

Discursive Strategies and “Humanity Differentials”. A Critical Analysis of the Representation of Victims in the War on Gaza

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Abstract

Our contribution explores the media narrative of the war on Gaza, focusing on the role this has played in the representation of the victims on both sides of the conflict. To this end, using a critical discourse analysis approach, we'll analyze *Il Corriere della Sera*'s media coverage of the first 15 days of the conflict, focusing on articles published in the national edition of the newspaper. In this way, we'll show how the *Corriere*'s narrative has shaped an asymmetric representation of the victims, promoting identification and empathy with Israeli civilians and relegating the subjective and individual dimension of the Gazawi to the background, transforming their everyday experience into mere “bare life”.

Keywords: Palestine; Discourse; Color-blind racism; Victims; Representations.

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1 Introduction

On October 7, 2023, television stations worldwide broadcast images of the attack on Israeli territory by the Al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of the Palestinian Islamist political party Hamas. As widely documented, the attack targeted numerous civilian objectives, resulting in a large number of casualties and hostages. After a few days of general “dismay” at the events and the vulnerability of Israeli security apparatuses, the Netanyahu government initiated an offensive, first from the air, then on the ground, which continues to this day. Although the nature and extent of the Israeli government’s reaction were initially unknown, from October 14, the start of the ground invasion of the Gaza Strip, it became increasingly clear that the military operation would be “unprecedented” in recent history in terms of intensity, duration, and severity. The complexity of the situation, rooted in a long-standing conflict, has sharply divided the debate. Moreover, in an era of viral, journalistic, and often propagandistic use of web media, the dissemination of emotionally charged images, as well as the involvement of civilian actors, has sparked a visceral dialectic around the events.

This polarization continued after October 14, between those who saw in the IDF’s military invasion the precursors and continuation of an old settler colonialism project (Ali, 2023; Grosfoguel, 2024; Veracini, 2011 & 2013; Wolfe, 2006) and those who, on the other hand, emphasized its inevitability and framed it as “self-defence”.¹ Evidently, the nature of this debate transcends the boundaries of sociological discourse and is situated on an eminently political ground. However, we believe that it is possible (and desirable) for this dialectic to rest on solid analytical and empirical foundations. In this regard, our goal is to offer a partial contribution by analyzing how media apparatuses have participated in this emotional reading of the conflict. The constant presence of civilian casualties and the “humanitarian” tragedy resulting from the war have “almost naturally” fed into a mode of information whose distinctive feature has been the mobilization of emotions. This is by no means a new aspect of contemporary journalism, but in this case, it has allowed us to analyze whether and how this emotional narrative was marked by an equal emotional affinity indiscriminately for the civilian victims recorded on both sides, or if it concealed subtle mechanisms of human differentiation.

The qualitative analysis focused on articles from the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* (hereafter CdS), chosen for its authoritative nature in the national journalistic scene and its solid liberal-democratic political tradition.² Precisely because of this positioning, CdS is generally considered one of the most balanced newspapers, less prone to partial and sensationalist tones. As for its circulation, according to 2025 data from Accertamento Diffusione Stampa (Press Circulation Verification – ADS), *Corriere della Sera* is the most widely circulated newspaper in Italy (ADS, 2025). Furthermore, our decision to focus on a national newspaper also appears crucial in light of the broader need to decolonize sociological methodology. As emphasized by Geoffrey Pleyers (2024), a genuinely global sociology must certainly avoid the risks of “methodological nationalism”, as already highlighted by Abdelmalek Sayad (2002). At the same time, however, it must also avoid falling into the opposite tendency of “methodological globalism”. By this term, we refer to “the opposite tendency: producing knowledge on the basis of global

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1. On 11/13/2023, Jurgen Habermas and other intellectuals published a letter in which they basically called for Israel’s right to self-defense in response to the horrendous attacks of October 7 (<https://www.resetdoc.org/story/habermas-israel-principle-solidarity/>).
 2. This role and this position within the national landscape had already been recognized at the beginning of the last century by an intellectual such as Antonio Gramsci (1975), who, in his Prison Notebooks, emphasized its importance within the national political arena.

data (often privileging economic data) and addressing it to an international audience composed of global actors, cosmopolitan academics, and experts from international institutions" (Pleyers, 2024, p. 24–25, our transl.). This tendency risks making sociology increasingly elitist and less attentive to its own public sphere, as it becomes oriented almost exclusively toward an international, predominantly academic audience. For example, it has been observed that precisely the choice to privilege exclusively global newspapers contributes to a continuous process of making local governmental dynamics invisible, thereby producing an abstract and monocultural form of knowledge (Seckinelgin, 2007).

