

Peter Ullrich

## With and without Jews: Two families of concepts of antisemitism

*Kurzfassung:* Hinter dem Streit um geeignete Definitionen von Antisemitismus steht eine tiefe Spaltung im Verständnis des Gegenstands. Der Aufsatz zeichnet die Entstehung von zwei inkommensurablen Begriffsfamilien nach: substanzielle und abstrakt-formale Antisemitismusbegriffe. Der semantische Kern substanzieller Antisemitismusbegriffe besteht in Feindschaft gegenüber Juden (bzw. dem Judentum) *als Juden* (auch wenn dieses Negativverhältnis sich Ersatzobjekte wie Israel sucht). In der Vergangenheit schälten sich, vermittelt über Brückenkonzepte wie Kommunikationslatenz, abstrakt-formale Antisemitismusverständnisse heraus. Diese sehen beispielsweise bei bestimmten Formen von Kritik an Israel vor allem historische Verknüpfungen zu Judenfeindschaft. Diese ist aber keine notwendige Begriffsbestimmung mehr. Die axiomatische Spaltung hat analytische und ethische Blockaden für die Antisemitismusforschung und das Engagement gegen Antisemitismus zur Folge. Gefordert sind also Transparenz über die Grundlagen der Diskussion und die Anerkennung der Existenz konkurrierender Begriffe.

*Abstract:* Behind the dispute about definitions of antisemitism we can detect a deep conceptual divide. The paper outlines the development of two distinct and incommensurable families of concepts of antisemitism: substantial and abstract-formal concepts. The semantic core of substantial concepts consists in hostility towards Jews (or Judaism) as Jews (where Jews may also be replaced by substitutes like Israel). In the recent past, mediated by bridging concepts like communication latency, abstract-formal concepts of antisemitism have emerged. In certain forms of criticism towards Israel these concepts consider antisemitic they merely see a historical connection to hatred of Jews. However, hostility towards Jews is no longer a necessary property of the concept. This axiomatic divide blocks the research on and the fight against antisemitism on an analytical and ethical level. What is needed is transparency about the basis of the conversation and a recognition that these two families of concepts exist.

### 1. In the trench war<sup>1</sup>

When I published an expert opinion on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism in 2019 (Ullrich 2019), divergent reactions were to be expected due to the critical tone.<sup>2</sup> But the *criticism* directed at the expert opinion, most of which was strident, focused only on selected aspects with high potential for maximizing differences. Irrespective of the important differences in concrete policy positions with respect to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the fight against antisemitism, the differences that come to light in the debate have a *conceptual basis* that has not yet been elaborated with sufficient clarity as a block to communication. For this reason, I focus here on the development of two fundamentally different concepts of antisemitism, or rather groups of understandings of antisemitism with family resemblances, in particular in the German debate. This conceptual divide runs crosswise to the other theoretical differences in the conceptualization of antisemitism and guides nearly incommensurable perspectives on what is designated by this word but quite differently understood.

### 2. Axiomatic division: Antisemitism with and without Jews

#### 2.1. Substantial concepts of antisemitism

Classical concepts of antisemitism used since the term emerged as a self-description of the antisemites in the late 19th century and up to the political and scientific literature of much of the 20th century have a semantic core: they refer to negative relations to Jews or Judaism (Kohlstruck and Ullrich 2015, 18). Kohlstruck (2020) calls this the "base concept" of antisemitism; it captures a variety of phenomena from unfriendliness to ideological hostility as part of a comprehensive worldview. Examples of this family of understandings of antisemitism include Adorno's remark about antisemitism as "the rumour about the Jews" (Adorno 1951, 200) and Helen Fein's influential definition of antisemitism as "a persisting latent structure of hostile beliefs toward Jews as a collectivity" (Fein 1987, 67). The fact that these phenomena may also be directed at non-Jews and may find substitute objects viewed as Jewish is often expressed as an addendum: "against Jews *as Jews*".<sup>3</sup> The (real or ascribed) *Jewishness* of the others is the crucial semantic criterion and the determining difference to the in-group communicating the antisemitism. In the following, I will refer to such more narrow, 'group-concrete' understandings of antisemitism as *substantial concepts of antisemitism*. Today, there is no longer by any means a consensus on the semantic

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to M. Kohlstruck, C. Gollasch and J. Göckede for helpful suggestions. A longer German version is available at <http://www.rosalux.de>.

<sup>2</sup> I have collected all reactions that I am aware of on my website (<https://textrecycling.wordpress.com/2019/10/29/gutachten-zur-arbeitsdefinition-antisemitismus-der-ihra/>).

