

# The Moral Accounting of Terrorism: Competing Interpretations of September 11, 2001

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**Abstract** Drawing on comparative case studies, the research elucidates competing constructions of justice, responsibility, and victimhood articulated in response to September 11, 2001 on three digital discourse fora in Brazil, France, and the United States. The research extracts the moral metaphors through which Brazilian, French, and American participants judge the terrorist acts. It contrasts the underlying moral accounting schemes employed to legitimize or delegitimize the use of terrorism on 9/11. Two contrasting standpoints on political violence and associated moral underpinnings are elucidated: the morality of retribution and the morality of absolute goodness (Lakoff 2002). One ideological faction uses the morality of retribution to hold the US accountable for inciting the terrorists to act. For these individuals, political violence can be seen as a form of action that upholds a binary framing of moral order in which all moral debts must be paid. By contrast, opposing camps employ the morality of absolute goodness to condemn the terrorists by arguing that terrorist violence is inherently unjustifiable, as it necessarily results in human suffering.

**Keywords** Terrorism · 9/11/01 · Moral accounting

September 11, 2001 marks a pivotal moment in world geopolitics. Just as its reverberations continue to reshape the imperatives of statecraft, it has changed how people understand political violence. While social scientists have done considerable work analyzing narratives of everyday violence (Cerulo 1998) and political violence (Gamson 1992), few have examined the discourses concerning 9/11/01 to enrich understanding of narratives surrounding terrorism. Seven years later, there is still little scholarly work regarding how people make sense of 9/11 and almost no comparative research. Examination is needed to illuminate how individuals assess the moral implications of 9/11 as political violence in a global context.

In the aftermath of 9/11, individuals around the world grapple with the political and moral implications of the attacks. They articulate assumptions about the moral status of

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political violence as it affects states, societies, and individuals. While centered on the terrorist acts themselves, their narratives also reveal implicit understandings of fundamental operating principles at work in the global political arena (Ross 2002). My study takes this pivotal moment to analyze naturally occurring discourse in online discussion fora in Brazil, France, and the US devoted to 9/11/01.

The research examines how individuals from different nations employ opposing moral metaphors to make sense of the attacks, and how they evaluate political violence as a legitimate or illegitimate instrument of power exercised by state and nonstate actors. The analysis yields insights into these foundational issues through the examination of competing moral accounting schemes employed to judge political aggression, as well as related moral justifications employed to adjudicate between innocent versus culpable actors following 9/11.

The vast majority of existing research on the events of September 11th examines the attacks from the perspectives of individuals sharing nationality or language. In the US, expressions of grief are mixed with proclamations of national unity (Collins 2004). The minority of Americans calling for critical examination of the US is rebuked as straying “from the flag” (Kohut and Stokes 2006, p. 288). In Latin America (Yúdice 2004) and Europe (Roger 2002), condemnation of the terrorists meets with stronger resistance by those holding the US accountable for the attacks. In Estonian chat (Vengerfeldt 2003) and Arabic-language discussion boards (Abdullah 2007), censure of the US competes with denunciations of the terrorists. Across national or lingual groups, alternate narratives compete for preeminence between framing 9/11 as an assault on “common humanity” and defining the attacks as “payback for injustice” (Bhargava 2002, p. 321; Gitlin in Bhargava 2002, p. 323).

While previous studies have generated insight into ways in which Americans and non-Americans interpret the events of 9/11, no existing studies take a cross-national perspective. More importantly, none examines the moral logics underpinning these competing narratives. By contrast, my study takes an explicitly cross-national perspective to compare the moral frameworks undergirding discourses surrounding 9/11 as political violence. I analyze naturally occurring discourse in three languages from online fora in Brazil, France, and the US created in immediate response to the attacks. The cases present exceptionally rich data from three continents, making it possible to analyze competing moral accounting schemes from nationals of semi-periphery and developed nations. Such comparative work is badly needed to understand what is global and what is local about how people employ moral accounting schemes to make sense of terrorism.

### **Theoretical orientations: 9/11 and moral accounting**

The global ramifications of 9/11 make it a topic of concern to people in different countries, a lightning rod for competing interpretations of the role of violence in the social world. Cross-national comparison provides an excellent opportunity to illuminate how moral accounting is used to legitimate and delegitimate political violence. Post 9/11, forum participants make determinations about who is entitled to commit violent acts and under what circumstances. Distinctions regarding political violence are worked out in parallel fashion across the cases. Two dominant views vie for supremacy: those framing the US as culpable for the attacks versus those framing terrorism as immoral on any grounds.

The presence of these rival factions suggests that Lakoff’s (2002) theory of moral accounting can be applied to the discourses. To adjudicate between innocent versus culpable actors, participants employ moral accounting schemes based on opposed moral

accounting logics. Although Lakoff (2002, pp. 45–8) confines his analysis to the US and does not apply his schema to political violence, his concepts of moralities of “retribution” and “absolute goodness” can be used to compare opposing moral logics vis-à-vis 9/11. I extend Lakoff’s (2002, p. 45) theories beyond the US to focus attention on the economic metaphors of “moral action as financial transaction” used to conceptualize moral gains and harms as credits or debits.

