

Uffa Jensen

Dangerously close to a correspondence theory. The IHRA's problematic attempt to define Antisemitism

Kurzfassung: Der Text konzentriert sich auf die Kernpassage der IHRA-Arbeitsdefinition zum Antisemitismus, wobei insbesondere anhand des Wahrnehmungsbegriffes eine problematische Nähe zur Korrespondenztheorie des Antisemitismus diagnostiziert wird. Zudem etabliert die Definition eine Hierarchisierung von (sinnlicher) Wahrnehmung, Sprache und Gewalt, die bei näherer Betrachtung nicht überzeugt. Hier offenbart sich ein Verständnis von Antisemitismus, das auf einen individualistischen Psychologismus hinausläuft und die sozialen wie kulturellen Konstitutionsbedingungen des Phänomens ignoriert.

Abstract: The text focuses on the core passage of the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, describing its problematic closeness to a correspondence theory of antisemitism. Moreover, the IHRA definition is shown to depend on a hierarchical relation between (sensory) perception, language and violence – a relation that is not convincing upon closer inspection. Hence, the text exposes an understanding of antisemitism that leads to an individualized psychologism that ignores the social and cultural conditions behind its emergence.

As deputy director of the Center for Research on Antisemitism, I was among the first who signed the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (JDA) (<http://jerusalemdeclaration.org>). I was moved to take this step for many reasons, but one important aspect was my basic reservation about the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism. While I agree with many of the points formulated by Peter Ullrich in his expert opinion on the Working Definition (Ullrich, 2019), I wish to look more deeply into various points that I find particularly important as an historian.

It would be worthwhile to examine the genesis and diplomatic establishment of the IHRA definition, especially since astonishing theses still are circulating on this subject today, theses that demand examination and, if necessary, fact-based refutation (Stern-Wiener 2021). But my criticism is oriented toward the text itself, not its genesis. The vast majority of the highly politicized debates about the IHRA definition focus on its examples of antisemitic actions, meant to illustrate the “core definition” (Ullrich, 2019: 11). Since an entire series of these examples relates to Israel and anti-Zionism, most critics of the IHRA definition consider these points in greatest need of discussion. Its defenders also expend the most energy elaborating on these points: for example, the actual definition is covered in a few lines in the “*Handbook for the Practical Use of the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism*,” whereas the examples are discussed and explained in detail over several pages (Bundesverband RIAs, 2021).

In this confrontation, a basic problem emerges: A debate about the legitimacy of critical attitudes toward Israel, or about possible antisemitic aspects within those attitudes, becomes intertwined with a discussion about antisemitism, so that the complex and multidimensional situation can be turned into an almost binary conflict (Ullrich, 2021: 202). Participants in these debates often fall into two camps: those whose main motivation lies in the area of the Mideast conflict and Israel/Palestine, and those who are primarily interested in the theme of antisemitism. Undoubtedly there is an area of overlap between these two camps: the zone of antisemitic hostility towards Israel, a zone whose existence is disputed only by a very few deluded individuals, and which no serious scholars in antisemitism doubt, to my knowledge. And yet this very difference in primary interest – Israel/Mideast conflict versus antisemitism – is fundamental and explains many misunderstandings. For it is by no means the case that scholars of antisemitism are automatically interested in Israel and the Mideast, just as one can absolutely not assume that experts on Israel or the Mideast are interested in antisemitism.

As a scholar of antisemitism, I have a particular perspective on these debates: in my view, the way we define antisemitism (if we decide it is necessary to do so) is not trivial. Precisely because the colloquial use of words like antisemitism is itself complex and cannot in any way be limited by an academic language and by academic notions of these terms, defining it is no easy task (Kohlstruck & Ullrich, 2015: 47 ff.). And in the case of antisemitism, there are many ways to use such definitions in prevention work. Every attempt at defining the term naturally aims toward influencing, and ideally structuring, its practical application and use in everyday speech. At the same time, however, no definition is immune to the essential transforming influence of being embedded in everyday language and prevention practice. Alongside the dictionary definition, there is always a definitional and conceptual practice, and they are not necessarily (probably never have been) identical.