Despite his presumed equidistance, empirical research on the newspaper's war narrative allowed us to observe how the view of the victims is an integral part of an elaborate management of emotions. Engaging with a series of anti-racist literature authors (Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Fanon, 2015; Hall, 2021), we highlighted the mechanisms through which a differentiation in the perceived degree of humanity among victims is produced. In an era marked by significant sensitivity to the "humanitarian discourse", this differentiation occurs through a perceptual scale where the boundary no longer passes through the brutal division between the human and its "zero degree", but through a subtle hierarchy between the "more human" and the "less human", the "closer" and the "farther away".

In the following paragraphs, after a brief overview of the theoretical and methodological premises of our contribution, we will analyze the conflict narrative offered by CdS, retracing the articles published between October 8, 2023, and October 21, 2023.

2 Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives

The article sits at the intersection of the analysis of the now-established transformations in the lexicon of journalistic language and the theoretical literature that has focused on the racial grammar of public discourse. In particular, emphasis will be placed on Agamben's (1998) reflections on the sanctity of life. Regarding the journalistic lexicon, the "postmodern turn" that has affected the cultural sensitivity of contemporary times has generated a profound renewal of the media discourse, promoting a process of hybridization "where official, public language and argumentation merge with very private, everyday language and experience" (Bondebjerg, 1996, p. 29). In this way, the formal and official language that characterized the 20th-century journalistic canon has been progressively overshadowed by the colloquial and mundane vocabulary of everyday life, which places increasing emphasis on experience and personal narrative.

This primacy of the individual dimension has been accompanied by the growing prevalence of narrative journalism, i.e., that form of reporting which uses fictional structures to construct representations of events (Gamson et al., 1992). From this perspective, the focus is on the emotional experience of individuals, their hopes, anxieties, and desires. As some scholars have noted (Oliver et al., 2012), the "turn towards emotions" has brought the human being back to the centre of journalistic discourse, but has also marked a new way of presenting social reality through the affective experiences of the subjects, contributing to the reaffirmation of a solipsistic perspective, thus obscuring the structural dynamics underlying that reality. Indeed, by bringing "flesh and blood" people and their problems to the forefront, narrative journalism fosters feelings of empathy, solidarity, and compassion in readers. At the same time, this emphasis on the subjective dimension results in a substantial concealment of its historical-social matrix, decontextualizing events and abstracting their protagonists from their material conditions of existence (Moisy, 1997). In this way, as many authors have pointed out, the media narrative could hardly "lead to anything more than care for those who are 'like us'" (Chou-

liaraki, 2008, p. 330; Curran, 2005), reinforcing the communitarian bond rather than shaping new cosmopolitan sensibilities (Chouliaraki, 2008).

Moreover, the specific field of war journalism has likewise been the subject of extensive research that has underscored its non-neutral character. Without attempting to survey the vast literature on the topic, it is important to emphasize that numerous studies have critically examined the ways in which war reporting is constructed — for example, by problematizing the sources on which it relies (predominantly governmental ones) (Bennett et al., 2007; Robinson et al., 2009), or by analyzing professional cultures (Tumber & Palmer, 2004).

Of particular relevance to our argument, Hoxha and Hanitzsch (2017), moving beyond content analysis alone, have shown that journalists operating in war contexts tend, often unconsciously, to select events that best conform to their overarching story narration. Their research also encompassed the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In the same vein is Tim Markham's (2011) reflection on the political phenomenology of war journalism. Drawing on a fundamentally Bourdieusian approach, Markham analyses the ways in which journalistic practice (and the actors who embody it) emerges at the intersection of habitus and field, carrying with it dominant norms regarding what may or may not be considered newsworthy. In his words:

This embodied regulation of knowledge is not the product of a state or corporate conspiracy; it is instead a rationalization which simultaneously lends solidity to and obscures to the conscious experience of field actors the political structure or arena of struggle in which journalists subsist (Markham, 2011, pp. 580–581).

It is by now well established that journalism must be understood as a form of knowledge capable of “orienting the public” (Park, 1940, p. 677), expanding our understanding of the world while also shaping our emotional apprehension of events. Within this context, war journalism is by no means exempt from these dynamics. Moreover, several scholars after him have gone further, demonstrating how media apparatuses have contributed to the promotion of a racist value system and a worldview grounded in the primacy of whiteness. In this respect, attention has turned to the racist and colonial genealogy of contemporary media discourse (Campbell, 1995; Feagin, 2009; González & Torres, 2012; Hartmann & Husband, 1974; Hunt, 1997 & 1999; Rhodes, 1993).

