of the “voluntary contributions of the peoples of India” which allowed for the completion of the palace’s construction in 1921. It seems to him problematic, placed only to emphasize the idealized prosperity of India under British rule. Hirshbeyn is also bothered by the accumulation of all kinds of monuments to Queen Victoria and her successors. The multiple marble and bronze statues he encounters symbolize, to him, the “harsh British rule” (kalter makht) that “oppresses” (drikt) Indian subjects. Elsewhere, he underlines that “slaves” bound by a “long chain of human suffering” were forced into erecting the architectural symbols of British imperialism. Similar reflections accompany Hirshbeyn when, in Calcutta, he sees the retinue of the British governor, surrounded by soldiers in uniforms with stripes and in a carriage decorated with white feathers. Hirshbeyn asks rhetorically: “Why and for whom? For whom is this glow?” Hirshbeyn denounces the exaggerated wealth aimed at concealing the poverty and exploitation of Indian colonial subjects. Hirshbeyn, whose first works were naturalist descriptions of Vilna's poverty, demands that pressing social problems not be obscured by exaggerated luxury celebrating the alleged prosperity of colonized India.

**Hirshbeyn the Orientalist**

Despite his anti-colonialist rhetoric, Hirshbeyn himself still engages in language that orientalizes Indian subjects, whom he portrays as fanatic, backward, and primitive. On the one hand, Hirshbeyn is intensely occupied with the lives of the lower classes in India. He feels unusually connected to the Indian people, even though he is a stranger in

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48 Hirshbeyn, *Indye*, 149.
50 Hirshbeyn, *Indye*, 49.
52 For instance, Hirshbeyn’s first drama *Miriam* (1905) tells the story of a poor orphan girl who leaves her shtetl for a big city (probably Vilna), where she also suffers poverty and ends up in a brothel.
their country. On the other hand, this perceived proximity allows him to freely rebuke the Indians. Hirshbeyn positions himself as an advocate for his fellow oppressed, which leads him to explain to them what he sees as their own problems. As a self-proclaimed representative of progress, Hirshbeyn does not hesitate to criticize what he considers archaic, violent, or inhuman. Writing about India, Hirshbeyn walks in the Orientalist shoes of a Westerner and authoritatively directs the Indian people toward changes he wants them to make.

Hirshbeyn’s critique begins from a discussion of what he views as the primitive elements of Indian society that prevent social progress. Hirshbeyn argues that India suffers from “religious ignorance” (religyeze finsternish) and that fanatic religiosity prevents any and all social advancement. Elsewhere, Hirshbeyn writes that the dalits (members of ethno-religious groups at the bottom of the Indian social hierarchy) have been expelled “from the human community,” and criticizes the “brutality” and “primitiveness” of Indian religious practices. For example, he cannot understand how the practice of offering animal sacrifices still exists. He refers to “brutal gods,” “wild instincts,” and “spasm-like shaking” as defining features of religion in India. The local religious practices are for him a form of exploitation of the common people by the priests (whom he sees as “parasites of the nation”) and the antinomy of modernity. Hirshbeyn sees this as a hopeless situation and suggests that social change in India will only be possible when religion loses its importance. Hirshbeyn’s remarks about Indian religions being brutal and primitive echo British colonialist sentiment which, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, interfered with India’s religious traditions. Under pressure from Britain’s Christian radicals, as of 1813 the East India Company worked for the “moral and religious improvement” of Indian subjects and attempted to stop what they saw as “idolatry.”

Hirshbeyn extends his critique to what he views as the deep inequalities inherent in the caste system, which he sees as a “sick oriental reality” (kranke orientalishe virklemkhayt). He describes the primacy of the Brahmins as “a dictatorship on behalf of the gods lasting three thousand years.” He sees the Brahmins’ consolidation of archaic social divisions as “perpetuating the darkness in the heads of several hundred million people.” According to Hirshbeyn, the Indian social system is based on the maintenance of inequality and thereby negates humanist values that define the twentieth century. As such, he finds the entire social system an anachronistic “nightmare” (koshmar). In India at that time, belonging to a caste defined not only one’s social status, but also one’s professional status. Hirshbeyn, referring to what were then specifically Jewish