<sup>3</sup> For instance in the "Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism" (The JDA Group 2021).

component of hostility towards *Jews*. In particular in some conceptions of "Israel-related antisemitism" and "structural antisemitism", a generalized, expanded or metaphoricized concept of antisemitism *without* an image of a Jewish enemy has established itself (hereinafter *abstract-formal* conception). The critics of my expert opinion and of the *Jerusalem Declaration* presented as an alternative to the IHRA Working Definition largely follow such conceptions, at least implicitly.

## 2.2. Bridging concepts

Different approaches specifically in German research on antisemitism that have also gained influence in political and activist circles and developed a dynamic of their own may be understood as bridging concepts on the way to the abstract-formal concept. The bridging concepts stimulated the debate on an abstract-formal understanding of antisemitism while still situating themselves in the substantial one. They include in particular the concepts of *communication latency* and *detour communication*, terms for responses to the public taboo against antisemitism after National Socialism (Bergmann and Erb 1986). The originators of these concepts assert that antisemitic communication may occur without *explicit* hostility towards Jews (latency), but they assume that the detour communication nevertheless *refers* to Jews. For instance, in the case of anti-Zionist criticism of Israel, "one would have to examine more closely to what extent Israel and Judaism are being identified" (Bergmann and Erb 1986, 232, own translation). Thus, despite some overlap, the conceptual distinction substantial/abstract-formal being proposed here is not identical with the distinction latent/manifest.

Haury's (2002; cf. also 1992) research on "antisemitism on the left", which emphasizes the semantic structure of the antisemitic worldview, plays a greater bridging role. In order to explain the supposed paradox of antisemitism on the left, he points to structural affinities of *certain* left-wing worldviews that have the potential to connect with or realize antisemitism (with left-wing anti-imperialism even tending to do so, Haury 1992). Haury argues *in the subjunctive mood* that such thought patterns could thus be referred to as "structurally antisemitic" despite lacking antisemitic content (Haury 2002, 159). In principle he maintains the distinction between *connective structures* and their possible but by no means necessary realization as *manifest antisemitism*. Nevertheless, he thus became the terminological father of and one of the important reference authors for the concept of *structural antisemitism* as antisemitism *without* Jews. What should rightfully be referred to – taking into account the entire book and its reasoning – as a structural potential to connect with or realize antisemitism<sup>4</sup> – Haury himself was quite clear in this regard<sup>5</sup> – thus linguistically becomes a subtype of antisemitism itself and henceforth informs an unintended expansion of the concept of antisemitism.

## 2.3. Abstract-formal concepts of antisemitism

By no means does the group of *abstract-formal concepts of antisemitism* lack a semantic connection to Judaism. It remains present as a frame of realizability or at least as a genealogical background. But hostility towards (or distance from) Jews / Jewishness is not a *necessary* semantic element here.

On the one hand, abstract-formal understandings are conveyed by some notions of the "new", or in more current usage: "Israel-related antisemitism". While the IHRA's Working Definition in the narrower sense (the 'core definition', Ullrich 2019, 11) is closer to the substantial concept, it is susceptible to interpretations in the expansive paradigm, in particular if (as is current practice) the examples appended to it are understood as part of the definition proper and used as clear and unambiguous indicators of antisemitism. This is contrary to its wording, which calls for the examples to be viewed taking into account the overall context and, of course, the core definition, for which the examples are mere examples. For instance, in their defence of the Working Definition, Harrison and Klaff (2020) assert that it expressly defines forms of criticism of Israel *as antisemitic by means of the examples*, portraying this as an advantage. Such an understanding is even more apparent in the popular 3D test of the Israeli politician Nathan Sharansky (2004), which also left visible traces in the Working Definition. His test for (new, Israel-related) antisemitism has three criteria: demonization, delegitimization and double standards. For Sharansky, the object of the antisemitic enemy image is Israel, irrespective of whether it is conceptualized as *specifically Jewish* in the texts and actions to be tested or whether the criticism can be reconstructed as obfuscating detour communication. That Sharansky and other advocates of such concepts view Israel as a per se and exclusively Jewish state is almost a premise of the classification described here, that hostility towards Israel *is* – irrespective of all other possible contexts – as such, *by definition*, antisemitism.

It becomes apparent here why a definitional expansion that abandons the semantic core of specific, group-concrete hostility towards Jews causes irritations: it negates other, as it were 'realistic' factors for hostility or e.g. double standards, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict with its nationalist and colonial components (Diner 2004, 312

<sup>4</sup> Pfahl-Traugher (2021) elaborates on this.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. in Holz and Haury (2021, 121): "The term 'structural antisemitism' for this affinity of the patterns is misleading for two reasons": because Jews are not the "chosen enemy" and "the above-mentioned patterns [...] are important in numerous worldviews" [own translation].

ff.), its geopolitical significance, its dynamics of violence and the resulting personal affectedness, or it implicitly declares the remaining content of the conflict to be a mere current form that the hostility towards Jews has assumed.<sup>6</sup> This seems quite obviously reductionist to me, and outright deterministic on the basis of a strong idealism (cf. Jensen in this volume).

