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Drones and the New Ethics of War

The "Humanitarian" Weapon

by NEVE GORDON

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This Christmas small drones were among the most popular gift under the tree in the U.S. with manufacturers stating that they sold 200,000 new unmanned aerial vehicles during the holiday season. While the rapid infiltration of drones into the gaming domain clearly reflects that drones are becoming a common weapon among armed forces, their appearance in Walmart, Toys “R” Us and Amazon serves, in turn, to normalize their deployment in the military.

Drones, as Grégoire Chamayou argues in his new book, *A Theory of the Drone*, have a uniquely seductive power, one that attracts militaries, politicians and citizens alike. A research scholar in philosophy at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, Chamayou is one of the most profound contemporary thinkers working on the deployment of violence and its ethical ramifications. And while his new book offers a concise history of drones, it focuses on how drones are changing warfare and their potential to alter the political arena of the countries that utilize them.

Chamayou traces one of the central ideas informing the production and deployment of drones back to John W. Clark, an American engineer who carried out a study on “remote control in hostile environments” in 1964. In Clark’s study, space is divided into two kinds of zones—hostile and safe—while robots operated by remote control are able to relieve human beings of all

perilous occupations within hostile zones. The sacrifice of miners, firefighters, or those working on skyscrapers will no longer be necessary, since the collapse of a tunnel in the mines, for example, would merely lead to the loss of several robots operated by remote control.

The same logic informed the creation of drones. They were initially utilized as part of the military's defense system in hostile territories. After the Egyptian military shot down about 30 Israel fighter jets in the first hours of the 1973 war, Israeli air-force commanders decided to change their tactics and send a wave of drones. As soon as the Egyptians fired their initial salvo of anti-aircraft missiles at the drones, the Israeli airplanes were able to attack as the Egyptians were reloading.

Over the years, drones have also become an important component of the intelligence revolution. Instead of sending spies or reconnaissance airplanes across enemy lines, drones can continuously fly above hostile terrain gathering information. As Chamayou explains, drones do not merely provide a constant image of the enemy, but manage to fuse together different forms of data. They carry technology that can interpret electronic communications from radios, cell phones and other devices and can link a telephone call with a particular video or provide the GPS coordinates of the person using the phone. Their target is, in other words, constantly visible.

Using drones to avert missiles or for reconnaissance was, of course, considered extremely important, yet military officials aspired to transform drones into lethal weapons as well. On February 16, 2001, after many years of U.S. investment in R&D, a Predator drone first successfully fired a missile and hit its target. As Chamayou puts it, the notion of turning the Predator into a predator had finally been realized. Within a year, the Predator was preying on live targets in Afghanistan.

A Humanitarian Weapon

Over the past decade, the United States has manufactured more than 6000 drones of various kinds. 160 of these are Predators, which are used not only in Afghanistan but also in countries officially at peace with the US, such as Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan. In Pakistan, CIA drones carry out on average of one strike every four days. Although exact figures of fatalities are difficult to establish, the estimated number of deaths between 2004 and 2012 vary from 2562 to 3325.

Chamayou underscores how drones are changing our conception of war in three major ways. First, the idea of a frontier or battlefield is rendered meaningless as is the idea that there are particular places—like homesteads—where the deployment of violence is considered criminal. In other words, if once the legality of killing was dependent on where the killing was carried out, today US lawyers argue that the traditional connection between geographical spaces—such as the battlefield, home, hospital, mosque—and forms of violence are out of date. Accordingly, every place becomes a potential site of drone violence.

Second, the development of “precise missiles,” the kind with which most drones are currently armed led to the popular conception that drones are precise weapons. Precision, though, is a slippery concept. For one, chopping off a person's head with a machete is much more precise

than any missile, but there is no political or military support for precision of this kind in the West. Indeed, “precision” turns out to be an extremely copious category. The U.S., for example, counts all military age males in a *strike zone* as combatants unless there is explicit intelligence proving them innocent posthumously. The real ruse, then, has to do with the relation between precision and geography. As precise weapons, drones also render geographical contours irrelevant since the ostensible precision of these weapons justifies the killing of suspected terrorists in their homes. A legal strike zone is then equated with anywhere the drone strikes. And when “legal killing” can occur anywhere, then one can execute suspects anywhere—even in zones traditionally conceived as off-limits.

Finally, drones change our conception of war because it becomes, in Chamayou’s words, a priori impossible to die as one kills. One air-force officer formulated this basic benefit in the following manner: “The real advantage of unmanned aerial systems is that they allow you to protect power without projecting vulnerability.” Consequently, drones are declared to be a humanitarian weapon in two senses: they are precise vis-à-vis the enemy, and ensure no human cost to the perpetrator.

