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Grégoire Chamayou, *A Theory of the Drone*, trans. Janet Lloyd, The New Press, 2015, 304 pp., \$26.95 US (hbk), ISBN 9781595589750.

Since the turn of this century, armed drones (i.e., unmanned aerial vehicles, or UAVs) have become a weapon of choice for the United States. Drone strikes started during the Bush administration with the “war on terror.” Under the Obama administration, drone warfare has been elevated to the pinnacle of counter-terrorism strategy, a shift driven by the combined effects of the draw-down of US forces from Iraq and Afghanistan and the administration’s political distaste for capture operations (itself a reaction to the Bush era torture program). The official justification for the right to kill people in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and other sites in Africa is that the United States is “at war,” that those who are targeted are terrorist enemies and militants who pose an imminent threat to national security, and that targeted killing operations are a legitimate form of national self-defense. Since 2004, drone strikes have increased by 1,200 percent, a trend that is likely to hold steady or rise because the “war on terror” has no end in sight and because more drone operators are being trained than all other types of military pilots put together.

In *A Theory of the Drone*, Grégoire Chamayou analyzes the political, legal, philosophical, and technological implications arising from the “dronization” of warfare. A central question that animates this study is whether killing without any risk of being killed qualifies as “war.” Drones are piloted and fired remotely by operators located thousands of miles from their targets. While the use of drones does require boots on the ground for launching and maintenance, that ground can be a well-protected and distant military base rather than a battlefield (in the literal sense). Chamayou and other critics of drone warfare argue that this kind of killing by remote control supplants reciprocal risks of combat with manhunting and assassination. Proponents rebut claims that the essence of war—which they define in a limited fashion as the projection of armed force—is being altered by drones; they argue that drones are just another lethal weapon in the pantheon of military hardware, but claim that *this weapon* is exceptionally “ethical” and “humane” because of its technological capacity to engage in protracted surveillance and then to strike “surgically” with low-yield bombs, thus minimizing both collateral damage (i.e., killing innocent civilians) and any risk to US forces engaged in this type of “war.”

The history of weaponized drones traces back to twentieth century developments in remote control and robotic technologies. Robots had the virtue of enabling operations in mining, firefighting, and deep sea and space exploration that would be dangerous or

impossible for humans. During the Vietnam War, the US Air Force invested in the development of reconnaissance drones, called “Lightening Bugs,” to gain intelligence to counter the heavy casualties inflicted by Soviet missiles. While the development of this technology was abandoned by the United States in the late 1970s, Israel—which inherited some of the surveillance drones—took over their development and use. In the 1973 War, Israel sent waves of drones to mislead Egyptian missile operators into firing, thus revealing the locations of those missile sites and enabling Israel to take control of the skies. Similar tactics were used against Syrian forces in the Bekaa Valley during the invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Israel demonstrated the military value and intelligence-gathering capacity of drones back to the Americans in 1983; following the bombing of the US Marine barracks in Beirut, a Marine commander secretly toured the site, then he went to Tel Aviv where he was shown footage from Israeli drones of his every move. This technology gap inspired the United States to get back into the business of drones.

In the transformation of militarized drones from a surveillance role—as played during NATO operations in Kosovo in 1999 when drones were used to identify targets that conventional planes could then bomb—to a weaponized role in which the drones themselves were armed, Israel, again, was inspirational; in November 2000, two months after the start of a second *intifada*, Israel for the first time openly acknowledged its policy of targeted killing (until then Israel denied the existence of a policy of extra-judicially executing Palestinians in the occupied territories) and increasingly used armed drones to conduct kill operations. In 2001, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld envisaged an Israeli-like approach to US counter-terrorism, but on a vastly larger geographic scale.

Chamayou traces and dissects the new strategic doctrine that was developed to guide and justify what is essentially manhunting by remote control. He argues, persuasively, that the combination of new technologies (i.e., armed drones) and their strategic applications (i.e., targeted killing operations) have upended the core principles that undergird the laws of armed conflict. It is now possible to wage “war” without battles (armed clashes) or fronts (geographic boundaries separating sides in armed conflict) or warriors (fighters whose own lives are at risk), and with one “side” (the side with drones) enjoying a unilateral advantage that negates the principle of reciprocity. The principle of distinction—the obligation to distinguish between combatants and civilians—has been deformed by the practice of Social Network Analysis; military strategy has become “network-centric warfare” with the aim of eliminating individuals in order to disrupt or destroy terrorist networks. In contrast to the conventions of *defense*, this *preventive* strategy depends on the marshaling of intelligence provided by surveillance videos and electronic monitoring to generate kill lists. From these flows a “policy of prophylactic elimination,” that is, eliminating enemies before they have a chance to strike. Rather than war, Chamayou argues, drone warfare is a vast campaign of extra-judicial executions.

