

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Grégoire Chamayou, *Drone Theory* (translated by Janet Lloyd), London: Penguin, 2015.
ISBN: 9780241970348 (paper); ISBN: 9780241970355 (ebook)

Adam Rothstein, *Drone*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015. ISBN: 9781628926323 (paper);
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Drone Theory?

Reading Adam Rothstein's *Drone* and Grégoire Chamayou's *Drone Theory* alongside each other is a good idea. Where the first lacks a detailed theoretical intervention (although it's certainly thought-provoking), the other lacks a nuts-and-bolts overview of all things drone. Together, then, *Drone* and *Drone Theory* are excellent primers for thinking deeply about our emerging Droneworld (Shaw 2012). Yet as important as they are, both books are haunted by a common absence: a sustained exploration of how drone technology emerges from a history of US empire and global violence—particularly during the Cold War. Both an over-theorization of the drone as an engine of metaphysics, or an under-theorization of the drone as a vessel of our cultural narratives, risks bypassing how the drone has excelled in militarizing vast swathes of the planet.

This is perhaps an obvious point to make, and one that itself risks steamrolling over the diversity of applications these flying robots are capable of, but I do want to begin by signaling the military genesis of drones. Whether we're talking about Predators, Reapers, Ravens or Global Hawks, these objects are part of a vast military assemblage that spreads geographically and historically. The difficulty that anybody faces in dealing with the drone is to find some kind of balance between treating the object as an actor imbued with agency, or as a mere tool of violence employed by war managers. Neither of these viewpoints can

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adequately grapple with the drone problematic, which suggests something of a synthesis, or even a paradox, embodied within the steely flesh of the machine itself.

Rothstein's *Drone* is part of a series called "Object Lessons", which advertises itself as a collection "about the hidden lives of ordinary things".¹ His book is a rich collection of vignettes about how to imagine and comprehend the drone. For him, drone theory is not simply an investigation into an artificial object, but a wider consideration of who we are, the type of society we live in, and the kind of future we want to build. While the bulk of *Drone* is designed to get the unfamiliar up to speed, and therefore of limited interest to those acquainted with our unmanned condition, Rothstein does keep the book moving at a fair clip, aided by precise prose that keeps asking the reader questions.

At the outset of the book there is a recognition that the drone is not an easy thing to theorize. Instead, "it is a heavy object, full of undiagnosed complications" (p.ix). Indeed, Rothstein's book really excels in tackling the multiple meanings, symbols, and narratives attached to drones, all of which provide a bird's eye view (drone's eye view?) of the terrain of contemporary debate. If the drone is important, it is not simply because of its geopolitical uses and abuses, but because "the story of drone technology is a story about us" (p.xv). This kind of introspection is a real strength of the book—something that Rothstein loops back to in closing chapters, and especially in Chapter 10, "Our Selves and the Drone". There, he writes, "Humans, in how they relate to technology, are analogous to drones in many ways. Our images of ourselves are *bricolages*. We construct our lives out of a variety of meaningful components, adding them and taking them out as they evolve and serve the system of our lives better or worse" (p.119).

If the closing chapters are attuned to these types of existential changes heralded by drones, then most of the book tracks a more conventional route. Starting with "The Military Drone" in Chapter 2, Rothstein notes how drones were forged in the fiery cauldron of the US

¹ See <http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/series/object-lessons/>

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military-industrial complex. This origin has subsequently colored (or tainted) how we think about and imagine drones. The rise of the Predator, in particular, “remains the quintessential image of the drone in the minds of the public” (p.32). The next chapter looks at the understudied commercial applications of drones, and provides an overview of how the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) is coming to regulate a sky full of robots. Chapter 6, “The Non-Drone”, begins to unravel what exactly it is about the drone that makes it an object of such frenzied public discourse. As Rothstein observes, there are plenty of robots, machines, and surveillance technologies out there, but few attract our attention in quite the same way as the drone. It’s ability to fly, unsurprisingly, is what makes it an object of such fascination: “The drone was the first robot that obviously surpassed us. Not a heavy industrial machine, or a top-heavy, trundling thing; rather, the drone buzzing over our head, within someone’s control, but just out of our reach” (p.86).

While Rothstein’s text seeks breadth rather than depth, and while it deliberately imagines the drone as a phenomenon bigger than military drones, I did find the lack of detail on, say, the use of US drones during the War on Terror, or the CIA’s campaign of targeted killings in Pakistan, a notable absence. But, in fairness, this is just one aspect of the drone, which, under Rothstein’s treatment, becomes an elusive cultural figure, a monster meshing together science-fiction nightmares and corporate dreams. The drone is not something exterior to us then, but bound to our past and future. “Drone culture is growing in our society, not just through a preoccupation with what we should or should not do with drones, but because every day we act more like drones in the way that we use technology” (p.123). While I would not necessarily recommend *Drone* to those academics and students familiar with issues related to drones, for those beginning a research project, or just the curious, this small book packs a big punch.

