

BOOK REVIEW**Grégoire Chamayou, *Drone Theory* (Penguin 2015)****Pages: 304. £6.99. ISBN: 978-0241970348***Julia Bambach**

Unmanned aerial vehicles, commonly known as ‘drones’, and unmanned systems in general represent one of the most important contemporary developments in conventional military armaments. The emergence and significant increase in the use of this technology, especially in the context of targeted killings, has become a ‘burning political issue’,¹ raising significant legal and ethical questions.² In the midst of this debate, author Grégoire Chamayou subjects drones to a philosophical investigation in his work *Drone Theory*.³ By illustrating and analysing a number of key philosophical findings presented in *Drone Theory*, this review responds to Chamayou’s arguments and aims to stimulate further discussion.

Set against the background of the on-going deployment of drones in modern warfare, Chamayou embarks on an exploration of the intricate dimensions of their genealogy, nature and socio-political impact. By providing a theorisation of the drone itself, Chamayou hopes to reveal what ‘possession of it implies and seeking to know what effects it might produce on its users, on the enemy that is its target, and on the very form of their relations’.⁴ Thus, his analytical strategy follows the method recommended by French philosopher Simone Weil, who proposed to approach warfare and the phenomena of armed violence by the nature of the means employed rather than ends pursued.⁵

Chamayou himself refers to this approach by Weil and advocates to ‘become a technician, in a way’ in order to analyse drones and their characteristics.⁶ In accordance with this approach, the starting point of Chamayou’s investigation is the technical and

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¹ Grégoire Chamayou, *Drone Theory* (Penguin 2015) 12.

² Michael J Boyle, ‘The legal and ethical implications of drone warfare’ (2015) 19 *The International Journal of Human Rights* 112.

³ Chamayou (n 1) 14.

⁴ *ibid* 15.

⁵ Simone Weil, *Formative Writings* (Routledge 1999) 173.

⁶ Chamayou (n 1) 15.

political analysis of the weapons themselves rather than preliminary deliberations on moral justifications for armed violence.⁷

Through his distinctive writing style, Chamayou weaves together a wide variety of sources, ranging from moral lessons from classical mythology to sobering extracts of conversations between drone operators extracted from military transcripts. In his prelude, Chamayou opens up his philosophical investigation with one such passage, which takes the reader directly to the centre of his discussion regarding the use of drones, namely the battlefield.⁸

After this brief insight into drone strikes, Chamayou's exploration of drones unfolds in the course of five major sections, titled 'Technique and Tactics',⁹ 'Ethos and Psyche',¹⁰ 'Necroethics',¹¹ 'The Principles of the Philosophy of the Right to Kill',¹² and 'Political Bodies'.¹³ Though dealing with highly specific topics such as the emergence of necro-ethics, a risk-free ethics of killing according to Chamayou,¹⁴ the sections build neatly upon each other and form a compelling critique of modern drone warfare.

The focus of Chamayou's investigation is on drones in the context of targeted killings and their role in military warfare. As the author himself states, this work addresses 'the case of armed flying drones, the ones that are known as hunter-killers'.¹⁵ By grounding his work predominantly on the issue of drone-based targeted killings, Chamayou limits the possibility of providing a more comprehensive theory that could explore the implications of other functions of drones. In contrast to what one might expect from its title, this book covers only one aspect of the multi-faceted subject of drones, although it does so comprehensively and profoundly.

The reason why Chamayou has so narrowly defined the focus of his work and why he accepts the resulting thematic limitations, lies in the objectives he pursues with this book. Set out in its introduction, Chamayou intends *Drone Theory* to not only provide a thought-provoking critique of drone warfare, but also to serve as a 'discursive weapon' for opponents of current drone policies.¹⁶ Thus, Chamayou principally

⁷ *ibid* 16.

⁸ *ibid* 1.

⁹ *ibid* 20.

¹⁰ *ibid* 82.

¹¹ *ibid* 126.

¹² *ibid* 152.

¹³ *ibid* 176.

¹⁴ *ibid* 128.

¹⁵ *ibid* 11.

¹⁶ *ibid* 16.

envisages his work to be used as an intellectual resource which sparks discussion and offers convincing arguments.

In light of these objectives, Chamayou cautions the reader that he is not a neutral observer nor that his analysis is impartial.¹⁷ Instead, he explicitly takes a critical stance towards drones and their use in modern warfare in the course of his philosophical investigation.