The doctrine being developed to legally justify targeted killing is contingent on vague and dubious presumptions about who is an enemy qualified to be killed, and the kind of threats he or they purportedly pose. Decisions about who and when to kill involves two intersecting registers: surveillance and threat assessment. Technologically, drones can function as “unblinking eyes” capable of “total surveillance” because they are equipped with dozens of high-resolution cameras aimed in all directions, and software that sends a constant stream of footage to remote centers and aggregates it into a single view. Even though human operators blink, the footage doesn’t; it is archived and can be viewed by multiple people. Threat assessment, in contrast, is (to date) entirely human and involves interpreting and acting on surveillance data. Sometimes targets are specifically identified individuals; bombing them is

termed “personality strikes.” But because the model of security is predictive, more often assessment of who and where to bomb derives from observed behavior—specifically, “patterns of life” and those behaviors that are interpreted to be anomalous and thus deemed actually or potentially threatening. The bombings of people whose individual identities are not known to the killers but who are deemed kill-able because of their behavior are termed “signature strikes.”

At the other end of the drone are those communities subjected to constant and potentially lethal surveillance. They are petrified, literally in the sense that they have good reason to fear for their lives in a constant way, and figuratively in that they might be rationally disinclined to move and interact in normal, social ways for fear of being bombed. Bomb-able places are treated as and referred to by military strategists as “kill boxes,” which are spatialized cubes that become free-fire zones if a target is seen or enters into the space. As Chamayou explains:

The zone of armed conflict, having been fragmented into miniaturizable kill boxes, tends *ideally* to be reduced to the body of the enemy or prey. That is, his body becomes the battlefield...In order for the pursuit and surgical strikes to be carried out, this mobile microspace must be able to be aimed wherever necessary—so the whole world becomes a hunting ground. (56-57)

Jeremy Scahill emphasizes this “whole world” aspect in his book, *Dirty Wars: The World Is a Battlefield*.¹ Chamayou, however, seeks to stress that drone warfare is inherently un-war-like; it is geographically unbounded and unilaterally delivered violence without battlefields, if battlefields are understood to be sites of combat. According to the logic of dronized manhunting, “success” is a matter of statistics: how many “bad guys” have been killed? In this paradigm, it is impossible to imagine, let alone quantify, the effects of drone strikes vis-à-vis the political issues that trigger and drive the conflict. The result of the dronization of war is not only the ability to kill without risk of being killed, but also the impossibility of anything that could meaningfully be called “victory.” Thus, the conditions are set for “perpetual war.”

The escalation of drone warfare evinces a blend of technological determinism (we have the technology so let’s use it) and a whack-a-mole approach to military strategy (we can kill those people remotely so we *should*). Drone warfare, therefore, does not really constitute a “strategy” at all. Instead, it is a technology substituting for strategy. Drone enthusiasts assert that these weapons provide a mere shift in tactics or a minor development in strategic rationales. They argue, since killing people is the essence of war, how is killing people remotely not war?

But what, then, *is* war? Drone operators “telecommute to the warzone,” exercise lethal force from a “peaceful zone” (i.e., bases inside the United States), and go home every day after their shifts. Drone operators “epitomize the contradiction of societies at war outside but living inside as though they are at peace” (121). In this context, a “good soldier” is not someone who must be brave and resolute but rather someone with a capacity to psychologically compartmentalize. Technologically, they are immunized against the possibility of reflecting upon their own violence because their targets are pixelated images transmitted by video. They are also immunized by distance from any risk of being exposed or harmed by the enemy. “Combatant immunity” means the right of combatants to kill in war without being

¹ Jeremy Scahill, *Dirty Wars: The World Is a Battlefield* (New York: Nation Books, 2013).

charged with murder, a distinction that hinges entirely on the existence of a state of war. But can people who do not engage in combat qualify as combatants and enjoy this immunity? The US government would say yes, and has developed a new line of medals and honors for drone operators.

Historically, the risks of death and injury, and the ethics of sacrifice, were ineluctable features of war. Risks to soldiers' lives were altered (but not eliminated) long before the appearance of drones, through the invention of increasingly long-range weapons. The Vietnam War was a major turning point for Americans in terms of the *politics* of risk and sacrifice. It was a war—the last war—in which tens of thousands of US soldiers died in what critics and anti-war activists condemned as a “war of choice” and an “imperial war.” The end of US involvement in Vietnam ushered in a shift from conscription to a volunteer army. The ostensible volunteerism of enlistment shifted the discourse from sacrifice to choice. But dead soldiers would remain a political problem for war-makers; the phrase “Vietnam syndrome” was deployed to describe the American public’s antipathy to the blood sacrifices of war, and was joined by the “Blackhawk down” or “no body bags” syndrome following the killing of eighteen soldiers in Somalia in the 1983.

Before the arming of drones, the military had embraced an almost equally riskless military strategy of high-altitude bombing; in the 1999 Kosovo intervention, pilots were forbidden to fly below 15,000 feet and not a single US soldier died. One difference between high-altitude bombing and drone warfare is the technology used for targeting. According to drone proponents, these weapons are more accurate and thus more “ethical” and “humane” than high-altitude bombing because they can clearly identify their targets and strike at close range and with greater precision. But the underlying connection between high-altitude bombing and drones is the political desire to be able to make war without putting soldiers at risk.