From this awareness, media apparatuses have been described as a cog in the complex ideological machine that shapes representations of difference and otherness, the meanings these concepts evoke, and the “appropriate” ways through which these topics should be “addressed” within public discourse (Hall, 2021). That is, media as powerful political and moral agents involved in the management of our emotions in the face of distant suffering and misfortune (Boltanski, 1999). To say it in other words, media help us imagine what we couldn't otherwise experience: the reality of other people's frailty and pain and where we stand in relation to them (Silverstone, 2006). In so doing, this dynamic does not remain confined to the realm of representations but produces concrete effects, reinforcing power structures, hierarchies, and racial privileges (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997 & 2001; Crenshaw, 2011). Furthermore, in the context of a multipolar and postcolonial global reality, and faced with a profoundly altered public sensitivity, the order of racist discourse has renewed its lexicon and physiognomy, continuing to operate “just below the surface” (Hall, 2021) of mainstream media in underground and sometimes imperceptible ways. In this regard, Bonilla-Silva (2002) described the “new” logic of racist discourse as color-blind racism, alluding to its ability to reject the racialized vocabulary of the Jim Crow era while continuing to fuel a dynamic of racial differentiation and human hierarchization.

It is in this context that Agamben's (1998) reflections on the "sanctity" of life and the way in which *zoé*, "bare life", becomes central in the exercise of sovereign power, seem particularly apt for capturing some of the dimensions emerging from the articles. It is known that the Italian philosopher's reflections focus on revealing how one of the foundational characteristics of the exercise of modern power lies in the progressive politicization of "bare life" and is articulated, therefore, around the division (dating back to ancient Greece) between *bios*, a politically connoted life, and *zoé*, life understood solely in its animal and reproductive aspects. From this perspective, the truth about Western sovereignty would be traced in its extreme figure, a life subjected to sovereign banishment, to a state of exception where inclusion and exclusion, norm and its suspension, intertwine and blur. It is in this sense that, for Agamben (1998 & 2003), the paradigm of modernity lies in the space of the camp, precisely the primary site of exception.

Its analysis highlights how the biological care of the body of the nation (properly biopolitics) is predisposed to transform itself into a decision on "death", into thanatopolitics. However, despite their heuristic value, such reflections have been noted to be based on a blind spot in Western thought, namely the removal of colonialism as a foundational act of modernity. As several authors have emphasized, the articulation between *zoé* and *bios* and the constitution of an exception space where life appears reduced to its biological functions could not be fully understood without including in its genealogy those places where the sovereign power could show itself primarily through its exceptional character, shielded from the usual juridical normativity that governs the "white" spaces of Europe (Mellino, 2019; Mignolo, 2011; Svirsky & Bignall, 2012): it is precisely from the colony and the post-colony that it becomes possible to observe sovereignty in its full necropolitical potential (Mbembe, 2019).

Critiques of the Eurocentric nature of Agamben's genealogy have not prevented recognition of its productive aspects, leading to its application in contexts where the "racial" character of the exercise of sovereign power cannot be overlooked. Specifically, there are several instances in which the legal-political situation between Israel, the Palestinian population, the occupied territories, and Gaza has been read through the philosophical lenses of exception, "bare life", and biopolitics (Azoulay & Ophir, 2012; Lentin, 2016). But what can be its operativity when applied to journalistic language? As we will see, the analysis of the articles from CdS will powerfully demonstrate how the "turn towards emotions" in contemporary journalism not only contributes to the de-historicization of events, but also facilitates the articulation of a racial hierarchy, in which the color-blind character (Bonilla-Silva, 2002) accompanies a dialectic marked by a-reciprocity. It will emerge that, in the context of the first weeks of the conflict, CdS recounts events by constructing two different figures of humanity that support one another: a figure full of agency, the Israeli victim/citizen, and an undifferentiated humanity, represented by the Palestinian being. The former resembles a "universal humanity", while the latter is represented from afar and above, through a decontextualized representation that abstracts from its socio-historical and experiential circumstances. This narrative repertoire, in addition to being linked to literature on humanitarian discourse (Douzinas, 2007; Fassin, 2011; Pallister-Wilkins, 2021), reintroduces the dialectic between *zoé* and *bios*, once again prompting a return to its origins in a colonial scene that continues to renew itself.

2.1 Methodological Approach

Our contribution adopts an approach based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The focus of CDA lies in the dialectic between language, social actors and power relations. Due to this orientation, CDA proves to be a valuable approach for studying media discourse and un-

derstanding how the narratives it constructs contribute to shaping the representation of events and social groups. Thus, CDA does not merely aim to highlight the salient features of discourse but also seeks to understand the effects associated with linguistic and lexical choices, examining how these choices reflect worldviews and value hierarchies. In doing so, CDA does not focus solely on the individual discursive event but also considers its broader context of production and the conditions that make it possible (Amer, 2017; Fairclough, 2014; Richardson, 2007).