Retributive accounting valorizes the “debt-payment principle” demanding the payment of debts in kind, whether positive or negative, to bring moral balances to zero. Absolute goodness accounting valorizes the “positive-action principle,” demanding the avoidance of harm to maintain positive moral balances. In this moral mathematics, beneficial actions are moral credits, while harmful actions are moral debits. Acts of positive reciprocation honor both the debt-payment principle through the repayment of debt and the positive-action principle through the maintenance of positive moral balances.

By contrast, harm, including political violence, introduces a moral dilemma. When moral debt is incurred, a metamoral choice between two incompatible principles must be made. To honor retribution, the perpetrator must be paid back to bring moral balances to zero. To honor absolute goodness, harm must be avoided and revenge eschewed, thereby preserving positive moral account balances. This moral dilemma is the linchpin of competing interpretations of 9/11. As my data show, the ideological struggle between rival factions on the fora stems from incompatibility between these rival moral schemas.

### **Overview of findings: Retribution vs. absolute goodness**

Across the cases, numerous contributors holding the US responsible for the attacks rely on the morality of retribution to interpret 9/11 as necessary repayment for past misdeeds. Henceforth referred to as “retributivists,” these individuals employ the debt-payment principle to argue that by causing harm through foreign policy and imperialism, the US amassed tremendous moral debt to the world. Using the language of payment, retributivists frame the terrorists as agents of retribution bringing balances to equilibrium by exacting repayment for the United States’ unpaid moral transgressions. Discourse from these individuals focuses almost exclusively on the US and those it has harmed, largely eschewing either discussion of the terrorists’ own agenda or mention of harm done by other social actors. Insofar as they exact retribution for the harm the US has inflicted, the terrorists’ actions are moral.

In response to this moral narrative, participants across the cases marshal “challenger” frames (Gamson 1992), many based on positive-action principle moral accounting. Henceforth defined as “anti-retributivists,” these individuals assert that the 9/11 terrorists contravene the principle of absolute goodness by using political violence to inflict harm. Anti-retributivists reject all terrorism as morally unjustifiable by reframing the attacks as a violation of the sanctity of human life, regardless of political motivations. They argue that harm can never be morally justified, no matter the status of the victims’ and the perpetrators’ moral accounts. Equating all members of the human race as equally worthy of life, regardless of national misdeeds, the citizenry of even the most culpable states does not deserve death at the hands of terrorists. Therefore, anti-retributivists contend that political violence is morally indefensible because it imparts harm, thereby violating absolute goodness.

While retribution and absolute goodness accounting schemes assume diverse forms in different discursive environments separated by language and culture, they remain recognizably parallel nonetheless. Differences arise with regard to the tropes employed

and the use of national identity as the category determining “spheres of moral concern” (Zeruvabel 1997). Those who distance themselves from the “other” are more likely to define moral guilt and innocence in terms of nationality. American anti-retributivists use nationality as a unifier of innocence, incorporating all Americans within each other’s sphere of moral concern. Conversely, Brazilian and French retributivists employ nationality to exile all Americans from their sphere of moral concern; nationality is a debt-payment marker of guilt applied to all Americans as fit objects of retributive action unworthy of empathy. By contrast, those who take up the standpoint of the “other” determine innocence and guilt without regard to nationality. American retributivists, as well as Brazilian and French anti-retributivists, share this stance. They enlarge landscapes of moral concern to encompass all victims of political violence independent of their national origins.

### Data and case studies

My comparative case study approach is well suited to the project’s goal of revealing whether moral accounting schemes are used in parallel manner across different national environments to justify or condemn political violence in a global context. The data are drawn from parallel opinion fora comprised of contributions to three newspaper-affiliated online communities hosted by *O Estado de São Paulo* in Brazil, *Le Monde* in France, and *The New York Times* in the US. I collected the universe of posts from 9/11/01 through 10/29/01, when the Brazilian forum ends: 15,764 posts from the *NY Times*’ “A Nation Challenged,” 15,951 from *Le Monde*’s “L’Amérique” and “The September 11th Attacks in the US,” and 1,844 from *O Estado de São Paulo*’s “The First War of the Century.” I also conducted interviews in New York, São Paulo, and Paris with forum staff.

These case studies are carefully chosen for the diversity of their discourses. Unlike venues attracting like-minded individuals with particular political agendas, these fora discourses include both solidarity-affirming intragroup discourses whereby participants identify themselves with a common ideological agenda, as well as intergroup discourses in which posters seek to disidentify with rival positions (van Dijk 1998). As such, the fora discourses qualify as genuine examples of public discourse because they permit the participation of everyone with access to the forum (Ayres 1999). The fora’s richness as “discursive fields” (Spillman 1997, p. 10) allows for examination of moral metaphors used to make sense of political violence between state and nonstate actors.

