

# Response to Reviewers

## Rationalizing the Unthinkable: Bureaucracy, Data, and the Calculus of Death

### Cover Letter

Dear Editor,

We thank you and the reviewers for the opportunity to revise and resubmit our manuscript, “**Rationalizing the Unthinkable: Bureaucracy, Data, and the Calculus of Death**” (Manuscript ID: [INSERT ID]). We are grateful to the reviewers for their thoughtful, detailed, and constructive feedback, which has been invaluable in strengthening our paper. The reviewers’ critiques, particularly regarding methodological transparency, empirical grounding, and conceptual clarity, have guided a substantial revision of the manuscript.

In response, we have undertaken significant revisions to address the core concerns. The most important changes include: 1. The addition of a new, dedicated **Methodological Framework and Analytical Approach** section (Section 3). This section explicitly details our analytical framework, defines the three core dimensions of the “calculus of death” (abstraction, normalization, predictive expansion), outlines our case selection criteria, and discusses the procedures and limitations of our comparative conceptual analysis. 2. A thorough revision of the abstract, introduction, and conclusion to more clearly articulate the paper’s methodological approach and theoretical contribution, moving beyond synthesis to define an operationalizable analytical framework. 3. Substantial edits throughout the paper to reduce theoretical jargon, improve logical flow, and engage more directly with literature that challenges our critical theory perspective, thereby enhancing balance and rigor. 4. Clarification of our use of the Palestinian case as an illustrative example within a systematic comparative framework, rather than as an empirical case study, to align the paper’s claims with its theoretical methodology.

We believe these revisions have directly addressed the reviewers’ major concerns, resulting in a more rigorous, transparent, and impactful manuscript. Below, we provide a point-by-point response to each reviewer’s comments, detailing the specific changes made.

### Reviewer-by-Reviewer Detailed Responses

#### Reviewer 1

*Comment: “Develop a clear methodological framework for theoretical analysis that specifies how evidence is evaluated and conclusions are reached.”* **Response:** We thank the reviewer for this crucial suggestion. To address this, we have added a comprehensive new section titled “**Methodological Framework and Analytical Approach**” (Section 3). This section explicitly outlines our three-dimensional analytical framework (abstraction processes, normalization procedures, predictive expansion), details our case selection rationale using principles of “encompassing comparison” and “ideal types,” and describes our analytical procedures for examining primary documentation and technical specifications. We also state the specific criteria for identifying the “calculus of death” and acknowledge the methodological limitations of our conceptual approach. This provides the requested transparency for how we evaluate evidence and reach conclusions.

*Comment: “Either provide systematic empirical analysis of the Palestinian case or reframe the paper as purely theoretical without using specific contemporary examples.”* **Response:** We have reframed our discussion to clarify the theoretical and illustrative role of the Palestinian case. In the revised abstract (lines 10-12) and introduction (Section 1, lines 70-75), we now state that our analysis “exposes how this process enables the systematic erasure of Palestinian life...” as an application of our framework, not as an empirical case study. The new methodological section (Section 3.2) explicitly positions the Palestinian case within a systematic comparative approach, selected to demonstrate how structural mechanisms operate through new technological means, consistent with a theoretical, not empirical, methodology.

*Comment: “Substantiate claims about algorithmic systems with specific technical analysis rather than theoretical extrapolation.”* **Response:** We have strengthened our engagement with specific technical mechanisms. In the related work section (Section 2, lines 150-155), we now cite and discuss Virginia Eubanks’ work on automated decision-making and Nathan Bailey’s analysis of algorithmic violence to ground our claims in existing technical critiques. Furthermore, in the methodological section (Section 3.3), we specify that our analysis of contemporary systems involves examining “publicly available technical documentation, patent applications, and government procurement records.” While remaining a theoretical paper, we now more concretely point to the types of technical evidence that inform our analysis.

*Comment: “Address counterarguments and limitations of the critical theory tradition being employed.”* **Response:** We have significantly expanded our engagement with counterarguments. In the related work section (Section 2, lines 165-175), we now explicitly acknowledge scholarship on the benefits of bureaucratic standardization and algorithmic efficiency, arguing that the dangers emerge “when divorced from robust ethical frameworks.” This engagement is continued in the discussion (Section 4, lines 320-330), where we directly address potential objections that we overstate technology’s harm or underestimate its humanitarian potential, strengthening the paper’s scholarly balance.

*Comment: “Clarify the relationship between historical cases of bureaucratic violence and contemporary algorithmic systems with more nuanced analysis.”* **Response:** The new methodological framework (Section 3) is designed precisely to enable this nuanced clarification. We introduce the concepts of “abstraction intensity,” “normalization procedures,” and “predictive scope” as dimensions for comparative analysis (Section 3.1). This allows us to trace structural continuities (e.g., the reduction of human life to categories) while acknowledging technological discontinuities (e.g., the shift from reactive documentation to proactive prediction). The discussion section (Section 4, lines 275-295) now explicitly contrasts historical “legibility projects” with contemporary “predictive projection.”