For the purposes of this analysis, we have followed the methodological guidelines proposed by van Dijk (1998). From this perspective, ideology and discourse are continuously articulated through individual practices and the cognitive structures of the members of a group, who, in their texts and speech, reflect the prevailing attitudes within their environment, with room for variation. In light of this, a central task for the researcher is to analyze how value judgments are expressed (and sometimes concealed) within the construction of complex narratives. The articles were, therefore, analyzed in terms of their discursive structure, which allowed us to identify both local and global coherence in the way the narrative of the conflict was constructed.

Specifically, our analysis focused on media coverage of the events of October 7th and the subsequent Israeli military operation in Gaza as reported by CdS between October 8th and 21st. We collected and analyzed 176 articles, including news reports, opinion pieces, and editorials. The decision to analyze these different types of articles together is justified by the opportunity to gain a comprehensive understanding of the newspaper's overall stance. Moreover, even within news reporting — albeit in a more subtle form — it is possible to detect specific viewpoints and positions. Our choice of CdS was motivated by its status as the leading newspaper in terms of circulation and national reach, and by its reputation for a pluralistic, moderate editorial stance. Regarding the chosen timeframe, we focused on the first two weeks following October 7th, in line with what several authors identify as the average duration of the news cycle — i.e., the period during which an event continues to attract public attention before being superseded by more recent news. In this framework, our attention was directed to all articles — news reports, reportage, interviews, and editorials — devoted to the Gaza war and published during the selected period. The aim was to understand how narratives and “life stories” are employed not only to “tell” the events and their protagonists but also to evoke a wide range of emotions, feelings, and moods surrounding these experiences.

3 Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis revealed that the detailed account of the human and humanitarian tragedy is one of the primary and persistent ways through which the newspaper portrays the unfolding conflict. In this section, we will demonstrate how this narrative reflects a significant inequality in the way Israeli and Palestinian lives are described. This subtle differential in the degree of humanization assumes a form suitable to the transformations in public sensitivity over the past decades (Fassin, 2010). Specifically, in this analysis, we are not confronted with the dichotomy between a zone of being and a zone of non-being (Fanon, 1961) or with blatant processes of dehumanization that would clearly and evidently demarcate an irreducible boundary between humanity and its “other” (Curry, 2017; Fanon, 1961).

In contrast, it is through humanitarian discourse that a “racialized” figure of the human (Ferreira da Silva, 2017) is delineated. This figure appears in the background (and intermittently), as the constitutive “reverse” of the “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) that accompanies and writes about the shattered lives of Israeli civilians. Throughout the analyzed period, while the killings of Israeli civilians are depicted through close and intimate narratives, functional in

immersing the reader into the depth of their daily lives and existential-political drama, the lives of Palestinian civilians, aside from a few standard passages, are mostly reduced to *zoé*: like the figure of the refugee, they inhabit “a limit zone between life and death, inside and outside, in which they were no longer anything but bare life” (Agamben, 1998, p. 159). This journalistic narrative persists regardless of the stages of the conflict and continues after the beginning of the Israeli invasion of Gaza, when the number of Palestinian victims becomes increasingly significant.

3.1 October 7–14: “Never Forget These Faces”

The conflict narrative during the week following the Hamas attack can be effectively encapsulated through the front page of October 9, which follows the initial formulations of October 8 and anticipates what will be a fundamental narrative constant: “Israel, over 700 dead”, the headline reads, accompanied by a collage of the faces of Israeli citizens killed on October 7. To underscore the message, an editorial by Paolo Giordano titled “Never forget these faces” is announced. It is worth noting that the issue of the “face” is the keystone to understanding how CdS articulates its reports on October 7.

The week is marked by a succession of reports and testimonies, essentially structured in the format of private and biographical accounts. The victims’ experiences are narrated in the first person, often beginning with a detailed description of family relationships, the “normalcy” of places and lives disrupted by an unexpected event, and a “pure evil” (CdS, 11/10/2024) that shatters an ordinary backdrop woven with recognizable elements of daily life.

Everyone had already seen it, except him. Noa dragged into the Negev by two men, eyes rolling desperately. Noa thrown onto a motorcycle and taken away, in the dawn of a dreadful day. Noa held hostage in some house in Gaza, holding a small bottle of water. Everyone knew Noa was lost. Everyone, except her father. “As soon as I hear the sirens on Saturday morning, I try to call her”. Yaakov Argamani slumps on the couch: “She told me she was going to that rave with her boyfriend, and I immediately got scared. Always the same message: ‘Not reachable’, both her and him. After an hour, I get two WhatsApp messages: ‘All good’, ‘I’ll call you later’. Strange: what’s the point of calling later? So, I go to the hospital for news. They only tell me she is not among the injured. But while they tell me this, Noa’s roommate calls: there’s a video circulating... What video? I hope she’s wrong, that it’s not true. A guy approaches and asks if I’m ready to see it...” (CdS, 09/10/2024).