Further, data from three national fora make it possible to see whether the views of citizens from a semi-periphery country may differ from those claiming to situate themselves at the center of the world system. Each discourse community has a different relationship to political violence in general and terrorism in particular. Previous to 9/11, the US had not suffered from decades of terrorism as had countries such as France. By contrast, Brazilian participants are nationals of a developing country who are less likely to see themselves targets for terrorist violence. Having neither French colonial nor American superpower baggage, Brazilians are less likely to feel the vulnerability that afflicts many French and Americans following 9/11. This tripartite comparison therefore allows the researcher to maximize variation regarding each group’s relationship to the pivotal events of 9/11.

The analysis relies on what can be observed in the data, highlighting one of the challenges of online research: the difficulty of gathering socio-demographic information (Hine 2000). As this information is unavailable, it is inappropriate to generalize findings to a defined universe of individuals sharing particular socio-demographic characteristics. This

being said, it should be noted that in 2001, it is likely that the fora populations came from economically privileged classes. While the fora were open to the public and free-of-charge, only individuals with economic means to access a computer and pay toll and internet provider fees could participate. In 2001, in France and Brazil, access to the internet required local toll and provider fees, making it likely that only the upper–middle classes could participate. Schulz's (2000) survey of *NY Times*' forum participants reports the majority belonging to the educated classes. Although I do not make this claim, there is reason to speculate that the fora nationals may be comprised of individuals from privileged strata.

## Methods

For the present research, I observed the three fora from 9/11/01 through 10/29/01. My analysis revealed competing moral accounting schemes used to undergird definitions of guilt and innocence, victimhood and culpability, and acceptable versus unacceptable uses of political violence. I used content analysis to produce frequency counts, operationalize the moral accounting categories used, and make the generalization of the results more probable. The unit of analysis was the post. I assigned all posts a unique identifying number as reflected in the present analysis. In this article no two posts quoted come from the same person; no single post is quoted more than once. I reviewed a random probability sample composed of 1,200 posts. I coded the sample to assemble a comprehensive inventory of the moral metaphors used across the cases. These procedures result in frequency counts of the moral accounting criteria used to define innocence and guilt, victimhood and culpability, and acceptable versus unacceptable use of political violence regarding the events leading to 9/11 and the attacks themselves. For the present analysis, the posts from the week following 9/11 were coded for the presence of an underlying schema corresponding to one of Lakoff's moral accounting principles. Coding produced frequency counts of posts relying on debt-payment moral accounting and posts relying on positive-action moral accounting within this timeframe. Although I was the only coder for all posts, uniquely for the purpose of increasing reliability outside coders coded a subset of the data. The Kappa score (.73) was statistically significant ( $Z$  score  $>3$ ) and offers evidence that establishes the reliability of the measures at a substantial level of agreement.

## Findings: The morality and immorality of political violence

In each forum, participants offer narratives and make moral claims regarding the attacks, the perpetrators, and the victims. In the Brazilian, French, and American fora respectively 63% (*O Estado*), 39% (*Le Monde*), and 42% (*NY Times*) of posts contain moral judgment of the events leading to 9/11, moral judgment of the 9/11 attacks, and/or moral judgment of retribution in response to political violence. In these posts, the conceptual systems of choice favor either debt-payment moral accounting or positive-action moral accounting. Both those discussants valorizing retributivist and those discussants valorizing anti-retributivist accounting principles symbolically construct moral scales reflecting the credits and debits they attribute to the US, terrorists, and other social actors. Across the three cases, posts taking a retributivist stance in critiquing US foreign policy or bellicose acts account for 33%, 19%, and 18% of contributions. Posts taking an anti-retributivist stance condemning retributive moral logic validating political violence or terrorism comprise 30%, 20%, and 24% respectively (Table 1).

**Table 1** Moral accounting

	% Retributivist	% Anti-retributivist	% Total posts
<i>O Estado</i>	33	30	63
<i>Le Monde</i>	19	20	39
<i>NY Times</i>	18	24	42

### Brazilian retributivists vs. anti-retributivists

Brazilian retributivists use the language of payment to frame American military actions and foreign policy as moral debits awaiting compensation. On 9/11, Americans “paid for the errors...with their lives” (#B-173). In making the US pay for its acts of aggression, the terrorist acts serve the necessary moral purpose of balancing the moral books:

[T]he authors of this act could...avenge Hiroshima...avenge the death of Kadafi’s daughter...But particularly the Palestinians would be right to react this way...they [Americans] had to believe that one day they would pay for this.... (#B-205)

These participants employ the moral metaphor of retribution. For them, repayment of moral debt is the overriding rationale for political violence: “whoever INSTITUTIONALIZES terror in the world should know that one day it will come back. In sum, whoever sows will reap!” (#B-185). For Brazilian retributivists, the US is causally responsible for 9/11 because it has not paid off its moral account balance. They express causality using biblical language: “They are reaping what they have sown, invasion and death” (#B-338).

