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A practical definition

Kurzfassung: Während die kritische Weiterentwicklung der IHRA-Arbeitsdefinition – etwa in Form von Peter Ullrichs Gutachten – grundsätzlich zu begrüßen ist, gerät dabei oft in Vergessenheit, dass die Definition primär für die Praxis entwickelt wurde: als handhabbare Begriffsbestimmung für die Arbeit in Pädagogik, Justiz oder Behörden. Für die weitere Arbeit mit und an Definitionen gälte es einerseits, die konkreten Orientierungsbedarfe dieser praktischen Arbeit gegen Antisemitismus zu berücksichtigen. Andererseits sollte die von der Definition selber geforderte „Bedeutung des Gesamtkontextes“ stärker in den Mittelpunkt gestellt werden, um die illustrierenden Beispiele für aktuellen Antisemitismus nicht als einfache Checkliste zu verstehen. Anstelle der detektivischen Suche nach einzelnen Stereotypen muss vielmehr ihr argumentativer und gesellschaftlicher Kontext berücksichtigt werden.

Abstract: While the critical debates around the IHRA Working Definition – for example in the form of Peter Ullrich’s expert opinion – are an intellectual step forward, it is often forgotten that the definition was primarily developed for practical use: as a manageable definition for practitioners in the field of education, the judiciary or public authorities. For further work with and on definitions it is necessary, on the one hand, to bear in mind the need for orientation in this practical work against antisemitism. On the other hand, more emphasis should be placed on “taking into account the overall context”, as demanded by the definition itself. Rather than understanding the illustrative examples of contemporary antisemitism as a simple checklist, their discursive and social context needs to be analysed.

The IHRA Working Definition has caused much controversy inside and outside academia in recent years. In the German-speaking context, it was Peter Ullrich’s expert opinion, among others, that fostered debate about criticism of the definition. While such discussions are principally to be welcomed, they soon lost sight of what the definition originally intended to be and still is: a practical definition. More concretely: a “working definition”. This term has two meanings, which Ullrich also recalls (8f.)¹: The definition is intended for working *with* it and *on* it.

The IHRA definition was originally developed with the first meaning in mind. This constituted a step forward, which does not quite become apparent in Ullrich’s expert opinion: The author mentions only in passing the increased need at the beginning of the millennium for a manageable definition that included the Israel-related antisemitism which was becoming increasingly relevant (7). This need was an expression of the lack of orientation e.g. of educators and civil servants, and of the concerns of affected Jews. For those who faced antisemitism, Holocaust trivialization and Israel hatred at memorial sites or in schools on a daily basis, it became increasingly important to be provided with a tool that was more comprehensible than long, scientifically complex texts. The EUMC definition developed in 2005 was the first to offer concise reference points for interpreting an ideology that is not necessarily expressed in overt hatred but is rather characterized by codes and detour communication. What is more: Due to the international character of the OSCE and the EUMC, this definition also fostered the beginning of a common European – and now global – understanding in the fight against antisemitism. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, whose predecessor was founded in 1998, is itself an expression of this worldwide exchange on the historical and current hatred of Jews. This has become all the more relevant in the age of social media, in which antisemitic images and myths are increasingly blending together despite all national and regional differences.

Peter Ullrich’s expert opinion, however, mainly focuses on the second meaning of the term “working definition”, while also contributing to it: Of course the IHRA definition can and should be criticized and elaborated further in academia, pedagogy and politics.² Just as for decades every other influential definition of antisemitism has been scientifically discussed, acknowledged or criticized again and again. Or practitioners ponder whether and how the definitions of Adorno, Sartre, Klug or Fein can be applied to very concrete everyday situations. In the case of the IHRA definition, such debates are far more difficult because it has itself become a marker, a kind of “cultural code” for research on and the fight against antisemitism. Shulamit Volkov (1989) used this term to analyse

¹ All page numbers refer to Ullrich, Peter (2019): Expert Opinion on the ‘Working Definition of Antisemitism’ of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Papers, 3/2019, Berlin.