The concept of "structural antisemitism" likewise envisages an "antisemitism without Jews" (Lelle and Balsam 2020) or at least "*as yet* without Jews" (ibid., own translation). The ambiguity inherent in Haury as to whether "structural antisemitism" is a specific form of antisemitism or a realizable "not-yet-antisemitism" has accompanied the use of the concept ever since. One current example among many is afforded by a formulation in a series of articles of the Amadeu Antonio Foundation on structural antisemitism, which introduces both meanings at once at the outset without resolving the inconsistency (Thiele 2021, own translation): "Structural antisemitism is often not recognized as antisemitism [...]. Although in particular some left-wing worldviews exhibit structural affinities with antisemitic thought patterns."

Besides Haury, Moishe Postone's (1995) "National Socialism and Antisemitism" with its extremely extensive (German) reception is an important text driving this debate (cf. e.g. Salzborn 2019, 77 ff.; Imhoff 2020). Here, too, the point of departure lies in modern antisemitism, whose characteristics as a *worldview* or explanation of the world Postone examines and derives from the basic categories of the capital relation (value, commodity) in his value-critical Marxist perspective.<sup>7</sup> Without using the term "structural antisemitism", he works out structural patterns of antisemitism<sup>8</sup> that can be realized on the political right and left. In Postone's view, the antisemitism that identifies the Jews with the rejected abstract is a "subjectively sincere, simplistic anticapitalism", which is what lends the text its "disturbing impact" (Hanloser 2015, 67). Departing from this analysis and radicalizing it, it became possible henceforth to mark any not purely conceptual-abstract critique of capitalism as antisemitic.<sup>9</sup> But the concept of structural antisemitism has gained currency not so much in the scientific debate but rather in its political and pedagogical environment.

Behind the expansion of the concept of antisemitism to the abstract-formal concept of Israel-related antisemitism lies an expansion of the concept's extension to what used to be borderline cases (anti-Zionism, criticism of Israel). By contrast, in the case of the concept of "structural antisemitism", *parts* of the concept's original intension (the structural patterns of the worldview) are generalized to become the proper core of the concept, while other parts (their anti-Jewish content) become optional. Thus, the concept's intension, and with it the implied extension, becomes narrower and wider at once: forms of hostility towards Jews that are not part of a full-fledged worldview, i.e. the "particles of resentment" of "antisemitizing character" and "varying consistency" (Diner 2004, 310, own translation), probably not insignificant parts of today's "fragmented antisemitism" (Ullrich 2013, 51 ff.), would thus no longer be subsumed under the concept (cf. also Kohlstruck 2020, 123), while many other phenomena, from Manichean worldviews to conspiracy theories of all kinds and "simplistic critiques of capitalism", are now per se included. However, as the use of the abstract-formal concept seems to be accompanied by a principally greater habitual readiness to classify things as antisemitic, the *restriction* of scope implied in the concept is hardly applied in practice.<sup>10</sup>

## 2.4. Implications

It is obvious that these expansions in the understanding of antisemitism stem from different sources and from controversies in different arenas, including political activism (cf. e.g. Hanloser 2015, 66), international politics and academia, which moreover strongly influence each other. Irrespective of the political dimension of the associated definitional dispute between different positions (with respect to social theory and the Arab-Israeli conflict), we can presume further secular background processes behind the development of new and divergent understandings of antisemitism (cf. in detail Ullrich 2022). In the century and a half of its existence, the concept has necessarily undergone changes in its meaning. Not least, the differentiation of various functional roles (within academia, but also in civil society, politics and administration) that deal with the subject has contributed to a multiplication of the *perspectives* on it. And the phenomena identified by the term have necessarily also undergone historical change. In this situation, some of the discussions on whether an event or an utterance is antisemitic are basically moot, as the affirmative and the negative position have incompatible understandings of the term. While scientists may be aware of their divergent concepts, public usage tends towards a specific substantial concept of

<sup>6</sup> For instance in Bernstein, Rensmann and Schwarz-Friesel (2021).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Hanloser (2015; see also Gallas 2004) for a critique of this derivational logic and its questionable premises.

<sup>8</sup> Personalization of social conditions in the Jews, dichotomy concrete/abstract, e.g. in the dualism of productive/parasitic capital.