It is exactly because their definitions produce effects in “reality” that scholars should reflect carefully on them. As scholars of antisemitism, who by virtue of their profession must be particularly interested in the resonant

meanings of words, we should pay close attention to the implicit contents of their own terminology. To be sloppy about definitions means to violate not only the rules of academic scholarship, but also the carefulness that is required in such an important and sensitive field as antisemitism research and prevention.

In the specific case of the IHRA definition, there is an insistence that this is not a fixed, scientific definition but rather a working definition. At the same time some of its proponents have described it as “comprehensive”; the American Jewish Committee, for example, called it a “comprehensive definition of antisemitism” (American Jewish Committee, undated: 1). In general, then, it is unclear what limits are imposed through the addition of the term “working” to the definition. Can it be used, or not, in antisemitism research? What are the effects of using it – not least because of its political-diplomatic and quasi-legal significance (Gould, 2018) – in fields such as prevention, public communication, political evaluation of speech acts, etc.? After all, while the IHRA definition clearly seems to limit itself by adding the word “working,” at the same time it expansively embraces all fields that deal with antisemitism in some way. Thus I ask myself whether the “working character” of the IHRA definition might serve a function that is often underestimated. Specifically because it is not presented as a “real” and complete definition to be wielded against all possible criticism, it can be widely adopted. Anyone who uses it is comforted by the fact that one can always rethink the definition of antisemitism – quite seriously and scientifically. But for the moment one doesn’t have to do so, because after all one can consult the IHRA definition. It makes sense to me that most proponents of the IHRA definition would rather avoid a serious discussion about its implications, possibly because the task is not at all the responsible act of defining. On a meta-level alone – that is, related to the question of how we as a society deal with antisemitism – the IHRA definition, thus, becomes an exciting phenomenon for any researcher sensitive to language and concepts, as it sits on the boundary between science, politics, law and diplomacy.

On a conceptual level, the core of the IHRA definition surprises me. To explain my bewilderment I need to analyze the definition’s central points in detail. The IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism originally was composed in English; in its current form, the definition reads: “Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities” (IHRA Working Definition). The German version is virtually identical.

Accordingly, antisemitism is “a certain perception of Jews.” I will return to this term “certain” in a moment, but I will begin with the word “perception” – “Wahrnehmung” in German – because it introduces the main distinction. The “Oxford Dictionary” lists several definitions of “perception,” the most essential of which refers to a sensory process: “taking cognizance or being aware of a sensible or quasi-sensible object” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989: 522). Even if the German word “Wahrnehmung” does not have the same Latin root, the German dictionary Duden provides a very similar definition: in essence, “perception with the senses” (Duden, 1999: 4412). If one considers the semantic field around “perception” and “Wahrnehmung,” one can find usages that, so to speak, place a higher value on brain performance than on externally originating impressions of one’s environment. In German, for example, one can speak of perceiving an object with a certain pre-understanding, that is, “I ‘construct’ the understanding in my head.” Nevertheless, it seems to me that the German word “Wahrnehmung” refers more strongly to the sensory dimension than does the English word “perception.” In whatever way we choose to weight these differences, both languages use these respective words to describe the process by which people gain a sensory impression of the things in their environment and then transform this impression into intellectual content. Thus I could interpret the core distinction in the IHRA definition as follows: Antisemitism is a “sensory impression of Jews.” This also seems to make sense to some defenders of the definition: “The IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism... thus concentrates on how others may perceive Jews, rather than on the actions of Jews themselves” (Bundesverband RIAS, 2021: 10).

This interpretation brings the definition onto dangerous ground, because it supports the assumption that antisemites actually perceive Jews and therefore that their mental attitudes and understanding or knowledge of Jews are shaped by these perceptions. This interpretation is known among scholars in the field as the Correspondence Theory of Antisemitism (Holz, 2001). It suggests that the antisemitic idea corresponds to a Jewish reality – of whatever kind. This concept of antisemitism, which was used before 1945 to describe the phenomenon as a reaction to an actual, existing “Jewish question,” is now considered outdated and obsolete. As historical research on antisemitism has shown, this concept is not far removed from the way antisemites themselves see their object of focus; they claim often enough to have perceived this object – the Jews – accurately, and to have rejected Jews on this basis (Holz & Weyand, 2015).