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54 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 260.
55 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 98.
56 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 220.
57 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 52-56.
58 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 230.
60 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 161.
61 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 39.
professions, comes out with anger against this lack of social mobility: “Why can man not devote himself to something better, if he has the energy and the ability to do it? (...) The son of a tailor will not be an architect here, and the son of a shoemaker a doctor.”\footnote{62} When visiting the Himalayas, Hirshbeyn sympathizes with a group of children removing manure and cleaning the gutter. The children’s faces seem to him noble and beautiful and he condemns the class system that takes away their right to improve their fate. In a gesture of support, he greets the child pariahs and says to them, “I will tell you what I always say: your time is coming ...”\footnote{63} With these and other scenes, Hirshbeyn proposes the highly individualistic message of an idealized, progressive society, where upward mobility is possible. At the same time, he further cements his subject-position as distinct from the Indians by perpetuating an Orientalist discourse in which it is the caste system that prevents social mobility rather than any imperial force.

Hirshbeyn often generalizes about “the national character of India,” approaching the Indians as a uniform mass of people without individual desires. This limits the idea of individuality important in Western, and thus also progressive Jewish, self-conceptualizing. Hirshbeyn’s anthropological and sociological observations are aimed at “understanding” the Indians, “translating” their habits, culture, and hierarchy in a way that is understandable to Eastern European Jews. For instance, referring to what he perceives as unusual funerary practices in India, using phrases such as “among us” (bay undz), Hirshbeyn contrasts Indian funerals with normative Jewish practices.\footnote{64} By this mean, Hirshbeyn constructs two separate groups, one consisting of Hirshbeyn and his Jewish readers, and the second of Indians, whom he defines as oriental Others. At the same time, Hirshbeyn analyzes what he understands as the “Indian psyche” and, in his opinion, the “national values” common in India. Hirshbeyn indicates that, for the Western world, “India is still a mystery” or an “exotic picture.”\footnote{65} Here, one can detect his reductionist view: What Hirshbeyn does not understand is a mystery, and what he describes and properly explains ceases to be so. This strengthens the role of the explorer, translator, and teacher, which representatives of the West attributed to themselves in the context of the Orient.\footnote{66} As Richard King notes, within most accounts of Western visitors in India there is a tendency to claim to have uncovered the ‘essence’ of the object under consideration. Thus, works that purport to explain the ‘Oriental mindset’ or the ‘Indian mentality,’ etc. presuppose that there is a homogeneous ‘essence’ or ‘nature’ that can be directly intuited by an India expert.\footnote{67}

\footnote{62} Hirshbeyn, Indye, 40, 42.  
\footnote{63} Hirshbeyn, Indye, 135.  
\footnote{64} Hirshbeyn, Indye, 265-266.  
\footnote{65} Hirshbeyn, Indye, 127, 249.  
Hirshbeyn further generalizes by declaring that the country is dominated by “pessimism” and a “fear of life.” In order to base his argument on a “credible source,” he quotes from Indian holy books and offers his own interpretations. Hirshbeyn states that Indians are focused on eternal life after death, neglecting the temporal on Earth, which he then interprets as a withdrawal from the need to improve the present situation of the poor. Hirshbeyn judges the Indian psyche as lacking the impulse toward rebellion and resistance against difficult social situations. He writes:

In Calcutta, Agra, Delhi or Mumbai, you see half-naked, but satisfied human masses. Satisfying themselves literally with nothing (...) They find a place to rest on the sidewalk or directly on the street. (...) The pariah puts himself on the street, looks at the stars, and has the feeling that both heaven and earth belong to him.

Hirshbeyn emphasizes this Orientalist paradigm by repeatedly comparing India to an immature child dependent on a firm and responsible mother. As “eternal children” trapped in a caste system or as “childish” religious zealots, Indians need Britain, the “mother” in this allegory, to “beat them [the Indians] on their hands” in order to usher them down the right path. Echoing Kant’s figuration of the Enlightenment as a process of leaving behind immaturity and the Hegelian vision of non-European world (especially Africa) as “the childhood of civilization,” Hirshbeyn places himself in the patriarchal role of European authority. Hirshbeyn calls on India to “wake up from its continuous silence, to listen to the harsh and brutal step of the West trampling the body of India” and become a fully matured nation in line with European models of progress.