At the same time, however, Chamayou's philosophical and analytical arguments could have benefited from a more nuanced perspective. In various passages of *Drone Theory*, Chamayou loses himself in narrative observations which, as he himself states, are 'openly polemical'.¹⁸ Thereby, the author neglects important counterarguments or information that would be worth addressing or at least mentioning. For instance, there is no mention in Chamayou's critical chapter on 'Counterinsurgency from the Air',¹⁹ that targeted drone strikes have been found to be highly effective in reducing the lethality and frequency of insurgent attacks.²⁰

Another point of criticism is the fact that Chamayou makes little reference to alternative, beneficial purposes of drone technology throughout his work. For instance, the positive impact of drone operations becomes apparent in the context of preventing violations of human rights and other humanitarian atrocities.²¹ In addition, drones can play an important role in complex humanitarian situations such as the Syrian civil war due to their ability to conduct surveillance in inaccessible regions.²² Similarly, drones can provide a solution for the United Nations (UN) in peacekeeping operations, both by reducing the risks that peacekeepers face and by monitoring the compliance of signatories with peace agreements.²³

Drones therefore not only have the capability to kill but also to rescue, protect and help innocent victims and civilians. It is unfortunate that Chamayou does not address this fascinating moral duality of drones at all. Acknowledging the significant potential of drone operations as a force for good would have contributed to a more nuanced theorisation of drones, which reflects real life more accurately.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid* 17.

¹⁹ *ibid* 60.

²⁰ Bryan Price, 'Targeting Top Terrorists: How Leadership Decapitation Contributes to Counterterrorism Targeting Top Terrorists' (2012) 36 *International Security* 44.

²¹ David Whetham, 'Drones to protect' (2015) 19 *The International Journal of Human Rights* 198.

²² Chamayou (n 1) 212-218.

²³ John Karlsrud and Frederik Rosén, 'In the Eye of the Beholder? UN and the Use of Drones to Protect Civilians' (2013) 2 *International Journal of Security and Development* 27.

On a positive note, Chamayou's discussion of the psychopathologies of drone warfare is brilliant and insightful within two chapters in the second section of the book titled 'Ethos and Psyche'.²⁴ The author elucidates the often overlooked psychological and moral implications for drone operators.²⁵ Though drone pilots might be thousands of miles from the battlefield, their work still involves tough stressors in the form of making life or death decisions and bearing witness to the consequences of these decisions. Especially the constant exposure to high-resolution images of real-time killings and post-strike damage assessments are considered causes of psychological distress.²⁶

Curiously, drone operators show signs of psychological trauma similar to their counter-parts who are exposed directly to the battlefield.²⁷ For example, researchers have found similar levels of depression and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder among drone pilots working behind computer screens as among military personnel engaged in combat.²⁸ This distress may express itself in the form of emotional problems such as depression or anxiety, as well as behavioural problems, for example increased alcohol and substance use.²⁹

In addition, Chamayou addresses the definitional problems surrounding the well-known psychological condition known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which may develop after exposure to a traumatic event.³⁰ For instance, witnessing an event that leads to death or injury to others can result in the subsequent experience of intense feelings of fear, helplessness, or horror.³¹ While it has been found that some drone operators may exhibit such symptoms, Chamayou notes that the suffering of these operators technically cannot be subsumed under the general definition of PTSD.³² According to its definition, PTSD either requires the direct personal experience of an

²⁴ Chamayou (n 1) 82.

²⁵ *ibid* 106.

²⁶ Markus Christen and others, 'Measuring the moral impact of operating "drones" on pilots in combat, disaster management and surveillance' (European Conference on Information Systems, Tel Aviv, June 2014)

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270100320_Measuring_the_moral_impact_of_operating_drones_on_pilots_in_combat_disaster_management_and_surveillance/download> accessed 31 January 2019.

²⁷ Wayne Chappelle and others, 'Symptoms of Psychological Distress and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in United States Air Force Drone Operators' (2014) 179 *Military Medicine* 63.

²⁸ Jean Lin Otto and Bryant J Webber, 'Mental health diagnoses and counselling among pilots of remotely piloted aircraft in the United States Air Force' (2013) 20 *MSMR* 8.

²⁹ Chappelle (n 27) 66.

³⁰ Chamayou (n 1) 66.

³¹ Chappelle (n 27) 65.