Noa, immediately identified by her first name, personalized by this use, her father worried by the unanswered WhatsApp messages, the Saturday night rave with her boyfriend, the meeting in hospital with her roommate, the video: the public tragedy becomes a private but universalizable drama, detached from its historical-political singularity. This expansion of the importance of subjective experience, of first-person narrative, resonates with Traverso’s (2022) reflections on the “new” writings of history and their contamination with forms of literature. In the field of historical sciences, this narrative form can thus be considered as the specific form that subjectivism assumes within journalistic discourse (Bondebjerg, 1996).

The “prism of subjectivity” (Traverso, 2022, p. 128) becomes the specific way through which events are subjected to a process of de-historicization. Far from being exceptional, this journalistic style continues to underpin the daily publications of CdS. “The general grandfather saves the granddaughters. And Rachel offers pineapples to the terrorists” (CdS, 10/10/2023, p. 6):

The grandfather is coming. The grandfather is coming. Repeated like the lullaby of a nursery rhyme. The grandfather is coming to save us. These are the only words that can calm Galia and Carmel, their bedroom is also the safe room in the house in the kibbutz in Nahal Oz, the place to take refuge when rockets and mortars fall after traveling just a few meters, Gaza is on the other side. The girls know the routine. [...] The silence of the ministers is overridden at 4 pm by a knock on the window and Galia's words: "The grandfather is here".

"Domestic heroism and heroic housewives", the article reads, almost as a clue to the interpretation of the text and the testimonies. As the days pass, details are added; on 12 October, the victims of the rave are revisited: "The faces of the rave. The snapshots, then the horror" (CdS, 12/10/2024), and again "The faces – The snapshots on social media. This is how the party kids are searched for" (CdS, 12/10/2024), whose introductory sentences read: "These are photos of a party. Ordinary faces. Of young people having fun, unaware that their joy would soon turn into a Bataclan, with shots and rockets fired by Hamas, in Israel". Besides returning to the dimension of the face, which we will address at the end of the article, it is necessary to emphasize how the aspect of the universality of the tragedy emerges, encapsulated in that ordinary which highlights the possibility that the event could have concerned "anyone" (as also referenced to the Bataclan attack). It is clear how such a linguistic device can stimulate identification and empathy in readers, but in any case, as Bennett (1988) argues, this narrative mode can only produce a continual minimization of the political and institutional considerations characterizing the social contexts of these events.

Interwoven with this narrative, it is interesting to observe the emergence of another figure, extremely personalized and "romanticized", which accompanies the testimonies of the victims of October 7: that of the reservist. Once again, these are narrative articles where the war scenario, structural considerations on the asymmetry of military forces, and socio-political analyses, blend into the "heroic" account of the individual who, faced with horror,³ is ready to abandon their daily life in the name of a higher good. Thus, the article/interview titled "The young Italo-Israeli reservist: "Now my place is here"':

He is 23 years old, a Roman Jew with dual Italo-Israeli nationality who protects his identity by calling himself E. His Roman accent is very clear, yet his Italian is excellent, and his tone of voice leaves no room for hesitation. [...] He says of himself: "I arrived in Israel in 2019, spent two years in military service with the paratroopers and also in the infantry. Then I stayed here in Israel. In October, after completing high school, I was supposed to enroll in the Faculty of Psychology. And I hope I can still achieve that." [...] Why did he decide to enlist? His response is unequivocal, his voice firm: "Because I feel it absolutely as a duty. Absolutely as a duty. The blood of my brothers was shed in an inhuman way, because only non-human beings behave like this [...]" (CdS, 10/10/2023, p. 6).

Far from being an isolated article, this "point of view" emerges repeatedly, particularly in the October 13 edition, where it even permeates articles focused on the political-military context and the choices of the Israeli government. Thus, the opening of "Bombs from the sky and tanks. No to humanitarian corridors":

3. See also the headline on the front page of October 13: "Proof of horror. Israel shows photos of murdered children. Hamas: 'Attack prepared for two years'" (CdS, 10/13/2024).

