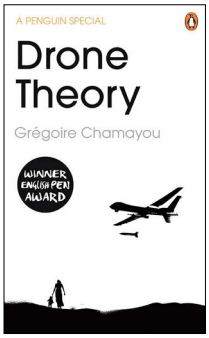
Book Review

Drone Theory



Author: Gregoire Chamayou (translated by Janet Lloyd)

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Introduction

The dichotomy between popular and academic discourse surrounding 'drones' is frustrating; pieces appealing to a mass audience often lack sufficient perforation, and scholarly work is seldom read outside academic circles. Grégoire Chamayou – research scholar in philosophy at the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* in Paris, and author elsewhere of *Manhunts: A Philosophical History* – offers here an underappreciated bridge between the two. Chamayou subjects unmanned aerial systems to a 'philosophical investigation' (p. 14), exploring the logic of military violence, its hypocrisies, and subsequent ethical implications whilst positioning it within the backdrop of the United States' War on Terror. In doing so, *Drone Theory*'s premise sets it apart from ethical narratives otherwise reviewed in this publication, and more than assuages its slightly dated (in the context of drone technology development) publication.

Chamayou begins by navigating the semantics of unmanned systems in order to understand the weapon itself. He shows a convincing grasp of the background in which drone usage has grown, which has vastly preceded the place of remotely piloted systems in public consciousness. The author is, admirably, honest with being 'openly polemical' (p. 16) from the outset; his aim is solely to provide ammunition for those who 'wish to oppose the policy served by drones' (p. 16), and quickly sets to work surveying the 'genealogy' (p. 26) of the system.

Chamayou uses this useful history of unmanned weapons to make the case that drones represent the 'remote-controlled hunting of human beings' (p. 31). In his view, the asymmetry

between drone pilot and adversary vulnerability has led to warfare becoming a game of 'hide-and-seek' (p. 34), with the solitary task being identifying and locating the enemy, and 'preventing the development of emerging threats by the early elimination of their potential targets' (p. 34). It is within this discussion that Chamayou likens drone use to an online hunting site whereby users can shoot live animals remotely, unfortunately just the first occasion of dramatic and over-emotive evidence that often subtracts and diminishes from his otherwise convincing arguments.

In fact, this appears to exemplify one of the author's major issues with remotely piloted systems. Repeatedly falling back on Clausewitz and notions of traditional warfare, he aims to condemn the use of drones in these 'militarized manhunt[s]' (p. 32) as 'the weapon of cowards' (p. 17). In doing so he is naïve, ignoring the very fundamentals of strategists such as Clausewitz and Tzu: to kill and not be killed, and the element of surprise. Tackling historian David Bell, who correctly suggests that 'if our technology is new, the desire to take out one's enemies from a safe distance is anything but' (p. 93), Chamayou reduces the use of drones to an extension of colonial history, glossing over the fact that unmanned technology is merely a continuation of seeking advantage in combat. His naivety also begs the question: if our adversaries utilise unmanned technologies similarly on the battlefield, will drone warfare once more be admirable, and hence ethical, in Chamayou's eyes?

Nevertheless, Chamayou is particularly persuasive when placing the nature of the drone as a manhunting instrument into its legal context, effectively drawing out the various sophisms often turned to in support of their employment. The most effort goes into debunking the claim – used to make drone strikes palatable to the US public – of their increased precision compared to more traditional means of targeting. Chamayou points out that '[t]he 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 […] makes it thereby better able to distinguish between the guilty and the innocent' (p. 143). Chamayou shows how, instead of winning 'hearts and minds', utilisation has left civilian populations living in fear. Resultantly, whilst tactically successful, drone strikes are strategically counterproductive.

The author goes on to suggest that this precision paradox means that '[t]he scenario that looms before us is one of infinite violence, with no possible exit; the paradox of an untouchable power waging interminable wars toward perpetual war' (p. 72). When taken with the above, Chamayou makes a good point, and perhaps the most striking of the book. At the time of this writing, chief al-Qaeda idealogue Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed in a US drone strike; with no obvious evidence of strategic success, Chamayou raises the question whether the West – especially considering the easier justification of lethal strikes given the reduced risk to allied operators – will continue to employ unmanned technology and expect different results despite the warnings from both counterterrorist experts like David Kilcullen, and philosophy scholars.

The triumph of Grégoire Chamayou's *Drone Theory* lies with the fact that it provides an impassioned, competing narrative to that which militaries too often surround themselves. He raises questions that Western militaries must ponder regarding the use of remotely piloted systems in the prosecution of political goals; *Drone Theory* is hence recommended as essential reading for strategists and tacticians alike.