² For some current examples cf. The Nexus Document (<https://israelandantisemitism.com/the-nexus-document/>) and The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (<https://jerusalemdeclaration.org/>). See also the application-oriented further development of the IHRA itself in the “Handbook for the practical use of the IHRA working definition of antisemitism” (<https://op.europa.eu/de/publication-detail/-/publication/d3006107-519b-11eb-b59f-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>). Moreover, based on the IHRA definition the organization “BildungsBausteine gegen Antisemitismus e.V.” has developed the “A-L-A-R-M” formula, cf. BildungsBausteine e.V. (ed.) (2019): Verknüpfungen. Ansätze für antisemitismus- und rassismuskritische Bildung. Eine Methodenhandreichung, pp. 56f., <http://www.verknuepfungen.org/publikation> (all accessed August 16, 2021).

antisemitism in the German Empire of the late 19th century. For the German Conservatives, antisemitism became "a sign of cultural identity, of one's belonging to a specific cultural camp. It was a way of communicating an acceptance of a particular set of ideas and a preference for specific social, political and moral norms" (ibid.: 317). In a similar vein, Volkov characterized the anti-Zionism in the North American and European left after 1967 as a form of subcultural code (2007). She saw it as an expression not so much of a political position on the Arab–Israeli conflict but rather of standing on the "right side" of history; taking a stand against imperialism, colonialism, racism and oppression. In quite a similar fashion, in the subculture of antisemitism research and anti-antisemitism advocacy, the IHRA definition has become such a code for an "affirmation of various values and the fundamental rejection of other values" (Volkov 2000: 82, author's translation) in recent years. These values touch on topics such as Israel's right to exist and the Palestinians' right of return, the relationship between antisemitism and anti-Zionism and the comparability or singularity of the Holocaust. One is for or against this specific definition, and as part of a "package deal" (Volkov 2007: 41) this (dis)agreement is associated with being for or against a certain critique of antisemitism. The – often knee-jerk and fierce – rejection of the IHRA definition on the one hand and of criticism directed at it on the other hand points to the formation of entrenched camps. The litmus test "What is your take on the IHRA definition?" has become a confessional rather than an analytical question.

But this camp mentality is not the only factor hindering the definition's further development: Its own "twofold claim" (10), the shifting between politics, pedagogy and science, between applicability and analysis, necessarily leads to problems. In this regard, Ullrich is right in stating that the IHRA core definition remains vague (10f.), cannot capture aspects of antisemitism as a worldview or ideology (11) and addresses neither attitudes nor institutional antisemitism clearly enough (11). The IHRA definition is primarily a guideline – not less, but also not more. Precisely for this reason it relies on the accompanying examples. They allow an illustration of the forms in which modern antisemitism is expressed, especially for practitioners. The examples also facilitate a recognition, a comparison with situations experienced in the classroom, on guided tours at memorial sites, in collecting data on criminal offences. And especially against the background of the temporal context in which the predecessor definition arose, namely the Israel-related "new" antisemitism in the early 2000s, it is understandable that these examples treat "one thematic subset very extensively" (12), as Peter Ullrich critically observes. This focus makes sense and is to be welcomed, as hardly anyone nowadays expresses antisemitism with the sentence "I hate Jews". Rather, in practice worldwide the greatest need for clarification arises at the intersection of antisemitism and criticism of Israeli policies.

Against this background, it is unclear why Ullrich, after criticizing the (core) definition's lack of complexity, in many cases interprets the rather concrete examples as more complex than they are. For instance, his broad interpretation of the example "Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor" is surprising. He is of course right to point to universalist (antinationalist, anarchist etc.) critiques of nation-states (13) which may motivate such statements. However, these are the absolute exception in relation to the worldwide – Islamist, right-wing extremist and also leftist – actors who only want the sole Jewish state to be abolished. Moreover, the IHRA definition quite clearly adds: "However, criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic" and thus conversely declares such universalist positions not to be antisemitic. The role of Ullrich's remarks on racism in Israel (13) also remains unclear, as the example is not about concrete policies but about something far more fundamental: the mere *existence* of a country as a racist endeavour. That is: Whoever may be in power, whether settlements are built or not, even after withdrawal from the occupied territories – the mere fact that there is an independent state "Israel" is viewed as an expression of racism.