As Edward Said writes, the Western discourse on the Orient has developed into a system of discrimination in which the Orient represents a backward, collective “otherness” awaiting enlightenment by a Eurocentric historiography in the guise of universalism. Hirshbeyn, indignant at the “religious fanaticism” and “passivism” of Indians, suggests for them elements of Western modernity, but is simultaneously convinced that India’s backwardness is unchangeable. This reflects Said’s argument

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68 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 274.
69 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 79-80.
70 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 104.
71 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 138-139.
72 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 272.
74 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 287-288.
about the presumed “unchangeability” of Oriental societies and the belief that progress and change can only come from colonizers.  

**Hirshbeyn Between East and West**

Hirshbeyn’s travelogue is an example of how a change in geographical and cultural context can allow travel writers to play with their identifications. Hirshbeyn, both consciously and unconsciously, moves between identifying with the Orient and with the West, between anti-colonialist sentiment and paternalistic and Orientalist intervention. The ambivalent character of Hirshbeyn in the Indian context (he was Jewish and thus not entirely Western) upsets a dichotomous order of clearly defined Western colonizers as well as colonized and orientalized Indians. Further complicating this binary are Hirshbeyn’s references to the Jewish experience in Eastern Europe and in the Americas, in which there is potentially an analogy to be made between the anti-Jewish discrimination and the cruel dominance of colonial powers over Indian society. However, when referring to progressive Jewish examples, Hirshbeyn also seems to maneuver in order to disguise his Orientalist remarks about Indian society.

Hirshbeyn’s own identity was hybrid. He was born and socialized in Eastern Europe and immigrated to the United States in 1914. When he visited India in 1926 and 1927, as indicated earlier, his American identity was still not firm. Despite his protestations, however, the years Hirshbeyn spent in the US (1914-1920, 1922-1925) likely strengthened Hirshbeyn’s identification with the West, as well as his belief in the democratic ideals of progress and equality. Consequently, traveling through India, Hirshbeyn could choose to interpret what he saw as an agent of a number of different national identities and groups of belonging. On the one hand, as someone who had experienced marginality in both Eastern Europe and the US, Hirshbeyn could empathize with the prejudice and poverty he observed. For the underprivileged Indians, Hirshbeyn’s democratic attitude immediately defined him as “not British.” The Indians immediately recognized that. When, for example, Hirshbeyn ventured into a poor neighborhood and expressed his interest in the miserable living conditions of the poor, those he saw identified him as “keyn Britisher.” On the other hand, in India, where his whiteness “sticks out,” Hirshbeyn could also adopt the role of a privileged Westerner, a role that, even after spending a number of years in the US and obtaining American citizenship, he could hardly play in America. In India, where few were aware of European and American discrimination against Jews or of anti-Semitism, Hirshbeyn could pose as a representative of the enlightened West rather than being a marginalized Eastern European Jew. In Europe or the US at that time, a Jewish traveler would have been excluded from this circle by the “real” representatives of the West.

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77 Hirshbeyn, *Indye*, 258.
Hirshbeyn’s ambivalence about this liminal and shifting identity is reflected in his language. On the one hand, writing about how Europeans are perceived in India, Hirshbeyn uses pronouns that include him in Western culture and European civilization. He writes, for example, “our entire [Western] technique has only one purpose: destruction.”79 Hirshbeyn reports that Indians also identify him as a representative of the oppressive West; one of the members of the revolutionary movement “Young India” addresses Hirshbeyn with the following words: “You [plural, meaning Westerners] do not know how to control instincts, and the Indian people have learned for centuries how to strive for fullness, how to control themselves.”80 In Agra, an Indian child associates him with Great Britain and imperialism and asks him: “Why do you [plural, Westerners] hurt us so much?”81 Hirshbeyn rejects this connection with the colonizer and replies, “Child, I have not come to do any harm to anyone.” These associations shame the writer, but the feeling of shame over Western misdemeanors is also a way to underline his Western privilege.

On the other hand, moments like these lead Hirshbeyn to reflect on his status between the West and the Orient. Underlining his affinity with the Indians, Hirshbeyn writes that he has grown up “on the border of the West” (oysevakns tsvisn mayrev-grenetsn), and suggests that he is at the same time Western and Oriental, not fully fitting in anywhere. In Bengal, listening to Indian music, Hirshbeyn is struck by its resemblance to Jewish music. Here, his invocation of the first person plural is more akin to his previous bay undz—that is to say, the “we” of Jewish communal belonging. He writes, “how close to us, the Jews, is the melody of the oriental music. Hearing it, I heard a variation of our music, wandering somewhere around the desert.” The melody even reminds him of the sound of Yom Kippur prayers.83 Hirshbeyn feels so connected with the oriental melodies that at some point he goes further to claim that he is a “child” of the Orient, a child who was simply “kidnapped” by Western culture and music.84 His stay in India was an experience that enlivened his identification with the Orient, with which, as a Jew with biblical roots in the Middle East, he could identify in a certain way.85 Hirshbeyn’s assertions of himself or Eastern European Jews in general as being oriental are a mechanism designed to underscore the proximity between Jews and Indians and disavow allegations of an Orientalist approach. At the same time, with Hirshbeyn’s self-identification as a “child” of the Orient, he is trafficking in an Orientalist stereotype of the oriental as immature and childish.