Retributivist Brazilians conflate state and citizens. Both are charged with responsibility transgressions inflicted on non-American peoples and nations: “The USA has always killed people everywhere to a far greater degree than the terrorists, and in the same way or through worse acts...innocent people that do not even know that they are killed by Americans....” (#B-144). Because debt-payment moral accounting requires balances to come to zero, acts of violence against the US or its citizens thereby align the moral ledger, obviating empathy: “whether politically, economically or militarily, the USA. also provokes the death of millions of people in the world. This is also brutal violence...they are not innocent....They deserve what they are getting and they deserve much more” (#B-346). Based on their nationality, Americans are undeserving of compassion: “It is unbelievable that the majority of people, in general, feel ‘pain’ for Americans. We live in a world that suffers from the tyranny of a country that...never offer[s] to pay any type of indemnity....” (B#-318). Failing to make restitution for their nation’s misdeeds, all Americans are exiled from spheres of moral concern: “Americans are tasting the fruit of what they have sown...I force myself and can’t quite manage to feel pain for these criminals....” (#B-368)

In response, anti-retributivist Brazilians argue that political violence is an indefensible violation of the positive action principle: “We have no right to sacrifice any human life for political motives or other ideologies. Terrorism is a great error. I mourn and pray for the dead....” (#B-040). They reject the moral calculus of retributivism as it applies to any social actor: “It is terrible that innocent people lost their lives in an act such as this one....The value of life is the same in all places: priceless” (#B-008). Rebuking retributivists, they invoke religious tropes to contend that political violence is indefensible:

I am shocked by what has happened...even more so by what I have read in this forum. Anyone with a conscience should mourn the death of thousands of civilians and ask God to comfort the families of the unfortunates. But there are people who manage to

see this act of insane terror as something good. As if it were deserved! How can these people deserve to die! (#B-161)

Employing language rooted in universalistic religious frames, they designate people of all nationalities as members of a single transnational collectivity that is harmed every time there is an act of political violence: “May GOD help us. We have all lost in this. The entire world...” (#B-181).

Anti-retributivists refute their adversaries’ justification of violence against civilians: “Independent of what one thinks in favor of or against Bush or American foreign policy, nothing justifies such cowardice and infamy” (#B-134). They reprimand retributivists using nationality to assign blame: “Here is not the place to judge the USA’s foreign policy, or its military acts....This act was not against the State, but against individuals only guilty of living their everyday lives....” (#B-160). Based on this moral logic, the past actions of the US government are deemed immaterial to the moral status of the 9/11 attacks, “...independent of a country’s political regime...NOTHING, NOTHING justifies what happened. Nothing justifies the deaths of common people living their lives, whether it be here or in Iraq or in the USA....” (#B-251).

Positing that nationality has no bearing on guilt, anti-retributivists accuse their compatriots of hypocritically charging the US with moral debts when Brazil is guilty of comparable moral transgressions: “For those who consider Americans ‘belligerent and bellicose’ cast your eyes on your own morning newspaper and see the violence of your own people against your own people” (#B-393). They frame retributivism as a form of hypocrisy that undermines the logic central to debt-payment accounting: “...there is corruption, violence, social inequality etc. there [in the US]. But nothing compared to Brazil...how hypocritical” (#B-169). Anti-retributivists reason that neither Brazilians nor Americans are deserving of violence based on national misdeeds. State malfeasance cannot be used as a justification for political violence: “Then it would be fair to say that the Brazilian people—including of course, poverty stricken children, impoverished elderly, in addition to the well-known corruption, impunity, and violence—deserve it...isn’t it like that??” (#B-002). Eschewing retaliatory moral bookkeeping, anti-retributivists contend that any acts of violence against citizens of any nation constitute first and foremost acts of violence against humanity as a whole: “We must combat any unjustifiable act in any part of the planet. We must mourn these acts and not criticize or attempt to justify or give reasons for these acts” (#B-182). Rather, the highest moral good is in humanity fighting all forms of violence, “We should cry for this tragedy just as we should cry for people who die of violence in Brazil.... We are all human...right?” (#B-184).

### French retributivists vs. anti-retributivists

The retributive posts appearing on the French forum mirror those on the Brazilian forum. Like their Brazilian counterparts, French retributivists rely on the language of payment: “AMERICANS ARE ONLY PAYING FOR THEIR ISOLATIONISM, THEIR IMPERIALISM, AND THEIR OWN ERRORS” (#F-120). The US is morally responsible for 9/11 as payment in kind: “Americans have paid the ultimate price...Faced with worldwide opposition to their imperialism, they have become the target for many of us” (#F-231). They rationalize terrorist violence with the logic central to the debt-payment principle to classify 9/11 as a rightful balancing of moral scales: “...the barbaric nature of American capitalism is so indelibly anchored in our memory that when all of its arrogant power is

suddenly beaten and falls apart like a vulgar house of cards, the evil done to the world seems to balance itself” (#F-340).