He lands in Tel Aviv and declares: "We are here with you, we are not going anywhere". Just a few meters from the runway, the leaders of El Al, Israel's national airline, announce that for the first time in 41 years, planes will also fly on Saturdays to bring reservists home. Israeli civilians living in another country, who are returning to fight because "they have no other country", as Ehud Manor sang, with verses that became the slogan of the ten months of protests against Benjamin Netanyahu. "*Pikyah nefesh*", in Hebrew, means the principle: the safeguarding of a human life surpasses any other religious rule. Take-offs on the most sacred day with the blessing of the rabbis (CdS, 13/10/2024, p. 2).

On the same day, in an article whose title itself homogenizes and depoliticizes the relationship between "besiegers and besieged": "On both sides of Gaza, besiegers and besieged tremble. At the border, the reservists arrive. And the Strip is without water". The account opens precisely with what we might call the epic of the reservist, whose humanity is presented through ordinariness and the same "fear" that would involve both this figure and the Palestinian inhabitants of Gaza:

[...] They are the reservists. Bearded or clean-shaven, with or without side curls, wearing nerd glasses. Young men from America, India, Europe preparing for the Great Revenge. Gaza is down there, and they sing to the Lord, looking at it. They sway, pray, shoot: one gave up a managerial career in California, another his honeymoon in Greece, a third university in Paris. 360,000 recalled: "I live in Frankfurt", says Menachem K., 29, a security expert, offering water. "I received the summons a month ago when no one imagined a crazy war like this. By the end of October, I had planned an 'illegal vacation' in Naples, three days of debauchery. I don't care: I am here to do my duty. None of us is shirking". They all tremble. Besiegers and besieged (CdS, 13/10/2024, p. 5).

It is important to emphasize, beyond "moral" considerations, that the number of Palestinian deaths reported within the same article had already exceeded the confirmed victims of October 7. Nevertheless, the attention is still largely dominated by the details of the attack carried out by Hamas: "Netanyahu shows the massacred children. 'Look at the horror'", in a section called "The Victims" (CdS, 13/10/2024, p. 6), and again "Defenseless. Surprised and 'paralyzed.' Hamas: 2 years to strike" (CdS, 13/10/2024, p. 8). Only from October 14, with the first signs of the Israeli invasion of Gaza, does a narrative of the Palestinian victims begin to emerge: "'This could be my last day'. 24 hours in the Strip where no one wakes up because no one sleeps" (CdS, 14/10/2024, p. 6). However, while the narrative form will remain central and similar, the viewpoint, detail, and perspective will not be equally so.

3.2 October 15–21: A "Generic" Humanity

Starting from October 15, with the unfolding of the Israeli ground offensive in Gaza, the attention paid by the newspaper to Palestinian victims and the living conditions in the Strip undoubtedly changes in quality and quantity. However, significant differences remain in the narrative's characteristics. Firstly, the life stories, which were the core of the narrative post-October 7, do not appear as a "linear" narrative, in which exclusive or predominant space could be given to the direct words of the witnesses. Instead, they are almost always a collage of "fragments". The quotations are often accompanied by the journalist's "marginal comments" of

varying lengths, through which the journalist “adds” his point of view. This is not so much to emphasize the collected testimonies (as in the Israeli case) but rather to put them in a critical perspective. An example of this is the edition of October 19, where the journalist repeatedly warns the reader about the reliability of the Palestinian voices:

The other night, I was trying to calm my children in our house a few hundred meters from the hospital, here in the historic center of Gaza City. The blast wave threw us to the ground. Pure horror. The bomb killed the poorest, those who did not know where to find refuge. Since its foundation in 1882, Al-Ahli, the only Christian hospital in the region, has assisted the needy. Those who cannot pay are also treated. “From today, we are even poorer”, declares Khamis Elessi, one of the local doctors. We listen to them with respect. But we cannot verify. However, we know that historically in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (it is not the only one), the numbers of victims are inflated or reduced according to propaganda interests (CdS, 19/10/2024, p. 5).

This is an explicit way of framing the situation (Goffman, 1956) that is consistently repeated and, in numerous articles, accompanied by the use of the conditional. In any case, beyond these examples where the journalist’s perspective is clearly evident, what we want to highlight is a more underlying dimension through which a differentiation in the degree of empathy and “similarity” is constructed. First of all, the testimonies and stories from the Israeli side continue to fill the pages of the newspaper: the story and pain of the grandson of two elderly people kidnapped on October 7 (CdS, 15/11/2024, p. 7), the detailed description of the lives of the hostages’ relatives and the inhabitants of the kibbutzim (CdS, 20/11/2024, p. 3–4), but also the account of the evacuation of Sderot, on the border with Lebanon (CdS, 16/11/2024, p. 6). We report an excerpt from this last article (titled: “Israelis leave Sderot. ‘It’s something never seen before’”) as further evidence of the sharing and intimacy produced and stimulated in the reader towards the Israeli protagonist/citizen:

He is sitting on a grocer’s chair, next to an ATM. His hands intertwined in a spasm. He looks at the parked cars. His leg is shaking. “I suffer from PTSD...” he says: “Post-traumatic stress disorder. It came to me twenty-five years ago, in the Lebanon war. With the medications, I was better. Now they are not enough; I feel bad again”. On October 7, Dan Harari saw and relived: the enemy at the gates, the neighbors slaughtered, the taxis riddled with Kalashnikov bullets, the bodies of Nepalese workers thrown onto pick-ups. And everyone was shooting, running, hiding. [...] It is the day of the total evacuation of Sderot, the town that once made the desert bloom and now only tears flow: the loudspeaker calls, the minibuses fill up, seven thousand families leave for the big hotels in Eilat, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv. In Moshe Dayan Square, only Dan cries with his stress. Motionless. Incapable: “I can’t stop thinking about the children — a sob —, they were three years old — an even stronger sob —, they could have been my children...”. Even the crows leave. And the strays. Their fear is not the sirens: it is the void. The silence of the wilted garden (CdS, 16/11/2024, p. 6).

On the same day, a few pages earlier, an article titled “Gaza, 600 thousand in flight. Attacks on the Lebanese border” opens on the bombings and the evacuation of the northern territories of the Strip:

Palestinian families fleeing south leave behind the rubble, and under those collapsed walls along the entire Strip, the missing would be a thousand, according to rescuers who continue to dig and remove the concrete blocks. Where they hear a moan, a voice asking for help, they insert a cannula to at least get water to those trapped. [...] The dead in the sandy corridor inhabited by 2.3 million Palestinians are over 2,600, including civilians and Hamas paramilitaries, who in 2007 took control of these 363 square kilometres from Palestinian President Abu Mazen. [...] According to the Israeli armed forces spokesperson, 600,000 would have followed the evacuation order, printed on leaflets dropped among the unplastered gray cubes of the northern villages (CdS, 16/11/2024, p. 2).

Although the second article retains some stylistic characteristics of the “story model”, it is much more contaminated by an “informational model” almost entirely absent in the first case, where we find a constant appeal to an emotional register that almost completely ignores the usual norms of objectivity, neutrality, and balance (Broersma, 2010). The analysis has shown that the testimonies that substantiate Palestinian life stories, although “dense” and rich in details, are often decontextualized, offering scant details about their biographies, their relationships, and their affections. It can be useful once again to compare one of the articles about the victims of the Al Ahli Arab Hospital bombing in Gaza with an article from October 17 dedicated to the testimonies of merchants from Shlomi, also on the border with Lebanon (“At the border with Lebanon where villages empty out for fear of Hezbollah”).

Charred cars, blood on the pavement, walls and roof damaged by shrapnel, windows and doors torn off: it is the scene of the explosion in the parking lot of the Al-Ahli Hospital in the Gaza Strip. Yesterday morning, health workers and volunteers were trying to clean the area. “Over a thousand displaced people were in the courtyard at 6:59 pm the other night when the missile exploded with all its power. A cloud of fire and shrapnel left no hope for those closest. The victims are also among the approximately 600 patients and health workers who were in the facility. Efforts are being made to identify the bodies; human limbs are still scattered in the area”, explains Rushdi Abualouf, the BBC’s local reporter who went to the scene yesterday (CdS, 19/10/2024, p. 4).

“It is more dangerous to be afraid than to die”, says Haim Benmucha, 28, defiantly. His uncle Gabriel taught him this, who learned it from his father when the family still lived in Morocco. Haim has gained war experience and keeps the bakery open, the only one in the area: “The important thing is to run to the right place. I don’t have a shelter: the safest place is the banana plantation. Or that wall there, near the brick factory”. And why? “Hezbollah’s rockets are stupid: they always arrive between 4 and 5 pm. And always in the same places”. He pretends to despise the enemy to hide the fear [...]. Beyond the border, the tough Unit 125 “Radwan Force” is ready, 2,500 men, hardened with the Russians and Iranians during the siege of Aleppo. Last February, they posted a video. They simulated an invasion from the north. And to make themselves understood better, they recited in Hebrew the prophet Jeremiah: “Take cover, children of Benjamin,/ out of Jerusalem,/ because from the North, a disaster is looming/ and a great ruin...” (CdS; 17/10/2024, p. 6).