*Comment: “Reduce reliance on theoretical jargon where plain language would suffice.”* **Response:** We have carefully edited the manuscript to simplify language where possible. For example, in the introduction (Section 1), we have rephrased dense passages to improve readability. Key terms like “calculus of death,” “abstraction,” “normalization,” and “predictive expansion” are now clearly defined upon their first major use in Sections 1 and 3.1, making the argument more accessible.

*Comment: “Address the literature on beneficial uses of bureaucratic and data systems for comparative balance.”* **Response:** As noted above, we have added this engagement in the related work section (Section 2, lines 165-170) and the discussion (Section 4, lines 325-330). We now acknowledge that standardized procedures can protect against arbitrary violence and that algorithmic systems can reduce human bias, framing our critique around the conditions under which these tools become dangerous.

## **Reviewer 2**

*Comment: “The study design lacks empirical rigor, relying entirely on theoretical synthesis without systematic analysis. Hidden assumption: That historical bureaucratic violence and contemporary algorithmic systems operate through sufficiently similar mechanisms to warrant direct comparison.”* **Response:** We agree that the paper’s theoretical nature required a more explicit methodological justification. The new Section 3, “Methodological Framework and Analytical Approach,” directly addresses this concern. We now systematically present our framework for comparison, defining the core mechanisms (abstraction, normalization, predictive expansion) that form the basis for identifying structural parallels. We also explicitly address the “hidden assumption” by stating our use of Weberian “ideal types” and Tilly’s “encompassing comparisons” (Section 3.2), which allow us to analyze cases within larger systems while acknowledging their unique characteristics. This provides the systematic analysis previously lacking.

*Comment: “Methodological flaw: No clear criteria for case selection or systematic framework for analyzing the proposed ‘calculus of death.’”* **Response:** This flaw has been remedied. Section 3.2, “Case Selection and Comparative Analysis,” details our rationale for selecting the Holocaust/colonial administration and contemporary algorithmic/Palestinian cases. We state they were chosen as well-documented instances that represent the phenomenon under study across different technological eras. Furthermore, Section 3.3 lists specific criteria for identifying the calculus of death: “(1) systematic abstraction that erases human moral standing, (2) procedural normalization that obscures violent outcomes, and (3) predictive expansion that enables preemptive violence.”

*Comment: “Missing empirical validation of the central claims about algorithmic systems and Palestinian erasure. Claims about contemporary systems appear exaggerated given the lack of specific technical analysis or case studies.”* **Response:** We have clarified the nature of our claims. The paper does not seek to provide empirical validation but to develop a conceptual framework for understanding a

phenomenon. We have tempered language that could be read as making empirical claims and instead emphasize the framework’s purpose. For instance, the abstract now concludes that our contribution lies in “developing an operationalizable analytical framework” (lines 20-22). We also more precisely cite existing scholarship (e.g., Eubanks, Weizman, Bailey) that provides technical and forensic analysis of related systems, grounding our theoretical extrapolation in established research (Sections 2 and 4).

*Comment: “Insufficient engagement with counterarguments or alternative explanations.”* **Response:** We have substantially expanded this engagement. New text in the related work section (Section 2, lines 165-175) and the discussion (Section 4, lines 315-330) acknowledges countervailing perspectives on bureaucratic rationality and algorithmic governance. We now state that our framework acknowledges potential benefits while arguing the structural tendencies become dangerous in specific contexts, thereby addressing alternative explanations for the systems we critique.

*Comment: “Need to demonstrate rather than assert the operation of the ‘calculus of death.’”* **Response:** The new methodological framework is designed to enable demonstration. By defining three operational dimensions (Section 3.1) and providing criteria for their identification (Section 3.3), we move from assertion to providing a clear template for analysis. The revised discussion (Section 4) then applies this framework, analyzing how the “calculus of death” operates through these dimensions (e.g., discussing “abstraction intensity” and “predictive scope”), thereby demonstrating its utility as an analytical tool.

*Comment: “Some sections read more like political commentary than scholarly analysis.”* **Response:** We have revised the manuscript to ensure a consistently scholarly tone. We have edited passages in the introduction and discussion to focus on conceptual and structural analysis, avoiding language that could be perceived as purely polemical. The addition of the rigorous methodological section further anchors the paper in scholarly discourse.

*Comment: “Overuse of theoretical jargon without adequate operational definitions.”* **Response:** We have provided clear, operational definitions for all key terms. The core concepts of the “calculus of death” and its three dimensions are defined in Section 3.1 (lines 180-205). Other important terms (e.g., “biopolitics,” “banality of evil”) are defined in context where they are first introduced. This ensures the argument is accessible and the framework is usable.

## Closing Note

We sincerely thank both reviewers again for their insightful and challenging comments, which have profoundly improved our manuscript. We believe the revisions detailed above have directly addressed the major concerns regarding methodology, rigor, clarity, and balance. The paper is now stronger, clearer, and makes a more transparent and defensible contribution to the theoretical understanding of rationality, bureaucracy, and violence. We are hopeful that the revised manuscript now meets the journal’s standards for publication.

Respectfully submitted,  
The Authors