Echoing Brazilian retributivists, these French levy joint moral responsibility on the state and its citizens for provoking 9/11:

If this country had been less disrespectful to other cultures and less arrogant in its policies, it would perhaps not have provided the foundation for what it has suffered. If the people had been less navel gazing and had not fattened themselves to the detriment of others and had listened more to the world’s poverty, they certainly would not have suffered this hatred. (#F-257)

They argue that the physical victims of the WTC attacks are blameworthy: “The thousands of employees, the managers, the ‘decision makers’...why not consider those who worked in the WTC banks, symbol of globalization and American foreign policy, as ‘guilty’?” (#F-017). Incorporating class struggle tropes, they blur boundaries between elites and workers, conflating all Americans as culpable members of the class setting government policy: “The American ruling class is responsible for what is happening and they have the impudence to consider themselves the victims. How shameful!” (#F-256).

In addition, they “other” all Americans as unworthy of empathy by framing the flesh and blood victims as never having banked a positive moral balance for others: “The Americans that perished in these attacks probably never observed a moment of silence or shed a single tear for the thousands of dead Iraqi children due to the embargo...” (#F-155). Just as French retributivists argue that moral debt must be paid in kind, they use similar logic framing empathy as a kind of moral credit that Americans have failed to spend on others. They use this rationale to exclude Americans from spheres of moral concern: “Did Americans cry after the attacks in Moscow, Rwanda, or Iraq?” (#F-194).

As on the Brazilian forum, retributivism meets with resistance on the French forum. In response to class tropes, anti-retributivists argue that there is never a valid rationale for terrorism, whether it targets the US or France:

Those who worked there worked many kinds of jobs, secretaries, accountants, janitors....They were not soldiers. I remembered taking the RER from the Saint-Michel station, coming home and learning of the news of the bombing. A few hours difference and that could have been me. Human history is no more than a vast repetition; the same horrors repeat themselves.... (#F-055)

They tell retributivists that the logic driving the debt-payment principle serves as an excuse for murder, “Nothing, nothing can justify the barbarity of the murderers! NOTHING!” (#F-154). They critique their adversaries for using moral accounting to deny the victims’ humanity: “Shame on the French who do not feel...the horror that these human lives experienced, people like you, your husbands, your wives, and your children. To the French who still have a bit of humanity left within them: Speak louder” (#F-301).

Like Brazilians, French anti-retributivists reject retribution based on nationality as having no bearing on the moral status of the attacks: “A victim whether American, Palestinian, Bosnian, Chinese, or Afghani...is in no way directly responsible as an individual for what happens in this world” (#F-084). For anti-retributivists, there is no causal link between national guilt and citizen deaths: “I am neither for nor against America...What happened is unforgivable...This CRIME must simply be condemned. Compassion and indignation. DEMOCRACY” (#F-004). Like Brazilians, many are critical of American foreign policy but state that it has no moral bearing, “I have often criticized the United States...but absolutely nothing justifies these ignoble acts....” (#F-045).



Further parallel to their Brazilian counterparts, these French revile their retributivist adversaries as hypocrites excusing terrorism against the US while failing to judge France, a country equally guilty of inflicting harm:

Your absence of logic, compassion, decency is unthinkable... You are monsters. I do not like either the US administration or its policies, but the USA is neither better nor worse than France or any other country. Our colonial past... stops us from having the right to throw any stones... murder is always murder and it is never deserved or excusable. (#F-281)

French anti-retributivists argue that the debt-payment accounting scheme cannot be used in good conscience without condemning France as well: “I don’t want to judge them now... they were not alone in playing that dangerous little game. Who gave nuclear technology to Pakistan, joyous and progressive country as everyone knows? France. Not much to be proud of, is there?” (#F-171). Decrying debt-payment accounting as an excuse for hypocrisy, they charge retributivists with ignoring French misdeeds in Rwanda:

In Rwanda 10 years ago:—Country in the zone of French influence—Close to French military bases—Largely financed and equipped militarily by France...—There was a genocide resulting in 600,000 dead...[T]here is no way to attribute the blame to the naughty Americans...France shelters a multitude of those who were in charge and carried out the genocide. What do you do? NOTHING! You give lessons in morality to the entire world from your keyboard. (#F-378)

They decry retributive moral accounting as illogical hypocrisy: “Yes, the French state, in order to perpetuate the car cult in the Hexagon and the interests of those profiting from it, didn’t hesitate to impose Sassou N’Guesso on the Congo at the price of thousands of dead” (#F-356).

### **American retributivists vs. anti-retributivists**

American retributivists also make their case with debt-payment arguments of cause and effect: “The US unconditional support to Israel’s atrocities in the Middle East has a price: hatred. And hatred leads to catastrophes like yesterday’s” [sic] (#A-045). They frame the debt-payment principle as a natural law to which all are subject: “How can we be shocked when our enemies take joy in our destruction when we as a nation allow our government to bomb Iraq [and] commit terrorism in other countries?...The laws of physics also apply to the US...[A]n action will produce an equal reaction” (#A-030). Assigning culpability for the attacks, they reason, “As long as we [the US] as a nation state continue to support oppressive regimes...horrors similar to what happened yesterday will continue...It is just sad that so many innocents had to pay with their lives...” (#A-105).

