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Introduction: The IHRA Working Definition and the debate about concepts and definitions of antisemitism

Kurzfassung: Die „Arbeitsdefinition Antisemitismus“ der International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance führt nicht nur zu wissenschaftlichen Kontroversen zwischen ihren Befürworter:innen und Kritiker:innen, sie spielt – zumindest indirekt – auch für die Förderung von Einrichtungen mit öffentlichen Mitteln eine wichtige Rolle. Vor diesem Hintergrund hatte Peter Ullrich 2019 für die Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung eine Studie mit einer kritischen Einschätzung zur IHRA-Arbeitsdefinition vorgelegt. Hierauf beziehen sich Sina Arnold, Dana Ionescu, Uffa Jensen, Keith Kahn-Harris und erneut Peter Ullrich in ihren Beiträgen. Ziel des Dossiers ist es, einen kleinen Beitrag zur Versachlichung und somit zur Gesprächsfähigkeit kontroverser Positionen zur Definition von Antisemitismus zu leisten.

Abstract: The “Working Definition of Antisemitism” of the “International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance” not only leads to scientific controversies between its proponents and critics, it also – at least indirectly – plays an important role for the financing of institutions with public funds. Against this background, in 2019 Peter Ullrich had presented a study with a critical assessment of the IHRA Working Definition. Sina Arnold, Dana Ionescu, Uffa Jensen, Keith Kahn-Harris and again Peter Ullrich refer to this in their contributions. The dossier aims to contribute to a more objective debate and thus to the possibility of a conversation between controversial positions on the definition of antisemitism.

In 2019, the German parliament, with a large majority but by no means unanimously, passed the resolution “BDS entschlossen entgegengetreten – Antisemitismus bekämpfen” (“Resolutely opposing BDS – fighting antisemitism”) directed against antisemitism in general and against the campaign “Boycott – Divestment – Sanctions” in particular.¹ While this is not explicitly mentioned, in its substance the resolution, like similar resolutions at municipal and state level, is based on the “Working Definition of Antisemitism” of the “International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance”.² For the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, but also for other organizations that receive funding from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Foreign Office, the “Working Definition” has gained increasing importance as an instrument for assessing cooperation partners. Thus, both aspects, the questions of whether there is a broad consensus to take the IHRA Working Definition as a basis also of funding decisions and cooperations or not and of how to assess the BDS campaign, that is, whether it is to be viewed as basically antisemitic or not, touch on the domestic and foreign work of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung.³ Moreover, in recent years the example of the Labour Party in the United Kingdom has illustrated the significance of positions with respect to the IHRA Working Definition for political debates. Valid, but also instrumentalized and unfounded accusations of antisemitism burdened the Labour Party considerably.⁴

For these reasons, in early 2019 the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, together with the aid organization medico international, commissioned Peter Ullrich of the Center for Research on Antisemitism at the Technische Universität Berlin to undertake a scientific study assessing the IHRA Working Definition, which turned out largely critical.⁵ Besides some criticism, there was mostly agreement with Ullrich’s reasoning that the definition has serious weaknesses. Having commissioned the study, the RLS was sometimes accused of a lack of empathy in dealing with the Jews affected by antisemitism and of giving insufficient weight to the practical use of the IHRA Working Definition for actors in the fight against antisemitism, relative to its concrete deficits from a scientific point of view.

Two and a half years have now passed since the publication of Ullrich’s expert opinion on the IHRA Working Definition, and in the meantime alternative, corrective or supplementary definitional approaches such as the “Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism” (JDA)⁶ and “The Nexus Document – Understanding Antisemitism At Its Nexus With Israel And Zionism”⁷ have been published. Nevertheless, reference to the IHRA Working Definition remains central for practice and political debate in Germany and in many other countries. For this reason, we have decided to take another look at various aspects of the criticism of the IHRA Working Definition and to also give space to counter-criticism. In so doing, we aim (firstly) to engage with *constructive* criticism and (secondly)

¹ <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2019/kw20-de-bds-642892>

² <https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism>

³ www.rosalux.de/publikation/id/45527/die-kampagne-boykott-desinvestitionen-und-sanktionen

⁴ www.rosalux.de/news/id/43269/eskalation-mit-vorlauf

⁵ www.rosalux.de/publikation/id/41168/gutachten-zur-arbeitsdefinition-antisemitismus-der-ihra and www.rosalux.de/en/publication/id/41169/on-the-ihras-working-definition-of-antisemitism

⁶ <https://jerusalemdeclaration.org/>

⁷ <https://israelandantisemitism.com/the-nexus-document/>

to make a small contribution to establishing a conversation that hardly exists, which brings together these different perspectives and thus renders controversial viewpoints in a field of debate characterized by excessive factionalism more objective. We want to (thirdly) take part in ensuring that as far as possible precise, consensual diagnoses and assessments of manifestations and causes of antisemitism form a viable basis for fighting it resolutely.⁸

The present discussion forum on the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism and the critical RLS expert opinion starts out with a current essay by Peter Ullrich, who also addresses the debate about his paper since 2019 but mostly analyzes the conceptual differences and background assumptions of the proponents of different definitions. Uffa Jensen (Berlin) again engages with the IHRA definition and – as does Ullrich’s expert opinion – its focus on antisemitism as *perception*, in which he sees a danger of relapsing into correspondence theories of antisemitism. By contrast, two contributions take a far more positive stance towards the Working Definition. Sina Arnold (Berlin) reflects critically on the expert opinion and its object with a view to the dependence on political-discursive contexts, which she believes should receive more attention. Dana Ionescu (Braunschweig/Göttingen) accuses the criticism of the IHRA, and in particular Ullrich, of a political bias. Keith Kahn-Harris (London) argues crosswise to the debate and asks whether it overrates the concrete form of the text, whereas the text is in fact open to manifold, rather free and even subversive uses.

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⁸ Examples of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung’s work in this subject area include the study “Aktueller Antisemitismus in Deutschland. Verflechtungen, Diskurse, Befunde” by Anne Goldenbogen and Sarah Kleinmann (2021, www.rosalux.de/publikation/id/43659/aktueller-antisemitismus-in-deutschland), the volume “Die jüdische mit der allgemeinen proletarischen Bewegung zu vereinen. Jüdinnen und Juden in der internationalen Linken” edited by Riccardo Altieri, Bernd Hüttner and Florian Weis (2021, www.rosalux.de/publikation/id/45015/die-juedische-mit-der-allgemeinen-proletarischen-bewegung-zu-vereinen) and the bibliography “Linke und Antisemitismus” (www.rosalux.de/dossiers/linke-und-antisemitismus/bibliografie/).