Grégoire Chamayou
Théorie du drone
La fabrique, Paris 2013, pp. 368[1]

Chamayou's text represents a rare philosophical study that engages with the transformation of contemporary war by means of a device — the drone — which is radically changing our relationship with combat. The extent of this transformation can be seen from two informative statistics: the number of armed drones in the United States increased 1200% between 2005 and 2011; and, though the budget for US defense actually decreased in 2013, the resources set aside for UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles) rose by 30%.

Chamayou's essay constitutes both a philosophical reflection on war and an important treatise on visual culture, insofar as the war 'fought' with drones corresponds to a different perspective the offensive soldier has of his enemy, whom has become merely a target to destroy from a distance. Chamayou's goal is summed up as follows:

> 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 contributions 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 drones (p. 16).

In a very clear way, Chamayou states that philosophy must be rooted in the present and relate critically to it, by means of a genealogy of devices through which power is exerted.

Contemporary common sense tends to acknowledge drones as the 'most ethical weapons' men and women have ever built. Drones, therefore, are humane weapons *par excellence*: the enemy is targeted without error, and 'our' soldiers are spared needless sacrifice on the battlefield. Through this propagandistic representation, spread by governments and the arms industry, drones are publicly legitimized. However, Chamayou rightly observes that this pacifying and acritical notion conceals a series of crucial problems: 1) the number of errors in hitting operational targets is incredibly high, as Chamayou's book shows through a

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[1] All quotations are taken from the English translation: *A Theory of the Drone,* trans. by Janet Lloyd (New York: The New Press, 2015), pp. 292.

wealth of documentation, making it difficult to believe that UAVs are infallible. 2) According to the classic rhetoric of war drones would be the weapons of cowards, that is, the weapon of a person who strikes from a distance without being seen. Warfare thus becomes execution — or is it assassination? — at distance. Drone warfare is no longer a balanced battle between the forces of two rivals, but rather consists in one person safely seated in front of a computer screen, hunting down prey that tries in vain to escape. 3) The diffusion of devices that are perceived as neutral or innocuous — under the guise of anti-terror instruments — furthers the possible creation of a 'synoptic iconography', along with certain Internet sites, cell phones and tracked credit card usage, whereby increasing portions of our lives can be monitored 24/7. Chamayou informs us, shockingly, that in 2009 alone US drones recorded the equivalent of 24 years of video footage. For the author, then, UAVs are less effective preventative weapons against terrorism than an experimental, intrusive tool for the surveillance of everyday life, which therefore troubles the founding principles of any democracy. In short, today we already inhabit a 'wide area persistent surveillance' made by widespread 'unblinking eyes' (an expression used by the Sierra Nevada Corporation at a NATO symposium), that are active day and night, 365 days a year.

When were drones first made? Chamayou identifies a study by the engineer John W. Clark, published in *New Scientist*, significantly entitled 'Remote control in hostile environments' (1964). This was the first theoretical text dedicated to designing 'telechiric systems' that is, machines that could operate at a distance in hostile environments 'by a cable or by a radio-link', thus keeping the operator safe, comfortably seated at his workstation in front of a screen. The setting for the 'telechiric systems' is identical to the UAVs: on the one hand is the 'danger zone', where the machine works as it hunts down the enemy; on the other is the 'safe zone', where the person monitoring the target can work in all safety. These are two totally different spaces that reflect two equally different existential conditions. Chamayou traces to Clark's study the emergence of a new perspective and the radicalization of asymmetric warfare. The author writes that Harun Farocki had fully grasped the relevance of this perspective (there are numerous references to his works in the publication) when he observes that 'technology of military vision produces not so much representations as "operative images", images that do not represent an object, but instead are part of an operation' (p. 114). And Chamayou writes: 'You can click the apparatus, and when you click, you kill. Here, though, the act of killing is in effect reduced to positioning the pointer or arrow on little "actionable images", tiny figures that have taken the place of the old flesh-and-blood body of the enemy' (p. 114). As the psychologist Stanley Milgram contended, this kind of device provokes 'a break in the "phenomenological unity" of the act' (p. 118).

Among the many aspects of great interest in Chamayou's book, there is certainly a careful philosophical reflection on how our relationship with war has been numbed even though combat grows more and more present in our lives. In fact, UAVs have revealed an inner contradiction of the State with regards to war.

It is not so much the humanization of war and our aversion to the victims that has produced drones in conflicts as it is the suppression of the dialectic contradiction between war and sacrifice:

> One can thus grasp what is politically at stake here: reconciling the neoliberal restriction of the aims of state power to security matters with the maintenance of its prerogative to wage war. Waging war, but without sacrifices. Freely exercising warwaging sovereignty, but within the internal political conditions of sovereign security and protection. Abolishing the contradiction. Wiping off the map the second schema, which is so problematic and in which official political relations were turned inside out and became unilateral in too flagrant a manner. Exercising power, at an internal level, in war as in peace (p. 181).

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