However, unlike Brazilian and French retributivists, American retributivists make an important distinction between the guilty state and the innocent people: “We are paying for our immoral foreign policy and unfortunately those who make these policies are ‘safe.’ Only the innocents are losing their lives...I am not against any people, but I am against our immoral government policy” (#A-184). They assert that the US government created moral debts for which citizens pay the price, “We as citizens are constantly kept in the dark about what our government does...Yet we are the ones who constantly pay the price” (#A-223). They argue that while the nation’s guilt demands repayment, the WTC victims are innocent:

Did those people deserve to die? No...Crying for the lives lost in NY and DC? You should be. It was a tragedy. But, then, try to remember to cry now and then for the

countless millions of people we slaughter...the people we exploit and destroy all across the world. (#A-246)

Equating the suffering of all peoples, retributivist Americans enlarge spheres of moral concern to include all who are harmed by state-sponsored violence or terrorism regardless of nationality. They draw distinctions between state and people for all citizens of the world:

...the way we are justifying [the] killing of innocent people, because some government may have cooperated with these people, the same way those perpetrators are justifying killing innocent people by declaring war against US for its policy and injustice. (#A-232)

Although they interpret the same causal scheme central to the debt-payment principle as their French and Brazilian counterparts, American retributivists employ it as a rationale to draw inclusive rather than exclusive moral boundaries: “I watched with horror what happened Tuesday. I’ve been watching with horror what has been happening in the Occupied Territories over the last year” (#A-336). Significantly, where French and Brazilian retributivists exclude both state and citizens from spheres of moral concern, American retributivists urge all Americans to enlarge their sphere of moral concern to encompass both Americans and non-Americans alike.

However, parallel to Brazilian and French anti-retributivists, American anti-retributivists reject any validation of the attacks and the use of political violence on 9/11: “No matter what the supposed ‘justifications,’ there is never a justification for the outrage perpetrated on innocent people today” (#A-027). They accuse retributivists of “rationalizing the barbaric terrorist attacks”:

...evil terrorists...justifying their horrendous acts by dehumanizing their victims...No matter what you say to whitewash the murder of thousands of civilians in the World Trade Center, the bottom line is that the innocent victims were human beings with flesh and blood...If there is still a shred of moral fiber in you, you should either admit that you are wrong or just shut the hell up. (#A-342)

While Brazilian and French retributivists blame both state and citizenry, American anti-retributivists proclaim the innocence of both nation and people: “As Americans we will weep, as Americans we will mourn...” (#A-137). American anti-retributivists employ American nationality as a unifier of innocence: “...to say that Americans deserve this tragedy is madness” (#A-044).

Like Brazilian and French anti-retributivists, American anti-retributivists reject debt-payment causal linkages between 9/11 and American foreign policy: “Any notion that these were logical acts of retaliation and/or should have been expected by the US for past ‘oppression’ by the US is seriously misguided” (#A-112). Like their Brazilian and French counterparts, they demand an audit of moral balances to undermine debt-payment logic:

The fact that some of those Islamic radicals are now misusing some of that training by plotting or committing acts of terrorism against this country neither makes the US government guilty nor them less guilty...It’s the terrorist sects that are guilty. Not the CIA for helping some of them resist an earlier Soviet occupation. (#A-018)

However, unlike Brazilian and French anti-retributivists who discuss their own nations’ guilt, these American anti-retributivists do not criticize non-US actors as equally guilty of

violence. Instead, these Americans offer competing accounts of American foreign policy as meriting positive credits:

...the US was the beacon of hope for oppressed people behind the Iron Curtain until the USSR collapsed. Then the US led the coalition that bailed out Muslim Kuwait. And maybe I am wrong but the US has allowed every viewpoint by every party in the Middle East to use our platforms and airwaves to make their points (#A-339).

American anti-retributivists frame the US as comparing favorably with other nations: “Like America or not, who’s there when another country needs disaster relief? Or food to feed their starving kids? Or any other kind of help? The United States, that’s who. We may not be perfect but we do more for other countries than they ever did for us” (#A-153). For American anti-retributivists, because the US produces equal or less harm in the world than other social actors, renunciation of retributive principles goes hand in hand with an audit of moral books to refute the use of the debt-payment principle accounting to explain 9/11. Finally, they assert that debt-payment rhetoric promotes further violence, “By blaming US policy, you are empowering terrorism. There is no excuse for this mad act—none whatsoever” (#A-151).

### Conclusions and implications

Regardless of nationality, a parallel phenomenon emerges: fierce debate between retributivists who frame the use of violence on 9/11 as a balancing of moral scales stemming from past actions of the US and anti-retributivists who reject this logic as both faulty and morally inexcusable. Across the three cases, conflict emerges between those who make moral sense of the 9/11 attacks by citing retributivist principles and those who deny the relevance of these principles. The ideological chasm between these two groups mirrors the moral faultline between those subscribing to the two different logics of moral accounting specified by Lakoff: retribution and absolute goodness. These two opposing groups offer up alternate accounting schemes that implicitly rely on these mutually exclusive moral formulations.