Chamayou’s 2015 book, *Drone Theory*, advances his previous thoughts in *Manhunts* (2012). In that work, he described how the hunting of humans—from slaves and heretics to

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criminals and migrants—has been, and continues to be, internalized in the functioning of modern sovereign power. The task of *Drone Theory* is thus to describe the most sophisticated tool of manhunting yet: the drone. Chamayou’s prose is sharp, stark, and well crafted. There isn’t a sentence that goes to waste in this book, and the result is a series of well-executed (if you’ll excuse the macabre pun) philosophical provocations on the practice of modern drone warfare. Overall, his argument is that drone warfare needs to be understood as a form of one-sided killing, since the drone—as a technology of remote killing—removes the very possibility for “reciprocity”. If war has been historically based on a mutual and shared risk of death (i.e. a “duel”), then the modern dronification of state violence (Shaw and Akhter 2014) doesn’t simply “transform” war; it bypasses the logic of conflict altogether, becoming the unilateral delivery of death.

Make no mistake about it: this is a book that is designed to “weaponize” philosophy, producing something of an activist counter-discourse to the mainstream view of drone warfare as precise, surgical, and clean. “More than ever, philosophy is a battlefield. It is time to enter the fray. What I have to say is openly polemical, for, over and above the possible analytical contribution this book may make, its objective is to provide discursive weapons for the use of those men and women who wish to oppose the policy served by the drones” (p.16). A real strength of this book is its rich intellectual armada, deftly handled by Chamayou. The book certainly keeps its promise of subjecting the drone to philosophical investigation, even if this comes at the expense of overlooking the history of drone technology, surveillance, and warfare, together with its modern global deployments. For example, Chapter 2, “The Genealogy of a Predator”, provides only a cursory, four-page sketch of the history of the Predator drone. The material infrastructures behind targeted killings, including a worldwide grid of fibre optic cables, satellite systems, computer networks, weapons contractors, and even the technical features of drone itself, are rendered invisible in Chamayou’s account. The result is that the drone takes on an almost mythical status, a specter that shakes the world.

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I am sympathetic to this “bracketing”, of course (not every book can cover every aspect of drone warfare), but the result is that the technical and the political, or, rather, the technical and the philosophical, are at times severed and cast adrift. Here, Chamayou is ambiguous. “Go look at the weapons, study their specific characteristics. Become a technician, in a way. But only in a way, for the aim here is an understanding that is not so much technical as political” (p.15). Put very simply, while this book may signal a materialist awareness (and at times it acknowledges why the drone is an important remote vector of state power), it is by no means a materialist philosophy. The grit, blood, gears, and steel of the war machine is simply not as important to Chamayou as how drone warfare is challenging our ethical universe.

Indeed, above all, this is a book about ethics—about what it means for the state to kill in the 21st century. The later chapters of the book deal with a series of “crises” in military ethics. Concepts such as “heroism”, “courage”, “sacrifice” and others like them—stained with thousands of years of bloodshed—are all evaporating with drone warfare. Without US soldiers risking their lives on the battlefield, these ideas lose their old meanings. How can a drone pilot sacrifice himself sitting in a cubical at the other side of the earth? The result is a new desire to re-engineer virtue and heroism around “preserving the American way of life”. The pilot—now structurally reduced to the figure of the executioner (p.103)—is nonetheless an ethical actor because his “dronized homicide” is part of a renewed patriotism. Saving American soldiers from the frontline, rather than risking American soldiers (as with the case of the Civil War, the First World War, the Second World War, etc.) is an inverted form of ethics—a “necro-ethics”—that seeks to establish itself in the minds of US war managers and publics alike. The rise of this ethic is what Chamayou calls “a nationalism of the most ferocious kind” (p.152).

Drone Theory is a thought-provoking work of political geography. Drone warfare is creating a new kind of cartography of killing, based not on isolated battlefields, but a unified

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battlespace, in which state violence is emergent and borderless. As he argues, “What is emerging is the idea of an invasive power based not so much on the rights of conquest as on the rights of pursuit: a right of universal intrusion or encroachment that would authorize charging after the prey wherever it found refuge, thereby trampling underfoot the principle of territorial integrity classically attached to state sovereignty” (p.53). Hunting is a global pursuit, and this means that the world is becoming a global hunting ground. However, there is a crucial wrinkle in this geographic formulation. Assassination from the skies is focused on individuals, which means that, “as a hunter-state sees it, armed violence is no longer defined within the boundaries of a demarcated zone but simply by the presence of an enemy-prey who, so to speak, carries with it its own little mobile zone of hostility” (p.52).

In other words, the expansion of state violence is predicated on a contraction of the target. And so, the idea of a homogeneous battlespace needs to be rethought. Chamayou replaces it with a modified version of the kill-box (the military’s designation for a target space), what he calls the “kill-cube”. While retaining the kill-box’s notion of a “temporary autonomous zone of slaughter” (p.55), the kill-cube rethinks the space of slaughter as a nonlinear and mobile volume. “Depending on the contingencies of the moment, temporary lethal microcubes could be opened up anywhere in the world if an individual who qualifies as a legitimate target has been located there ” (p.56). Chamayou’s book demands that we take the drone seriously: he argues that it is a metaphysical actor creating new relationships between state and society, new geographies of killing, and new systems of ethics.

What, then, in the final analysis, is the drone? Is it the cause of a new way of killing or the effect of thousands of years of human slaughter? Both books raise these types of fundamental questions, marshaling theory and weaponizing philosophy, going beyond the drone in order to comprehend the drone. Are we any closer to finding a definitive answer in our search? Or does the drone embody these kinds of contradictions, both concretizing a history of empire and baptizing a brave new Droneworld all at once?

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Ian G. R. Shaw
School of Geographical and Earth Sciences
University of Glasgow
Ian.Shaw.2@glasgow.ac.uk

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