

The Meaning of Terrorism

Coady, Tony, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, pp 240, £30 (hardback).

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BOOK REVIEW

Coady, Tony, *The Meaning of Terrorism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, pp 240, £30 (hardback).

Twenty years after September 11, the definition of terrorism remains a contentious issue. How to understand or not to understand 'terrorism' is by no means a purely academic exercise. The term has a history of being used to denounce certain types of political violence and their perpetrators as being wrongful *per se*. Like Tony Coady, I believe that it is not just possible but, in fact, crucial to separate the descriptive from the evaluative component if the concept is to be informative at all and if we aspire to an open-ended inquiry into its distinctive wrongness.

In *The Meaning of Terrorism*, Coady revisits and refines the themes of his writing on the topic over the past decades while providing in-depth discussions of many of the key figures in the debate on the ethics of war and terrorism. One of the continuing threads in his own work on terrorism has been his endorsement of a 'tactical' definition. According to Coady, a terrorist act is 'A political act, ordinarily committed or inspired by an organized group, in which violence is intentionally directed at non-combatants (or "innocents" in a suitable sense) or their significant property in order to cause them serious harm.' (19). 'Terrorism' is then understood as 'the tactic or policy of engaging in terrorist acts' (20). He calls this a 'tactical' definition because it focuses on what terrorists do rather than who they are or what their ultimate goal is. As such, Coady objects to 'political status definitions', which, as a matter of principle see terrorism as perpetrated by non-state actors against the state, ruling out terrorism perpetrated (or ordered) by state actors. However, as Coady points out, states will regularly employ lethal violence against non-combatants to crush legitimate protests, violent or not (50).

The crucial element of Coady's definition of terrorism is, without a doubt, the idea that it is always directed against non-combatants or 'people who don't deserve to be targeted' (20). Few will disagree with Coady that this element captures the 'distinctive moral significance' of terrorism. The difficulty, however, lies in determining who falls into that category? While Coady accepts the idea that people who are suitably connected to 'a wrongdoing of the relevant kind' (130) can be legitimate targets of violent attack, he vehemently rejects the idea flouted by some terrorist actors that mere membership in a political community that is engaged in violent aggression makes one a legitimate target of violence (*ibid.*). Consistent with his earlier writings on the morality of terrorism, he also denies that a so-called 'supreme emergency' could ever justify the direct targeting of non-combatants.

Highly recommended for anyone who is curious about the nature and moral distinctiveness of terrorism.

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