This capacity for a military to kill without risk to its own forces is forging a norm that runs completely contrary to the international humanitarian law principle of immunity for civilians (non-combatants). Chamayou terms this reversal in the law and ethics of armed conflict “the principle of immunity for the imperial combatant” (130). Once again, Israel has led the way by asserting the state’s “right” to use massive force against enemy civilians in order to shield its own troops from danger. One result is “a hierarchization of bodies based on whether they are [citizens] of the nation-state or not” (132). The other result is the erasure of the civilian – combatant distinction, as soldiers of the (Israeli) nation are deemed “citizens in uniform” whose lives take priority over those of the enemy. Chamayou minces no words in describing the implications:

The project is nothing less than the dynamiting of the law of armed conflict as it was established in the second half of the twentieth century: an evisceration of the principles of international law in favor of a nationalism of self-preservation...[T]hat is also the primary principle of the necroethics of drones. (134)

Necroethics describes an imperative to “kill well” and a desire to save *our* lives by killing others. Thus, the necroethics of drones applies this desire to surgical strikes for remote-control killing. Bradley Jay Strawser, a leading proponent of drone warfare, has asserted a “principle of unnecessary risk”—risk to *us*—as immoral, and argues that drones avoid risk

and therefore are moral weapons.² What justifies this risk-avoidance principle, according to Strawser, is the “justness” of the war in which it occurs. But Strawser also subscribes to the claims that drone strikes are exceptionally precise and surgical, so therefore they are also moral weapons for enemy communities because, the claim goes, “lives are saved.” Saved how? Saved from becoming casualties—collateral damage—that would result from attacks by different—less precise—weapons. This justification is based on what Eyal Weizman terms “the logic of the lesser evil.”³ As Hannah Arendt reminds us, proponents tend to forget that they have still chosen evil.

In arguments that favor drones for their claimed surgical precision and ability to avoid civilian casualties, the greater evil would be firebombing, carpet bombing, or high-altitude aerial bombing. This comparative reasoning falls apart however when one considers that drones are used for manhunting and targeted assassinations, not full-scale military campaigns. Even in this case, one can ask: more surgical than what? The kill- and wound-radius of bombs launched from drones are 15 and 20 meters respectively. Anyone within range will be killed or wounded. By comparison, the lethal radius of a grenade is 3 meters. But the use of grenades is not riskless.

The drone’s inherent imprecision is the faulty discrimination in the choice of targets and the analytically weak foundations of kill lists. Lethal precision cannot compensate or substitute for the muddle of network-analysis targeting. Chamayou taunts: “That would be tantamount to saying that the guillotine, because of the precision of its blade...makes it thereby better able to distinguish the guilty from the innocent” (143). Moreover, how can one reasonably think that a weapon that invites perpetual war is ethical? For an ethics of the drone, one must look to the doctrine of political assassination. Chamayou compares drones to poison: both kill unexpectedly and surreptitiously, and in so doing, both deprive the victim of the power of defending himself. Drone strikes rule out combat and transform conflict from asymmetrical to unilateral delivery of violence. This is an “ethic of putting to death, a necroethic that makes use of the principles of *jus in bello* in order to convert them into criteria for acceptable murder: an ethic of butchers or executioners, but not for combatants” (163).

Targeted killing and drone warfare have produced a crisis in international law. Israeli and US officials have charted similar courses in propounding the legality of these practices by constructing rationales that serve to “nationalize” and distort the principles of international law in an effort to bring their armed desires into those parameters. This reasoning that seeks to “legalize” targeted killing, however, has not gained any significant international acceptance. The refusal to accept or endorse the framing of these practices as legal (and as war) is why international law is in crisis.

What effects does the dronization of armed forces have on the state, and on the society in whose name and interests drone warfare is waged? For one thing, the risklessness offered by drones affects decision-making by inviting this form of violence as a preferred option. The dense techno-military networks engaged in drone warfare confound conventional understandings of a chain-of-command, making individual accountability difficult and thus inviting riskier patterns of behavior. Drones are popular among Americans because they are perceived as risk-free and effective, and this makes them a “moral hazard” because remote-

² As quoted and discussed by Chamayou pages 136ff. See: Bradley J. Strawser, “Moral Predators: The Duty to Employ Uninhabited Aerial Vehicles,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 9, no. 4 (2010).

³ See: Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (London and New York: Verso, 2011).

control manhunting is naturalized. This hazard is by no means confined to war; the militarization of domestic policing and the transmissions of weapons and tactics to the “homeland” would suggest that this practice may come home to roost, too.

What is to be done to reverse the course of dronization? Although Chamayou offers no straightforward answer to that question, he provides a rich array of insights and compelling critiques that could have a political impact. For this reason, the book deserves a very wide reading—especially among American war makers, politicians, and citizens who are, ultimately, responsible for the predatory violence meted out by drones in our name.

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