If the latter part can be likened, in some respects, to certain characteristics of the reservist’s epic previously described (marked by a similar attempt to adopt the military perspective, en-

veloping it in heroism), the former, compared to the narrative of Palestinian victims, paradigmatically highlights the profound inequality observed throughout the analysis. On one hand, there is a humanity characterized by generic features, a multitude (the polyphony of voices), observed almost from above; on the other hand, there are "faces", ordinary stories drawn from a repertoire familiar to the reader, observed "on an equal footing", up close. Every day, lives are forced to confront "horror", just as could happen to any reader: "That same evening, Hamas released a video in which Ilan and Merit recognize Itay, lying down with his hands tied, in the back of a van. 'What do you do when you see your son like this? Are you from Milan? Think about your kids kidnapped in Piazza Duomo!'" (CdS, 16/10/2024, p. 10–11). In this sense, Palestinian lives are nothing but "bare life", a paradigm of the gaze, merciful but asymmetric, of the humanitarian lexicon: "The victims are paraded exhausted, tortured, starving but always nameless, a crowd, a mob that inhabits the exotic parts of the world" (Douzinas, 2007, p. 13).⁴

4 Conclusion

The analysis has focused on the articles published by CdS between October 7, 2023, and October 21, 2023, regarding the initial reactions to the attack carried out by Hamas in Israeli territory and the subsequent invasion of the Gaza Strip by the Israeli army. It aimed to demonstrate how the newspaper narrated the conflict, its different phases, and the actors involved. Our theoretical approach fits within the broad strand of sociological and philosophical literature that attributes performative properties and "effects of reality" to language (Foucault, 2016). In particular, we have focused on the bulk of articles whose main focus is characterized by attention to the victims and the "humanitarian" aspect of the conflict. The reasons for this choice lie in the hypothesis that the "victim-centered" narrative could synthesize and evoke two seemingly independent dimensions of contemporary journalism: on one hand, the tendency, emphasized in the literature (Bondebjerg, 1996; Broersma, 2010), towards an increasingly recurrent use of storytelling and narrative news, and, on the other hand, how this same mode of storytelling subtly lends itself to fueling contemporary race talk.

Indeed, the qualitative analysis has revealed how these two aspects were closely interrelated and mutually reinforcing. The proliferation of a subjective and biographical style readily lends itself to a decontextualizing rhetorical strategy, in which all those elements historically considered necessary for the socio-political analysis of an event are purged. Throughout the first week, a narrative emerges strongly resembling the tropes of the bourgeois novel, in which intimate and familiar normality is shaken by the intrusion of the unforeseen, an event capable of disrupting every daily equilibrium.

It has been argued (Oliver et al., 2012) that this approach to information is potentially instrumental in the production of empathetic feelings and identification. It is a rhetoric that continues to characterize even the second part of the articles under consideration (October 14–21, 2023) and, therefore, inevitably involves the narrative of the Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip. In this sense, we could say that when the discursive terrain identifies with the sphere of the "humanitarian", what dominates the scene is a perspective of apparent equidistance aimed at portraying each actor as a victim of a brutalizing mechanism that places them outside of history and therefore in a condition of substantial "powerlessness".

4. A mass that, if in humanitarian discourse appears worthy of pity and mercy, is always ready to transform into a "horde" when it claims its own agency: "The anger and the grumbling: at the moment, it is not the fury that was unleashed over the outrages against Islam, it is not the protest that shook the Middle East of other wars. It's a seismic swarm of unrest, the epicenter here and tremors everywhere" (CdS, 19/10/2024, p. 5).

However, the qualitative nature of the analysis has allowed us to highlight how, in the transition from Israeli to Palestinian victims, there was also an important shift in the modalities of representation of the involved subjectivities. To illustrate this shift, we decided to use the Levinasian metaphor of the face, already evoked by Fassina (2011): in cases where the testimonies concern Israeli civilians, they are endowed with a deep characterization which, albeit structured on “commonplaces”, brings us back to a daily and intimate dimension where the face itself acts as the master signifier. On the contrary, in the case of Palestinian testimonies, it is precisely the more depersonalizing and abstract characteristics of humanitarian discourse that emerge with greater force.

In line with some recent reflections (Douzinas, 2007; Mellino, 2019), Palestinians are thus a mass, a “whole” with indistinct characteristics which, although worthy of compassion, appear fleetingly and whose names alternate without remaining impressed in the reader’s gaze. Bonilla-Silva (2019) has also reflected on how racism should be considered a device for producing differentiated emotions. In this sense, our analysis shows how the narratives of the victims are not “all equal” and how this inequality lends itself to retracing, in new and different ways, ancient hierarchies of the human. We therefore consider it all the more necessary to ask ourselves how the media and newspapers can contribute to such reproduction, in an era marked by sensationalistic and subjective storytelling. It is precisely in this direction that the article moved, offering a further point of reflection to an already rich debate.

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