Engagements with Criticism

Introduction

The previous chapters addressed the newspapers’ explicit engagements with death, action and historical context. Not only were pieces of data (i.e., paragraphs) identified explicitly, quantitative analysis accounted for what may be termed their explicit, manifest, evident content. From the present chapter on, the course of analysis will progressively become more and more interpretative: concerning more and more implications of engagements with criticism, antisemitism and war.

Dealing with explicit engagements with criticism, this chapter will be something of a hybrid in this sense. Data were still identified explicitly, and the first half of the analysis will be quantitative, examining broad trends in the broadsheets. But the second half of the chapter will consist of purely qualitative analysis of certain aspects of criticism.

It will not simply be the method of analysing the texts that changes from this chapter onward, however. Whilst the concern of previous chapters was more bottom-up, working predominantly with what the newspapers offered, from this chapter on certain crucial theoretical concepts will guide the analysis. Thus, as we have seen in Chapter 1, the act of criticism is a focal point of the (meta-)debate on Israel/Palestine. What can be said and who can say it were dilemmas both proponents and opponents of the ‘new antisemitism’ theory pondered heavily. It therefore promises to be a fertile ground from which to understand some deeper aspects of the coverage.

For the purposes of this chapter, all utterances in the database concerning acts of either explicit criticism or explicit support of one of the warring sides were collected from the newspapers’ comment pieces.¹ The interest will lie in what authors thought of other

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stakeholders’ relevant positions and how they engaged with them. Thus, of prime interest here is the fact that explicit occasioning of the act of criticism in most cases means engagement with the position of some ‘other’ agent. Via their criticism, and the newspapers’ evaluation thereof, we will learn who the ‘other’ side in the debate on Israel/Palestine is, and what ‘we’ disagree with them on, how ‘we’ debate the dilemmas with ‘them’, and what the chances are for ‘us’ or ‘them’ to settle our dissensus.

For the purposes of quantitative analysis, the agent and the position of an utterance of criticism was first coded. It was decided whether they are neutral, supportive/critical of Israel/Hamas or Palestinians, or expressing overlapping values. At the same time, it was quickly realized that another dimension needed to be introduced: an author may express approval as to a particular critical/supportive position or signal his/her distance. To account for this, coding would not simply account for what the position of those ‘others’ who expressed criticism/support was, but also what the author’s position was vis-à-vis the occasioned act of criticism/support: was the evaluative perspective distancing, synoptic or neutral?

Whilst it may look straightforward enough, such a system of coding presented the analysis with a number of revealing dilemmas. First of all, the book’s choice of the coding values does not necessarily indicate agreement as to the categorically distinct nature of these values. Namely, the idea of being critical or supportive of an agent may arguably not be a meaningful position in itself. What does it mean to be pro-Israeli or supporting Israel? Does it mean to support the idea of Greater Israel? To support the idea of the two-state solution based on the pre-1967 borders? To support the idea of the two-state solution based on the borders ratified by the UN General Assembly in 1947? To support the idea of a bi-national state upholding equal rights to every one of its citizens? To justify certain Israeli military/political actions unrelated to the above? To justify any Israeli military action? This list could go on with positions that are subscribed to by relevant agents, and that represent such vast variability as to make the simple values of ‘supportive of Israel’ or ‘pro-Israel’ borderline-meaningless – even if they actually fitted the data very well.

Second, a unique problem presented itself in the collapsing the ‘State’ and its populations. Whilst rarely acknowledged, this is an issue even in the case of Israel: a sizeable number of its citizens may not warrant being treated contiguously with the State of Israel, especially when it comes to an armed conflict with Palestinians. Yet it is even more of a problem when it comes to the relationship between Hamas and the