³² Chamayou (n 1) 110.

extreme traumatic event, or the being a witness of such stressor.³³ In the case of drone operators, Chamayou considers this definition to be problematic. Drone operators do not directly experience the traumatic event such as a targeted killing, as they are by definition removed from the scene of action. Simultaneously, they cannot be considered witnesses either.

For Chamayou, the particularity in the case of drone operators lies in the fact that they are ‘far more than just witnesses’ as they actively bring about the traumatic event.³⁴ In regard to this issue, the author commends the efforts to expand the definition of PTSD by developing the notion of ‘Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress’.³⁵ This concept would enable the consideration of active perpetrators of traumatic events and allow for a better understanding of the psychological impact of drone operators.

In addition to the psychological impact, Chamayou also discusses the moral impact some drone pilots experience in the course of their work. Referring to a seminal study of over 2,700 U.S. Army service members, the author points out that one of the main factors associated with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder is the ‘attribution of responsibility in killing’.³⁶ According to recent research,³⁷ this could imply that drone operators may be heavily affected by a phenomenon termed moral stress. Moral stress may be understood as ‘the possibility that deciding upon moral dilemmas may not only cause physiological stress but may also lead to changes in the evaluation of values and reasons that are relevant to problem solving’.³⁸ Since the research is still in progress, the implications for further discussion of the effect on drone pilots remain to be seen.

While Chamayou’s analysis of the psychological and moral implications for drone operators is complex and rich in detail, his account of the psychological trauma of those living under drones remains superficial. The author merely alludes to the profound psychological effect on civilians by referencing the experiences of journalist David Rohde, who was kidnapped by the Taliban.³⁹ Drawing upon Rhode’s recollections, Chamayou hauntingly describes life under drone surveillance as ‘a psychic

³³ *ibid* 111.

³⁴ *ibid* 112.

³⁵ Rachel MacNair, *Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress: The Psychological Consequences of Killing* (Greenwood 2005).

³⁶ Shira Maguen and others, ‘The impact of reported direct and indirect killing on mental health symptoms in Iraq war veterans’ (2010) 23 *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 86.

³⁷ Christen (n 26).

³⁸ *ibid*.

³⁹ Chamayou (n 1) 44.

imprisonment within a perimeter no longer defined by bars but by endless circling of flying watchtowers above'.⁴⁰

Evident in Chamayou's description, life under drones entails a combination of constant surveillance and potential death from above at any moment.⁴¹ This harmful environment can cause severe psychological trauma, which is briefly addressed by Chamayou in reference to one of the most comprehensive studies investigating life under drones.⁴² As part of this study, interviews with those affected as well as medical research demonstrate the severe psychological impact of drones, as well as the interruption they present to everyday life in the northern tribal region of Waziristan. Chamayou further includes a few quotes from personal accounts which had been reproduced in this study.⁴³

In contrast to his otherwise detailed analyses of various concepts and applications, Chamayou's analysis of the psychological impact on people living under drones lacks any considerable depth. Perhaps the author assumed that there was no need for an elaborate exploration. It seems rather obvious that psychological trauma occurs in stressful, anxiety-inducing living conditions such as constant observation by drones. Nevertheless, Chamayou could have enriched his analysis by incorporating personal experiences of the victims or addressing issues in researching this specific sort of trauma.

In reviewing *Drone Theory*, a further noteworthy peculiarity is Chamayou's continuous use of numerous captivating descriptions of drones. For instance, he compares them to 'miniature equivalents to that fictional eye of god'.⁴⁴ This comparison refers to the 'all-seeing eye of God', a Christian symbol which depicts the eye of the omniscient God watching over humanity'.⁴⁵ In the chapter titled 'Surveillance and Annihilation', Chamayou critically examines the development of drone surveillance systems. The invention of a spherical array of nine cameras attached to an aerial drone leads him to establish a connection to Jeremy Bentham's concept of the panopticon.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ *ibid* 45.

⁴¹ *ibid* 46.

⁴² International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic at Stanford Law School and Global Justice Clinic at NYU School of Law, *Living Under Drones: Death, Injury, And Trauma to Civilians from US Drone Practices in Pakistan* (2012) <<https://www-cdn.law.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Stanford-NYU-Living-Under-Drones.pdf>> accessed 30 January 2019.

⁴³ Chamayou (n 1) 45.

⁴⁴ *ibid* 37.

⁴⁵ Albert M Potts, *The World's Eye* (University Press of Kentucky) 78.