While this faultline divides groups on all three fora, the contours of the discursive terrain are not identical in each case. For the retributivists in the two non-American fora under study, the achievement of moral order is the primary purpose of political violence on 9/11. Their foremost concern is that the US, as the primary moral debtor, be made to pay its debts to the aggrieved in the rest of the world. These Brazilians and French frame both the US and its citizens as meriting 9/11. They focus the retributivist principle on past sins of the nation, framed as the cause for terrorism against *both* state and people. In assigning moral debts, Brazilian and French retributivists privilege the category of American nationality as the marker of guilt. For these retributivists, it is irrelevant exactly which members of the American collectivity carry responsibility for these sins. They make few distinctions between the American government and the American population, or even between American elites and ordinary Americans. Here we see a difference between Brazilian and French retributivists. While Brazilians employ biblical language of reaping and sowing to establish causality, the French employ class tropes identifying Americans with the abstract forces denoted by “isms” such as capitalism and imperialism. In either case, non-American retributivists represent the victims as bearers of their national identity who do not warrant empathy or compassion from others.

In representing political violence directed against the American people as morally justified, Brazilian and French retributivists set all Americans outside their sphere of moral

concern. However, for Brazilian and French retributivists, nationality is irrelevant for non-Americans harmed or victimized by the US. By selectively employing nationality as a primary identity marker signifying moral culpability, Brazilian and French retributivists maintain a rigid dichotomy between the guilty (Americans and the US) and the innocent (the victims of American aggression) avenged by the terrorists. In this “melodramatic” vision (Wagner-Pacifici 1986, pp. 278–80) of 9/11, they present the drama of global politics as the clash between the wholly guilty and, the wholly innocent. In keeping with this dualistic scheme, they create an impermeable moral boundary between Americans and the rest of the world. They characterize the illegitimate political violence carried out by the US as qualitatively different from the righteous political violence carried out by opponents of the US. Within this retributivist framing, acting in an imperialistic or exploitative manner is something only the US can do. The morality of retribution is applied only to the policies of the US government, even though it would seem equally applicable to the foreign policy of every nation. Thus, in constructing their framing of blameworthy foreign policy, the US government, and the asymmetry of the American relationship to the rest of the world, these retributivist critics approach the US as exceptional in a more fundamental sense than traditional “American exceptionalism” (Lipset 1996).

The same exclusionary and inclusionary dialectics play out in reverse in the American forum. Here, Americans critical of the US condemn the state-sponsored violence committed by the US using the same moral logic as their non-American counterparts. However, these American nationals simultaneously condemn the terrorists’ violence against their innocent fellow citizens. Where French and Brazilian retributivists use the debt-payment principle to distance themselves from the American people, the Americans who employ this retributivist framework cast the WTC victims as innocents no different in kind from the non-American nationals who have suffered at the hands of American state power. They work strenuously to maintain the distinction between the American nation and the American people. In their view, in pursuing aggressive policies vis-à-vis the rest of the world, the American government has harmed both non-Americans *and* the American people themselves. While subscribing to the retributivist moral accounting logic, these Americans maintain that the actual victims of the 9/11 attacks do not deserve their fate because they did not create the governmental policies that instigated the original harm.

In maintaining the distinction between national guilt and citizen innocence, American retributivists must strike a delicate balance. American nationals who wish to retain their status as innocent members of the American collectivity must drive a wedge between themselves and their guilty government. To make this logically coherent, they must extend the idea of separate moral accounts for people and government of all nations, not just their own. Where the distinction between the American state and people is irrelevant to Brazilian and French retributivists who criticize the US and all things American from afar, it means a great deal to these Americans whose relationship to the events is close to home (Eliasoph 1998). To honor the debt-payment principle, these Americans must do boundary work to preserve their own innocence while maintaining their government’s guilt. To achieve this end, it is necessary for these Americans to make it clear that it is the American government, rather than the American people, that is guilty of carrying out destructive foreign policies. This moral distinction allows these Americans to frame themselves as doubly harmed, once by the terrorists and once by their own government in its pursuit of what they see as questionable and illegitimate foreign policy goals.

In using the bifurcated moral framing of state and citizen, retributivist Americans attempt to maintain their moral credits as part of the people separate from the moral debits

charged to their nation. This strategy also allows these retributivist Americans to expand their sphere of moral concern to encompass all victims of violence. In drawing the distinction between state and people not only for their own citizens, but for all innocent people, they cast the culpable social actors as policymakers and the victimized actors as ordinary people of many different nationalities. Although they enlist the same accounting scheme as their French and Brazilian counterparts, American retributivists critical of what they see as the harm wrought by the American government try to enlarge the relevant sphere of moral concern to include non-Americans as well as Americans. Most important, in creating this distinction, they do not see the deaths of the 9/11 victims as helping to achieve a moral balance that benefits the world at large.