<sup>9</sup> From categorizing the Occupy movement as an antisemitic pogrom

([http://liliffm.blogspot.de/images/Eswillsichwasbewegen\\_c.pdf](http://liliffm.blogspot.de/images/Eswillsichwasbewegen_c.pdf)) to characterizing peaceful protests against social inequality in the affluent Berlin neighbourhood of Grunewald as an antisemitic expropriation campaign (<https://taz.de/Protestoper-in-Berlin-Grunewald/!5707948/>) – which are in themselves outrageous relativizations of the Holocaust.

<sup>10</sup> On the empirics of boundless concepts of antisemitism cf. Kohlstruck/Ullrich (2015, Chap. 5).

antisemitism that presupposes a timeless, unitary essential core (Kohlstruck 2020, 128 f.) and thus necessarily produces the misunderstandings to be analysed here.

I personally favour the substantial concept (including the bridging concepts), as the abstract understanding turns the concept more and more into a formal category and makes it lose both empirical relevance with respect to its original meaning and explanatory power, as it definitionally conflates phenomena with very different historical origins. This loss of specificity and its political added value are quite apparent with respect to both the critique of capitalism and the Arab-Israeli conflict when conflicting perspectives are automatically defined as antisemitic and are thus also politically delegitimized. Both my expert opinion and the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, to which I contributed, are written in this spirit. This gives me good reasons, but none that compellingly refute the other position epistemologically. For every definition *necessarily* has a voluntaristic aspect. There is no third or neutral authority that could decide on the basis of truth; defining means: deciding.

The distinction that has been identified here between substantial concepts of antisemitism *with* and abstract-formal concepts of antisemitism *also without* Jews would have to be accepted as a premise of any further discussion by all participants in order to achieve clarity about the subject under discussion instead of merely simulating an exchange of arguments that are in fact incompatible. Corresponding terminology – the distinction substantial vs. abstract-formal – should also be established in order to improve the ability to communicate. In view of the complexity of the issue, classifying one's own understanding as "up to date" and others as unscientific (cf. Castle 2019; Bernstein, Rensmann and Schwarz-Friesel 2021) is not a good approach. However, such an engagement is understandably uncomfortable for 'both' sides. The advocates of an abstract-formal concept of antisemitism would have to acknowledge independent historical origins of conflictual issues such as the Arab-Israeli conflict which, despite existing overlaps, cannot be explained exclusively by dislike of Jews, and the potential problematic implications of such analyses, which range from conservative to racist (Ullrich 2013, Chap. 3). Proponents of an exceedingly narrow substantial concept would in turn have to ask themselves to what extent they are prematurely excluding changes or possible generalizations of antisemitism from their purview. They would also need to ask themselves whether they also apply the definitional strictness they demand to other areas (e.g. racism, sexism) or whether some of them tend to approve of or even explicitly push for a wide usage with respect to these topics. I would in fact assume that this is the case for instance in left-wing anti-racist Palestine solidarity circles. The lax usage merely gives rise to fewer controversies in these areas, as it hardly creates any new inner-left antagonisms – the 'right people' are sure to be the targets. Not so in the case of Israel-related antisemitism, where the carelessly broadened, decontextualized concept directly constrains the ability of the Palestinian side and of those in solidarity with it to articulate themselves and delegitimizes their interpretations resulting from the conflict as the epitome of a false ideology (cf. Ullrich 2020).

Based on the reflections of standpoints proposed here, a further pursuit of what part of the research on antisemitism has been doing for a long time anyway would be warranted: collecting arguments by concrete historical and sociological analysis and concept development that indicate continuity and coherence or changes and shifts. Further conceptual differentiations must then ensue in a different analytical perspective. But this first requires an approach to the respective concrete historical subject matters that does not fix their relationship in advance and that considers conceptual alternatives. Thus, everything speaks in favour of continued (scientific) *debate* on the suitability of different concepts and definitions of antisemitism. Disagreement is inherent in the subject matter and thus necessary; accordingly, the discussion cannot be shelved but needs to be continued. We should strive for the ideal of a common understanding of antisemitism while keeping in mind that it is unattainable.

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*The author:*

Peter Ullrich, Dr. phil. Dr. rer. med., sociologist, senior researcher in the research area "Social Movements, Technology, Conflicts" at the Center for Technology and Society and fellow at the Center for Research on Antisemitism (both at Technische Universität Berlin); research interests: political sociology, social movements/protest and the police, sociology of knowledge approaches to antisemitism and public discourse about antisemitism.  
eMail: [ullrich@ztg.tu-berlin.de](mailto:ullrich@ztg.tu-berlin.de)