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79 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 31.
80 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 31.
81 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 269.
82 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 287-288.
83 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 172-173.
84 Yiddish original: “Ikh bin a kind fun unter azelkhe himlen, mit dem ayntsikn untersheyd, ikh hob zikh gelozt farkhappn fun dem fremd nigun in mayrev-land”
85 Melekh Ravitch, echoing the Orientalist stereotypes, has suggested that the time in Asia influenced Hirshbeyn’s writing, and that his narrative became “orientally static” and his tone “oriental.” Ravitch, “Fun masoes biniomin hashlishi tsu masoes Perets Hirshbeyn,” 111, 116.
I suggest that drawing on his Eastern European background, Hirshbeyn goes beyond the Western colonialist critique of India. Bringing in progressive Jewish references and underlining his lack of belonging to the imperialist West, to a certain extent, destabilizes Hirshbeyn’s Orientalist remarks. When opposing child marriage, the lack of opportunities for upward social mobility, or the discrimination against women in India, Hirshbeyn uses an ideological framework shaped within the social and intellectual constellation of his early years in Eastern Europe. From the concerns of Jewish socialism Hirshbeyn takes the ideals of equality, the proletariat’s struggle, and women’s rights and applies them to his analysis of Indian society. Hirshbeyn’s involvement in the women’s cause is traceable, for instance, in his text “Di revolutsye befrayt di froy” (The Revolution Liberates Women), which referred to the improvements that socialism brought to women in Soviet Russia.  

In the mid-1920s, referring to the situation of immigrant Eastern European Jewish women in Argentina, Hirshbeyn condemned the local morals that limited the rights of women and were in his view a far cry from the situation in the United States:

When a girl comes to Argentina wanting to work in a factory or to be independent in any other way, instead of looking for a groom who would rescue her—no, Argentina is a swamp for these kinds of girls (...) A woman is helpless here. And should the girl transgress the borders and just go out to look for a job, she will be treated with suspicion. After work she cannot spend any moment hanging around outside. In North America, I see Jewish daughters who go out with whomever they want. This is natural. But the local ethics in Argentina do not allow it.

Hirshbeyn’s criticism regarding women’s issues in India concerns the same areas as in the case of Eastern European Jews: patriarchalism, discrimination, and child marriage. His criticism of the treatment of women in India is rooted in Jewish feminist movements demanding a better situation for women, and at the same time echoes colonial “antidotes” for the backwardness of India. As Joanna Lisek writes, the issue of women’s rights and emancipation, rooted in both Haskalah and positivist social thought, has become an important vector of modern Yiddish culture. In the interwar period, about sixty to seventy percent of Jewish women in Poland participated in the process of secularization and modernization. About one-third of the Bund members were women, as were many activists within the Zionist movement. Jewish women in Poland, Hungary,

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87 Perets Hirshbeyn, “Argentine,” 1926, undated, YIVO Archive, Perets Hirschbeyn Papers, Folder 126, 4-5.
and other Eastern European countries gained access to education and electoral rights and publicly demanded equal treatment.\textsuperscript{89}

Already in the first decade of the twentieth century, Hirshbeyn was convinced that “not only is a Jewish man the flywheel of the new times, but also the Jewish woman is an equal part of a future Jewishness.”\textsuperscript{90} Hirshbeyn’s pro-emancipation beliefs found expression in his literary work. In \textit{Tkies-kaf} (Handshake, 1908) he criticized the practice of arranged marriages among Eastern European Jews. In the figure of Khanele, Hirshbeyn empowered young Jewish women who strove for love and condemned matchmaking as a financial transaction. In \textit{Oyfn sheyd veg} (At the Crossroads, 1911) he portrayed Dora and Michael Helman, a couple who led a traditional Jewish life with defined gender roles: men focused on religion and women on the family and household. Hirshbeyn criticized this family model of an absent father and praised Dora as a strong woman who took her life in her own hands and independently managed to bring up their children.

