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The emergence of the drone as an imposing presence in warfare and battle strategies has significantly changed the ways in which notions of war and peace are understood today. Grégoire Chamayou’s *A Theory of the Drone* (2013) takes a novel look at this phenomenon and examines the political, philosophical and affective dimensions of this radically new technology of surveillance and death. In fact, one of Chamayou’s strengths lies in the breadth of his perspective and the surgical way in which he pries open the impact of drones on sovereignty, warfare and surveillance. For Chamayou, the technology of the drone demands a new theory because it is not an evolution of earlier forms of airborne weapons or projectiles, but an altogether new technology of taking lives whose use is often sheathed in the garb of ethical arguments. Chamayou terms this “necroethics”—the ethics of death, or the justification of death that allows the nation state to sanction the implementation of righteous violence and the conduct of “just war”. This concept forms the spine of Chamayou’s argument and a great part of the book deals with the interconnections between necroethics, technologies of death and sovereign power.

The book consists of twenty-three chapters and an Introduction that are conceptually divided into five parts, nested between a Prelude and an Epilogue. In the Introduction Chamayou makes an important point—while “drone” could mean any kind of unmanned vehicle, he deals specifically with armed, flying drones such as the “Predator” and the “Reaper” which the United States has been using in its endless war on terror. For Chamayou this is methodologically crucial, as it sharply defines both the specific technological, as well as the geopolitical origins of his theory. The first part of the book, “Techniques and Tactics” actually looks at the ways in which these two aspects, the technological and the political have given rise to a new form of warfare, based not on the principle of armed combat among equals, but on the principles of hunting. According to Chamayou this is a significant shift, as the structure of warfare has now shifted from...
that of a duel to that of a game of hide and seek—a “manhunt” so to speak.

This also complicates the laws of warfare as the act of seeking could be done anywhere from up above, rather than being concentrated in a definite geographical point, limited by the constraints of international boundaries and laws. In other words, the author suggests that the ability to both seek and destroy without the possibility of equal engagement from the “opponent” renders the notion of “airspace” and international boundaries null and void. For Chamayou, this is one of the ways in which the “war on terror” has become “global”—a vertical expansion, rather than a horizontal one that turns all space into a potential zone of engagement. The drone therefore becomes a kind of an all-seeing and ever-present eye that turns humans into “targets”. Perhaps nothing sums this up better than Chamayou’s chapter on the “Kill Box”. The “kill box” essentially is a three dimensional rendition of a cube with diagonal black lines that graphically defines the “target” of the operation on the surface of the screen. The taking of life has therefore transformed into a kind of a graphical game where the drone operator is less subjectively involved in the decision about terminating a life of a human agent, and more closely involved in the act of opening and closing kill boxes.

The second part of the book “Ethos and Psyche” deals more directly with these questions of subjectivity. In the chapter on “Drones and Kamikazes” for instance, Chamayou undertakes a comparison of the drone with the Japanese Kamikaze bombers of World War II to unravel the specific differences in the subjectivities of their operators. He writes that while the kamikaze pilots’ act of suicide meant that the body of the operating agent was veritably fused with the machine, in the case of the drone there is a radical separation between the two. The drone is then constituted by a remarkable lack of affect in comparison to the suicide bomber or the foot soldier. For proponents of drone usage, this is a boon, for the drone reduces cost in manpower and lives.

The implications of this line of argument are followed through in much more detail in the third part of the book—“Necroethics”. This is perhaps the author’s most crucial intervention where the kernel of his project lies. Using the theoretical framework built up in the earlier chapters, Chamayou levies a steady attack on the ethical arguments used to justify the use of drones. The author says that the proponents of drone usage argue that the drone is a humanitarian weapon for two reasons. First, it ostensibly reduces the risk to the state’s own soldiers; and second, by virtue of its precision, it reduces collateral damage. He then goes on to dismantle both these lines of argument systematically by saying that the reduction of manpower usage in warfare also reduces the chances of the soldiers’ own subjectivity hindering the act of killing, i.e the use of drones reduces the involvement of individual conscience in the conduct of war. Thereby warfare becomes more efficient, and that is not necessarily the same as the ethical conduct of war. On the other hand, absolute precision in the act of killing is also not possible, because human beings operate drones from afar. Not only are they susceptible to errors of judgment, the actual weapons deployed by the drones also have a “kill radius”—zero collateral is nothing but a myth, no matter what the powers that be would have us believe. Chamayou writes: “The fact that your weapon enables you to destroy precisely whomever you wish does not mean that you are more capable of making out who is and who is not a legitimate target. The precision of the strike has no bearing on the pertinence of the targeting in the first place. That would be tantamount to saying that the guillotine, because of the precision of its blade—which, it is true, separates the head from the trunk with remarkable precision—makes it thereby better able to distinguish between the guilty and the innocent.”1 In final assessment, Chamayou’s criticism against the label of a “humanitarian weapon” is that it is still a weapon—it is not “humanitarianism” but a purportedly more humanitarian way to kill.