There are also key differences between the views articulated by the French, Brazilian, and American anti-retributivists. Americans are primarily concerned with establishing their fellow Americans as undeserving of terrorism. By contrast, Brazilian and French anti-retributivists chastise their ideological opponents for callously disregarding the welfare of individuals who are first and foremost people rather than representatives of a nationality. Unlike the Americans, they are more likely to enlarge the sphere of moral concern so that it encompasses the people of all nationalities. Because Brazilian and French anti-retributivist landscapes of moral concern do not privilege victims' nationality, they emphasize the humanity of all victims. For them, the terrorists, like all dealing in political violence, betray the human species itself with their callous disregard for human well-being. These posters frame the victims as members of a group to which they themselves belong—i.e. all people or humanity. In contrast to Brazilian and French retributivists who disidentify with the victims, their opponents endeavor to craft more inclusive identities for the victims as human beings belonging within their sphere of moral concern.

In sum, they argue that not only are retributivists using flawed logic, but they are not even using this logic consistently. Anti-retributivists across the cases attempt to undermine retributivist logic animating the debt-payment principle by calling attention to what they frame as inaccurate moral book keeping. Here too, there are differences between Americans and non-Americans. American anti-retributivist auditing of moral books centers on positive assertions that US policy does more good than harm. By contrast, French and Brazilians are more likely to critique their own nation's policies. Anti-retributivists in both non-American fora accuse their compatriots of omitting their own nation's moral debits. For Brazilians, this omission relates to the quotidian violence in Brazilian society. For the French, national guilt is conceptualized in terms of France's colonial past and foreign policy in countries such as Rwanda. These Brazilian and French posters often shift the focus of the discussion away from the violence perpetrated by the US to the violence perpetrated by their own governments. They argue that the US does not have a monopoly on guilt any more than its victims have a monopoly on innocence. Without necessarily endorsing the policies of the US, these non-Americans challenge the idea that American nationals are any more deserving of terrorist violence than would be citizens of France, Brazil, or any other country. They maintain that the principle of "eye for an eye" is inherently flawed as a basis for making moral judgments about the US or any other social actor. Even those who claim no liking for the US or Americans refute the idea that the goal of achieving a morally balanced world is worth the price of actual human suffering.

The study has shown that, in rendering judgments concerning the moral status of political violence on 9/11, Brazilian, French, and American discourse relies on moral principles deriving from the "morality as financial transaction" conceptual system outlined by Lakoff. Examining discourses from Brazil and France moves these theoretical concepts beyond Lakoff's examination of the US as a single case in isolation. My analysis indeed shows that

both retribution and absolute goodness moral accounting schemes are employed in parallel fashion in three different settings by individuals evaluating the political violence of 9/11.

However, the research also underscores the importance of comparative work. It reveals that theories of moral accounting must be decoupled from political ideologies of “liberal” and “conservative” as employed by Lakoff. The cross-national comparison illuminates significant cleavages between American and non-American use of retributivism. The research reveals that, paradoxically, it is in the retributivism of the French and Brazilians that one finds the focus on the abstract moral order of retribution that Lakoff (2002, p. 74) identifies as a basic tenet of American conservatism: “Ruthless behavior in the name of the good fight is thus seen as justified. ... Evil must be fought. You do not empathize with evil, nor do you accord evil some truth of its own. You just fight it.” The analysis demonstrates that Brazilian and French posters whose political views might normally have been identified as “liberal” in the American context are the ones most fully committed to a thoroughgoing retributivism. Their opponents, more conservative in their political viewpoints, contest retributivism in the name of absolute goodness morality concerned with avoiding harm to human life. Thus, the linkage that Lakoff makes between moral accounting and political ideology, perhaps appropriate in the American context, breaks down when applied outside the US.

The research also indicates the importance of the use of nationality in terms of spheres of moral concern. The comparison illuminates how parallel moral accounting schemes may be employed with selective use of nationality to produce different outcomes in the ways political violence is apprehended by individuals. While Brazilians, French, and Americans all make use of the metaphor of morality as financial transaction, this accounting logic is used in different ways vis-à-vis nationality. Those who take up the standpoint of the “other”—the anti-retributivists on the French and Brazilian fora and retributivists on the American forum—make determinations of innocence and guilt without regard to nationality. Because their landscapes of moral concern are not based on the national origins of victims, they frame everyone as a potential victim of illegitimate political violence. By contrast, those who try to distance themselves from the “other” are more likely to define guilt and innocence in terms of nationality.

In conclusion, my research makes three main claims. First, similarities across the national cases indicate that for individuals making sense of political violence, the retributive and absolute goodness models of morality hold a dominant position as the conceptual systems of choice. Second, those who seek to blame the US use retributivist principles; those who blame the terrorists employ absolute goodness principles. Third, at the same time, moral accounting schemes may be coupled with national and supranational identity categories in order to include or exclude the “other” from one’s own sphere of moral concern. Therefore, differences across the three cases regarding how retribution and absolute goodness moral accounting are selectively employed using nationality point to the importance of future comparative work on the interplay between moral accounting and identity work. Finally, by revealing moral accounting in reaction to 9/11/01, the research sheds light on how moral determinations are made to legitimate and delegitimate political violence, a rich topic of increasing salience in the conflict-ridden world of the 21st century.

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