Now, any reader of the IHRA definition may object that the text does not merely speak of “perception”/“Wahrnehmung” but adds the qualifying “certain”/“bestimmte.” We thus refer to the subordinate clause in our attempt to define the unfortunately chosen noun. In the sentence, “I saw a certain red color that easily slipped into orange,” we must read the subordinate clause if we want to find out something more specific

about the red color. In the case of the IHRA definition, the subordinate clause is, "which may be expressed as hatred towards Jews." Now, a definition using a word like "may" is ultimately not a logical definition; after all, it leaves open the possibility of a quite different outcome. Historically, moreover, I could argue at length that hatred of Jews should not be considered the only expression of antisemitism (what about disgust, envy, or shame associated with Jews? What about claims of "rational" rejection of Jews, etc.?) (Jensen, 2017). This kind of definitional narrowing should not block the understanding of antisemitism, particularly when it comes to the important consideration of emotional and affective components (Jensen & Schüler-Springorum, 2013). But if we turn the question completely around, the linguistic, conceptual imprecision becomes more obvious. Why doesn't the IHRA simply define antisemitism as "an imagined/twisted/aberrant perception of Jews"?

The problem is not resolved by the additional provisions of the IHRA definition that follow in the second sentence; in fact, the sentence adds another problem. Here it is specified that "rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism" are directed against Jews or people who appear to be Jews, and against Jewish institutions. This rightly states, first of all, that there are both verbal and physical manifestations of antisemitism; for example, insults and acts of violence. At the same time, with the formulation "rhetorical and physical manifestations" a hierarchy is established. The text thus asserts that there are verbal and physical manifestations of something that has already been defined as antisemitism. This brings us back again to the very first sentence, which remains unclear.

Together, these two sentences may be understood as follows: Insults and attacks are manifestations of the (sensory) perception of Jews. This would then mean nothing other than that hate speech and violence are triggered by a preceding sensory-intellectual process. This is much more problematic than it may at first sound; for what else can this mean other than that, before anyone hurls expletives at Jews or even physically attacks them, he or she must first have perceived them via the senses? Apart from the fact that the problem of "realistic" perception elaborated above is exacerbated here, another conceptual problem arises: Do we understand antisemitism primarily to be a perception, a thought, an idea, subjective knowledge – and only secondarily as socializing words and action? This contradicts all current theories about the social constitution of individuals: Their (antisemitic) mindsets are produced in social and cultural contexts, such as language and everyday practices. Ultimately, the IHRA definition is based on an individualistic psychologism, since it presupposes a mental structure behind all expressions of antisemitism, while ignoring the social conditions that shaped that very structure. One could also say – again, being a bit provocative – that the IHRA definition was crafted by Platonists.

After all, why so critical? If instead of "perception"/"Wahrnehmung" we were to have said for example "construction"/"Konstruktion," wouldn't the IHRA definition prove to be a useful tool after all? That may well be so. But this, too, would bring with it a specific conceptual practice that, in my view, already is apparent in the way the IHRA Working Definition is used today, primarily because most of those using the definition already treat it as if it said "construction" rather than "perception."

Read in this way, as is often done despite the fact that this is not what the IHRA text intended, antisemitism is equated with the notion of an antisemitic stereotype. In other words: antisemitism is a certain "prejudice about Jews." At first that sounds somewhat odd; after all, many of those who worked on the IHRA definition vehemently reject the concept of "prejudice" for antisemitism. They argue that by using such terms as stereotype or prejudice, one comes too close to making antisemitism comparable to other forms of discrimination (such as racism based on skin color, antiziganism, and anti-Muslim racism), even though antisemitism is the only one of these that is marked by the existence of a worldview: "Hatred of Jews – as a conceptually closed, fact-resistant worldview system determined by intensive negative feelings – is not just one system of prejudice among many, but rather a unique cultural-historical phenomenon...." (Schwarz-Friesel, 2018: 13; for the prejudice research approach, see Benz 2021; for another critique: Jensen & Schüler-Springorum, 2013). According to this theoretical political "exceptionalism" (Kohlstruck & Ullrich, 2015: 52 f.) antisemitism thus appears to be the only independent worldview that functions almost separately in the psychological sense.