These observations concerning the situation of Jewish women in Eastern Europe and the US informed Hirshbeyn’s analysis of India’s social conditions. Hirshbeyn criticizes child marriage in India and suggests that in this aspect of social life, Jews are more modern. He writes that, due to the enormous age difference between spouses in India, “the whole nation is physiologically ill. The older the man—the younger his wife. It’s sexually abnormal. It is brutal and backward, so that the old men would take ten- or twelve-year-old wives (...).”\textsuperscript{91} According to Hirshbeyn, a woman in India is constantly humiliated and “deprived of a human character.”\textsuperscript{92} Elsewhere, Hirshbeyn writes that “among our people, love life begins to develop at the age of eighteen or twenty years. Young people get to know each other before the wedding (...). In India, the bride is afraid of her future husband.”\textsuperscript{93} In another passage, Hirshbeyn argues that women in the West enjoy a better status. He writes: “Indian women do not know the girlish feelings of our Western women.”\textsuperscript{94}

The first phrase leaves it ambiguous whom Hirshbeyn means by “our people” while the second one suggests that the category of “Western women” could include also Jewish women. Probably Hirshbeyn refers to a group of Jewish women (in diverse diaspora centers) involved in the modernization, which (at least partially) included them in the category of “Western women.” Although Hirshbeyn’s desired readers (progressive Yiddish speakers) were on the periphery of the West and were often still following


\textsuperscript{90} Hirshbeyn, \textit{In gang fun lebn}, 174.

\textsuperscript{91} Hirshbeyn, \textit{Indye}, 77.

\textsuperscript{92} Hirshbeyn, \textit{Indye}, 75.

\textsuperscript{93} Hirshbeyn, \textit{Indye}, 90.

\textsuperscript{94} Hirshbeyn, \textit{Indye}, 75.
religious prescriptions surrounding family life, in Hirshbeyn’s comparison, they were “more modern” than the Indians. Referring to the social improvements that “our women” experienced in once traditional and superstitious Jewish society, Hirshbeyn underlines his ambivalent position as a Jew and thus hopes to minimize the Orientalist tropes emerging from his argumentation which defines India as antifeminist and hence backward.

Despite his progressive feminist attitude, in his Orientalist essentialism Hirshbeyn believes that the improvement of women’s situation in India could only come from outside and be a result of eradicating what he considers a barbaric Indian culture. Hirshbeyn advocates the emancipation of Indian women in a way similar to that of Jewish women in Eastern Europe, but at the same time he does not believe that Indians will be able to bring about such a change. Hirshbeyn essentializes India as unprogressive, exactly as the British colonizers do, not acknowledging that the country might have its own pro-women reformers. As Spivak argues, the colonialist approach to Indian women was rooted in the imperialist desire of “white men saving brown women from the brown men.” This thinking is traceable also in Hirshbeyn’s analysis of the situation of Indian women. Depriving India of a progressive potential, Hirshbeyn casts himself as a member of Western culture and thus no longer appears as a representative of a fellow discriminated ethnic group.

Hirshbeyn refers to the progressive Jewish example also when discussing religion in India. Hirshbeyn authoritatively states that Indian religious practices do not fit into the modern world. As Richard King points out, Western Orientalist discourses define Indian philosophy and religion as irrational, otherworldly, and mystical, and thus establish the West as superior and rational. Hirshbeyn writes that, in India, “sects still organize sexual orgies around temples and sacrifice goats” and that in holy cities you can still see “fanatics.” Observing what he perceives as cruel religious ceremonies in India, Hirshbeyn is glad that even among traditionally Orthodox Eastern European Jews secularism was becoming more and more powerful. The traveler writes: “(...) in my heart I thank two thousand years of life in the diaspora. It was the dispersion that let us arise, to free ourselves from the altars, priests, and sacrifices.” By pointing out that “we“ (progressive Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe or the Americas) do not sacrifice animals and have to a certain extent freed ourselves from arranged marriages,