⁴⁶ Chamayou (n 1) 43.

Originally an architectural design, the panopticon refers to a special structure for a maximum-surveillance prison which would enable one guard to watch and assess all prisoners at all times.⁴⁷ Delving into Greek mythology, Chamayou even attributes drones the same kind of power which the mythical Ring of Gyges conferred onto its bearer.⁴⁸ Mentioned by Plato, whoever was wearing this mythical ring could become invisible by adjusting it.⁴⁹

Particularly in his section on necro-ethics, Chamayou elevates drones from their status as instruments and imbues them with a certain agency of their own. In his account, drones dream of achieving omniscience and are compared to 'having God overhead'.⁵⁰ Although this makes for an intriguing narrative in which drones themselves become protagonists, this manoeuvre must be viewed critically. The danger in Chamayou's portrayal lies in the resulting de-instrumentalization of drones. By becoming more than an instrument, we are unable to gain insight into the nature of drones, namely them being mere pieces of technology.

It also obscures the attribution of responsibility as we need to remind ourselves of who is perpetrator and what the instrument. We should not view drones as agents but direct our attention to the people who make the decisions and operate the drone so that we can hold those responsible to account. In addition, Chamayou's depiction of drones undermines the idea that drones can be used for different purposes. Drones have no purposes of their own and ultimately fulfil purposes set by humans.⁵¹ They may even carry with them the means of protest. Used by protest groups such as the Occupy movement to record police indiscretions,⁵² it is possible to reverse the scrutiny and watch the watcher.

Reading Chamayou's investigation, which highlights the atrocious implications of drone warfare, one cannot help but wonder why the use of drones is not considered more shocking. In addition to a spatial dimension which allows for distancing oneself from the violence of drone strike programmes carried out in remote territories, there is

⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (Harvester 1980) 209.

⁴⁸ Chamayou (n 1) 96.

⁴⁹ Andrew Laird, 'Ringing the changes on Gyges: Philosophy and the formation of fiction in Plato's Republic' (2001) 121 *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 12.

⁵⁰ Chamayou (n 1) 37.

⁵¹ Bart Custers, *The Future of Drone Use: Opportunities and Threats from Ethical and Legal Perspectives* (Springer 2016) 301.

⁵² Adam Martin, 'Occupy Wall Street has a drone: The occuicopter' *The Wire* (11 February 2015) <<http://www.thewire.com/national/2011/12/occupy-wall-street-has-drone-occuicopter/45891>> accessed 10 January 2019.

an intentional lack of information and transparency. Throughout Chamayou's account, we hear discomfiting assurances and justifications of the nature of drone strikes by military and government spokespeople, exemplified by the former head of the Israeli Defence Forces Legal Department stating that 'if you do something for long enough the world will accept it'.⁵³

Finally, Chamayou ends his philosophical investigation on a hopeful note, reminding the reader that technology is in fact not invincible.⁵⁴ He reiterates his call to action by encouraging the reader to actively oppose current drone warfare policies and to fight for social change.⁵⁵ However, this call to action may already be too late. In line with Chamayou's use of mythological metaphors, it seems that Pandora's box has already been opened through the ongoing process of normalisation and wide-spread acceptance of drone use in society. Even though actively protesting the particular cruelties and drastic consequences caused by targeted drone strikes seems to constitute a moral necessity, it is clearly impractical to abandon the evolving drone technology in its entirety.

Drone Theory is certainly not an exhaustive discussion of the theory of drones due to its narrow focus and failure to consider alternative perspectives. Nevertheless, Chamayou accomplishes his mission of making a valuable and much needed contribution to the debate on drones. By bringing to light the impact of drones on fundamental ethical issues such as targeted killings, Chamayou extends the philosophical dimension of the existing discussion significantly by venturing into the worlds of warfare, ethics and sovereignty. Moreover, *Drone Theory* makes for a compelling read due to Chamayou's ability to expertly link the narrative strands of his investigation and analyse their central themes.

To conclude, Chamayou's work can be understood as a catalyst which inspires a more critical engagement with drones and how they ought to be used in the future. For anyone with an interest in drones and their use in military warfare, *Drone Theory* is an insightful and worthwhile resource that will surely stimulate further thought and discussion.

⁵³ Chamayou (n 1) 167.

⁵⁴ *ibid* 302.

⁵⁵ *ibid* 227.