In the next two parts of the book “The Principles of the Philosophy of the Right to Kill” and “Political Bodies”, Chamayou looks more closely at the laws of warfare and the political implications of the right to kill. In the chapter titled “Warfare Without Combat”, he draws on the work of Carl Schmitt to reinforce the vertical relation between the airborne weapon and the enemy on the ground, and uses Schmitt’s analogy of St. George and the dragon to imply both the physical and the moral distance between the assailant and the killed. The author writes: “The verticalization of armed
violence implies a tendency toward the absolute hostilization of the enemy, both politically and juridically. He is no longer positioned, in any sense of the term, on the same ground as oneself.”2 In the very next chapter “License to Kill”, Chamayou extends this theorization to the specific context of the use of drones by the Unites States and suggests that wherever the use of drones has been sanctioned and actively engaged by the Unites States, the legal terrain has been blurred. Since the use of drone strikes for political assassinations is now a “public secret” the only way legal legitimacy has been defined in these cases has been through what Chamayou calls “naked self-defense” and “lethal policing”—naked because it has shed the skin of legal constraints, and lethal because it is a sanction to murder. This for Chamayou is the essence of the effect of necroethics—the justification to conduct war by a “democratic” state. Chamayou draws on Kant’s conceptualization of the “republic” (which he sees as being similar to the modern democracy) to say that the ultimate aim of the democracy is to establish peace. The drone then exemplifies the central paradox of the modern democracy, i.e the establishment of peace only via war, which the author terms “democratic militarism” in the eponymous chapter. He writes: “On the face of it, the drone appears as the solution to the central contradiction of the discourse of protective sovereignty: wage war without endangering the lives of one’s own subjects […] but here comes the bad news: the promise to preserve national lives goes hand in hand with the increased social vulnerability and precariousness of those many lives”.3 The “precariousness” that Chamayou writes about is the gradual replacement of the human agent by the machinic. The use of drones he says, is similar to the use of colonial populations by British imperialists in their wars…only without the cost in lives. Dronization as Chamayou sees it, is a way to counter the anti-war rhetoric of democratic pacifists—the preservation of the lives of the state’s own soldiers after all, robs the anti-war camp of one line of argument against warfare.

Chamayou’s book, recently translated into English by Janet Lloyd (2015), is an important intervention in the study of technology and politics. In particular, it succeeds in unraveling some crucial issues concerning the state of the “global war on terror” and the often controversial role of the United States in defining terms such as “terrorism” and “war.” That the drone is a new and terrifying monster is commonplace knowledge; it is however, the theory of the drone that is so unique. Chamayou’s attempt represents the crucial role theory can play in the understanding of both political and technological phenomena. However, as a theory of “the drone”, the book does leave some room for thought and analysis. Chamayou enters the study of the drone from the field of political thought and the study of warfare. But what would a theory of the drone be like if say for instance, one had to consider Amazon’s recent plans to use drones for commercial delivery? Or for instance, from the point of view of the filmmakers of Drone Boning (2014), the “surveillance porn” film produced by Ghost+Cow films which made waves last year?4 The concerns about surveillance, security, privacy and civil liberties would definitely remain, but would this theory of the drone suffice for the filmmaker, the journalist or the business analyst? This is not to say that Chamayou’s work is incomplete. He does undertake a thorough study of the impact and implications of one (perhaps the major) use of the drone. But like any good theoretical attempt, it is a beginning.

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Notes
2. Ibid., 166.
3. Ibid., 194.

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