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95 Arguments for improving the situation of women also came from reformist-minded Indians. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Ram Mohan Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar criticized the situation of women in India as abnormal. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the ideas of women’s emancipation were included to some extent in the Indian national liberation movement. See Mina Gaikwad, The Ideas of Modern Indian Political Thinkers on Women (Raleigh: Lulu Publication, 2017), 52-53, 118-123.
96 Spivak, A Critique of Postcolonial, 287.
97 Richard King, Orientalism and Religion, 28, 32.
99 Hirshbeyn, Indye, 58.
Hirshbeyn allows his readers to feel more modern.\textsuperscript{100} Hirshbeyn articulates a criticism of religion and social oppression typical of his generation of progressive Eastern European Jews. While his criticism of Indian religious practices is Orientalist in defining them as fanatic, the reference to Jews who once used to be religious in a similar way, but who abandoned the most cruel elements of their faith, to a certain extent dilutes the power of Hirshbeyn’s Orientalist remarks.

Conclusion

Hirshbeyn’s India travelogue presents an opportunity for reflection on (anti)colonial and Orientalist discourses in the peripheries of the West. Writing from a progressive-socialist perspective, Hirshbeyn pays attention to the fate of the poor and the subaltern. Nevertheless, at the same time he traffics in Orientalist discourse that pathologizes India’s “nature” or “psyche” as the main source of its problems. Indeed, it is often hard to state clearly whether Hirshbeyn is a traveler who expresses solidarity with India or one who criticizes and exoticizes it—or, whether he does all three simultaneously.

Inscribing his travelogue with such an Orientalist paradigm, Hirshbeyn aims to satisfy the demands of his readers in Eastern Europe, who likely expected a thrilling read about distant lands and unknown peoples. By juxtaposing Eastern European Jewish and Indian experiences, Hirshbeyn allows his readers to imagine new social hierarchies in which Jews are Western, modern, and advanced, as opposed to Indians who remain familiar with still primitive foils. Orientalizing India, Hirshbeyn tries to help progressive Eastern European Jews de-orientalize themselves. This follows the model identified by Stuart Hall, who argues that only in constructing the Other as its own absolute negation can Westerners recognize themselves as modern.\textsuperscript{101}

Thus, Hirshbeyn is careful not to place the Eastern European and the Indian on equal footing and avoids any mention of Indian modernization initiatives. Hirshbeyn sees the Jewish case as a good example of a successful (albeit unfinished) modernization and liberation. He paternalistically suggests that Indians should follow the secular and socialist ideas circulating in the West and adopted by the Jewish communities of which he is a part; Hirshbeyn assumes that such ideas could not be conceived independently in India. Hirshbeyn, like nineteenth-century utilitarian historians, sees the caste system as the main problem facing Indian society and the reason for its “backwardness.” Hirshbeyn, bound by the Orientalist discourse around India, appears unable to participate in Indian discussions on modernization and liberation. This follows Spivak’s

\textsuperscript{100} In the 1920s, arranged marriages were still commonplace among religious Jews in Eastern Europe. Also, the kaparot custom, during which a rooster was sacrificed on the Yom Kippur holiday, was still practiced. Distancing himself from these practices, Hirshbeyn positions himself and his readers as part of a new modern Jewry.


\textsuperscript{102} Debjani Ganguly, Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity: Notes on a Postcolonial Hermeneutics of Caste (London: Routledge 2006), 42.
arguments about how subaltern resistance discourses are not understood by the West. Instead, Hirshbeyn constructs a discourse in which India needs external help to solve its problems.

At the same time, his travelogue is also a call for the liberation of the oppressed. Indye offers multiple moments of a direct critique of Great Britain’s colonial policy as both an economic and cultural project. For Hirshbeyn, colonized Indians and Eastern European Jews were similarly controlled by external powers, persecuted, restricted, and dependent on a local hegemony. Hirshbeyn approaches India using an analytical apparatus shaped by the Haskalah and the ideologies of the Jewish labor movement. His critique of the situation of women, child labor, and the lack of opportunities for social mobility in India is an extension of a maskilic and socialist critique of the Eastern European shtetl. However, Hirshbeyn’s criticism within the endogenous Jewish context is almost self-explanatory, while in relation to India such criticism often turns into Orientalist accusations by a man from the West who “knows better” about India’s needs. Even though he calls on the Indians to revolt, Hirshbeyn often, like the British, denies Indians the agency to shape their own future. Thus, Hirshbeyn’s approach is hybrid and unstable, moving without resolution between anti-colonialist condemnations and conscious and unconscious Orientalist reductionism.

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