With respect to the example of dual loyalty, Ullrich also makes the definition more ambiguous than it is (14). The accusation against Jews of "being more loyal to Israel [...] than to the interests of their own nations" is usually directed at individuals. The definition's original English version accordingly speaks of "accusing *Jewish citizens* of being more loyal [...]". The "Jewish organizations" that Ullrich mentions are therefore not included in the original definition. Neither does it refer to a simple strong proximity to Israel, but to the notion that e.g. a German Jew *actually* only represents Israel's interests – and is by extension not a "proper" German. Sure, in individual cases these loyalties may be descriptions of political facts. Just like there are also some women who cannot park a car, some Muslim men who beat their wives and some Blacks who deal with drugs. But it should be clear that the example aims at historically evolved stereotypes of Jewish dual loyalty and separation.

Even beyond the examples, Ullrich charges the definition with deficits that are beyond its remit, for example when he faults it for not addressing right-wing extremist or religious antisemitism (16). The IHRA definition generally does not speak of actors but of forms of expression and stereotypes. Antisemitism from the right is covered insofar as right-wing extremists also want to harm Jews, murmur about their control of the media or accuse them of dual loyalty.

If the IHRA definition is to remain relevant to academia and practice, and of course in so doing to withstand criticism like any other important definition, the debate should focus much more on a small but important clause. It is astonishing how often proponents and critics alike apparently overlook it. The illustrative examples apply, as

stated in the definition, "taking into account the overall context". That means: They are not a definite "checklist". Ullrich is right in stating this (16), but he then paradoxically goes on to interpret it in this way and to measure the definition by a standard that it does not claim to fulfil. Instead of a forensic search for individual stereotypes, the discursive and social context needs to be spelled out. Potentially antisemitic (speech) acts should be viewed in the context of the semantic structure and connected to societal structures and processes. Only viewing semantics or acts in the context of their use allows an adequate understanding of whether one is dealing with politically motivated criticism or whether Israel is being imagined as the "collective Jew". The next task – and Ullrich partly undertakes it (13)³ – for proponents and critics would thus be to define the context of use. In a first step, this is the immediate semantic context of a statement, for instance the intention of the speaker, i.e. what is to be expressed by the utterance – the desired function or effect. The question of emotion arises as a secondary issue: Antisemitism is, as Jean-Paul Sartre expressed it, "first of all a passion" (1995: 6); in addition to the cognitive level, it always also includes an emotional level. And finally, the reception is important: In which context and how is a statement received, who encounters it? This focus also puts the perspective of those affected by antisemitism center stage. On a yet more abstract level, the context also includes an understanding of the respective political (sub)culture and its historical development. This would raise questions such as: Who says what, why and to whom?

To illustrate: The IHRA definition rightly mentions "Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis" as an example of current antisemitism. Yet it makes a difference whether a Nazi comparison is made in Germany among Germans, with the (secondary antisemitic and nationalist) goal, or at least effect, of reversing the roles of perpetrators and victims and exonerating the ancestors; whether it is used in the United States by left-wing and right-wing actors alike to generate outrage, with the Holocaust as a symbol of all evil; or whether a Syrian youth uses it out of historical ignorance in order to attract attention (cf. Arnold/König 2019: 30f., Ullrich/Arnold 2015).⁴ In all cases, the comparison is historically incorrect and should be criticized. But with respect to the question of whether it is an expression of antisemitism, the text of the IHRA definition is right: The context must be taken into account.

However, this requires a lot of prior knowledge, sensitivity, time and engagement with the perspectives of those affected by antisemitism. In everyday practical situations, such interpretational challenges cannot always be met. The IHRA definition therefore constitutes a step forward for the very concrete work against antisemitism. Any further work on it needs to take into account such needs for orientation.

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³ See also his earlier reflections on this, cf. Ullrich 2013.

⁴ For further remarks on this determination of the context cf. Arnold 2022; 2016, pp. 40-46.