From Conquest to Pursuit

If Guantanamo was the icon of President George W. Bush’s anti-terror policy, drones have become the emblem of the Obama presidency. Indeed, Chamayou maintains that President Barack Obama has adopted a totally different anti-terror doctrine from his predecessor: kill rather than capture, replace torture with targeted assassinations.

Citing a *New York Times* report, Chamayou describes the way in which deadly decisions are reached: “It is the strangest of bureaucratic rituals... Every week or so, more than 100 members of the sprawling national security apparatus gather by secure video teleconference, to pore over terrorist suspects’ biographies and to recommend to the president who should be the next to die.” In D.C, this is called “Terror Tuesday.” Once established, the list is subsequently sent to the White House where the president gives his oral approval for each name. “With the kill list validated, the drones do the rest.”

Obama’s doctrine entails a change in the paradigm of warfare. In contrast to military theorist Carl Von Clausewitz, who claimed that the fundamental structure of war is a duel of two fighters facing each other, we now have, in Chamayou’s parlance, a hunter closing in on its prey. Chamayou, who also wrote *Manhunts: A Philosophical History*, which examines the history of hunting humans from ancient Sparta to the modern practices of chasing undocumented migrants, recounts how according to English common law one could hunt badgers and foxes in another man’s land, “because destroying such creatures is said to be profitable to the Public.” This is precisely the kind of law that the US would like to claim for drones, he asserts.

The strategy of militarized manhunting is essentially preemptive. It is not a matter of responding to actual attacks but rather preventing the possibility of emerging threats by the early elimination of potential adversaries. According to this new logic, war is no longer based on conquest—Obama is not interested in colonizing swaths of land in northern Pakistan—but on the right of pursuit. The right to pursue the prey wherever it may be found, in turn, transforms the way we

understand the basic principles of international relations since it undermines the notion of territorial integrity as well as the idea of nonintervention and the broadly accepted definition of sovereignty as the supreme authority over a given territory.

Wars without Risks

The transformation of Clausewitz's warfare paradigm manifests itself in other ways as well. Drone wars are wars without losses or defeats, but they are also wars without victory. The combination of the two lays the ground for perpetual violence, the utopian fantasy of those profiting from the production of drones and similar weapons.

Just as importantly, drones change the ethics of war. According to the new military morality, to kill while exposing one's life to danger is bad; to take lives without ever endangering one's own is good. Bradley Jay Strawser, a professor of philosophy at the US naval Postgraduate school in California, is a prominent spokesperson of the "principle of unnecessary risk." It is, in his view, wrong to command someone to take an unnecessary risk, and consequently it becomes a moral imperative to deploy drones.

Exposing the lives of one's troops was never considered good, but historically it was believed to be necessary. Therefore dying for one's country was deemed to be the greatest sacrifice and those who did die were recognized as heroes. The drone wars, however, are introducing a risk-free ethics of killing. What is taking place is a switch from an ethics of "self-sacrifice and courage to one of self-preservation and more or less assumed cowardice."

Chamayou refers to this as "necro-ethics." Paradoxically, necro-ethics is, on the one hand, vitalist in the sense that the drone supposedly does not kill innocent bystanders while securing the life of the perpetrator. This has far-reaching implications, since the more ethical the weapon seems, the more acceptable it is and the more readily it will likely be used. On the other hand, the drone advances the doctrine of killing well, and in this sense stands in opposition to the classical ethics of living well or even dying well.

Transforming Politics in the Drone States

Moreover, drones change politics within the drone states. Because drones transform warfare into a ghostly teleguided act orchestrated from a base in Nevada or Missouri, whereby soldiers no longer risk their lives, the critical attitude of citizenry towards war is also profoundly transformed, altering, as it were, the political arena within drone states.

Drones, Chamayou says, are a technological solution for the inability of politicians to mobilize support for war. In the future, politicians might not need to rally citizens because once armies begin deploying only drones and robots there will be no need for the public to even know that a war is being waged. So while, on the one hand, drones help produce the social legitimacy towards warfare through the reduction of risk, on the other hand, they render social legitimacy irrelevant to the political decision making process relating to war. This drastically reduces the threshold for resorting to violence, so much so that violence appears increasingly as a default

option for foreign policy. Indeed, the transformation of wars into a risk free enterprise will render them even more ubiquitous than they are today. This too will be one of Obama's legacies.