If one operates, in this sense, essentially with the two concepts – "stereotype" and "worldview" – then a causal connection quickly comes to mind: One who uses an antisemitic stereotype does so because he/she has an antisemitic worldview. In this respect stereotypes function as indicators of a more fundamental problem: the basic disposition of a worldview. In the many-faceted, highly politicized public debates, the close connection between a stereotype and an underlying worldview plays an important role time and again. Anyone who utters or writes a stereotypical phrase about Jews is then quickly labeled an antisemite, no matter whether the statement was so intended or how consciously and intentionally it was used in a problematic way (for a description of this approach as a formal abstract, see Ullrich, 2021). The IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism is certainly not

applied to every public accusation of antisemitism. However, it conceptually fits this tight connection between act and ideology. One of the important questions it raises is about the importance of intention in antisemitism: of course, one does not have to understand it as voluntaristic, or as trivial in terms of free will. If one is prepared to interpret the IHRA Working Definition sympathetically and disregarding linguistic shortcomings, however, then one should be willing to engage in this substantively fruitful debate.

At the same time, the IHRA Working Definition Antisemitism does not use other words. As written, it proves to be a psychologistic, individualistic, and sensuality-fixated definition that is dangerously close to a correspondence theory of antisemitism. Because of what might best be described as its linguistic imprecision (to avoid using more negatively loaded words), these implications are not transparent. I rather have the impression that these problems were not at all clear to the original authors of the definition. Of course, one could have interesting and perhaps even fruitful discussions about all the abovementioned aspects cited in a definition of antisemitism. One might even be able to suggest various arguments that could sharpen and justify the preconception that I see at work in the IHRA definition. One might – that is, if both the politicized focus on examples in the debate and the unstated assumptions behind the IHRA definition didn't argue against the possibility of such further debate. Also casting doubt on this option are the polemical attacks against any questioning of the Working Definition. At any rate, the frequent use of the IHRA definition has generated an interesting problem: Does its use perpetuate the possible implications of the definition and establish among its many different users a kind of pre-understanding of what they view as antisemitism? Whether as a working definition or more, in this sense the IHRA definition could be deeply problematic, even triggering developments that contradict its intent. One could even put this more emphatically: the provisional character in which the definition is shared outside the realm of experts is exactly what allows the popularization of questionable ideas about the phenomenon – ideas that the definition is actually intended to describe and combat.

The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism presents in its core definition a brief suggestion: "Antisemitism is discrimination, prejudice, hostility or violence against Jews as Jews (or Jewish institutions as Jewish)" (JDA, 2021). The JDA insists on a substantive concept of antisemitism, which is why "negative relations to Jews or Judaism" are at the center of focus (Ullrich, 2022: 1). One also can, and should, have debates about that. Ultimately, one can even combine a formal-abstract understanding with a substantive one: After all, "antisemitic" speech "without Jews" can perpetuate antisemitic stereotypes, wherever it arises. For example, someone who pronounces an antisemitic phrase without having been aware of its content may still be received antisemitically by others, thus prolonging the history of antisemitism. But in what ways do we understand and label a situation like this as antisemitic? These and similar questions could lead to worthwhile discussions in the field of research on antisemitism, if only they did not constantly run into two obstacles: the insinuations against critics of the IHRA Working Definition, as well as the very linguistic imprecision and conceptual shortcomings of the definition itself.

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The author:

Prof. Dr. Uffa Jensen is a historian at the Center for Research on Antisemitism at the Technische Universität in Berlin and its deputy director. His research interests are the history of antisemitism, of German Jewry, of psychoanalysis, of the history of emotions as well as visual history. He has previously worked at the University of Sussex, the Universität Göttingen and the Max Planck Institut for Human Development. His publications include „Gebildete Doppelgänger. Bürgerliche Juden und Protestanten im 19. Jahrhundert“ (Göttingen 2005), „Gefühle gegen Juden. Die Emotionsgeschichte des modernen Antisemitismus (together with Stefanie Schüler-Springorum 2013), „Zornpolitik“ (Berlin 2017), „Wie die Couch nach Kalkutta kam: Eine Globalgeschichte der frühen Psychoanalyse“ (Berlin 2019).
eMail: jensen@tu-berlin.de