

An Ideology of the Drone

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Is the American government’s drone warfare a radical kind of manhunting, or just a military tactic that can be used for various ends, ranging from highly legitimate to barbarous?

Reviewed: Grégoire Chamayou, *Théorie du drone*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2013, 363p. An English translation by Janet Lloyd, *A Theory of the Drone*, New York, The New Press, is to be published in 2015.

Grégoire Chamayou, a French researcher in philosophy, is also the director of the publisher La Découverte’s “Zones” series, which “focuses on counter-culture, activism and new forms of protest connected with social movements and involving new critical theories”; the guiding thread of the series is “resistance to oppression”.¹ He became widely known with the publication of his earlier book, *Les Chasses à l’homme* [Manhunts] (2010), described as “a fragment of the long history of violence by the powerful”.² Here he pointed out the way in which “from Aristotle to Besson”,³ “human beings have been tracked down, pursued, and captured or killed in various kinds of hunting”.⁴ Chamayou’s purpose was to show that the rise of these practices in modern times was “in unison with the development of transatlantic capitalism.”⁵

He explained that one of the contemporary forms of this pack-hunting power is the “international manhunt” launched by President Bush after the September 11th attacks: “imperial war became hunting down criminals”.⁶ So Chamayou takes an interest in drones as a method of tracking. His book *Théorie du drone* closely follows his previous publication *Les chasses à l’homme*: the subject is less the drone as such than it is the drone as an illustration of the violence of the powerful – in this case that of the “American Reich”, whose drones he describes as “the weapons of state terrorism”.⁷ Their operators are all “killers”, and the ethics of the drone are those of “executioners”.⁸

Drone warfare raises some complex strategic, ethical and legal questions that have been examined by a number of authors. Chamayou makes drone warfare serve political activist purposes by reducing it to a capitalistic weapon enabling Americans to export their imperialism and oppression. Although bound to please a particular, already persuaded

¹ [Editions Zones webpage](#)

² G. Chamayou, *Les Chasses à l’homme*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2010, p. 7.

³ “D’Aristote à Besson... Petite histoire des chasses à l’homme”, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 6 mai 2010.

⁴ G. Chamayou, *Les Chasses à l’homme*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ G. Chamayou, “La chasse à l’homme, une nouvelle doctrine de guerre”, *Libération*, 3 mai 2011.

⁷ G. Chamayou, *Théorie du drone*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2013, pp. 313 and 95.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

readership, he risked disappointing or irritating the specialists, and that risk has been realized.⁹

This book has some great qualities – it is stimulating and well written – but it also has some significant biases, which it adopts because of its explicitly activist ambition: “the objective of this book is to supply discursive tools to those who want to oppose the policies of which drone warfare is an instrument.”¹⁰ At the same time, it is presented as a “work of philosophical inquiry”,¹¹ and therefore aimed also at improving our understanding. It is certainly a philosophical work – its author is solid, erudite, sometimes brilliant – but it is too politically motivated, too biased and incomplete, to provide any keys to comprehension. It aims less at comprehension than at indignation.

Of course, that helps explain the book’s success: it resonates with the view that drones now constitute the “airborne image of evil”.¹² It has become so accepted to oppose them – without understanding anything about them, because after all everyone knows that they are flying robots that kill Pakistani children – that a book like this, which reinforces these prejudices and puts into words the general indignation, is bound to be popular, and anyone who wants to qualify or to contradict it is bound to be in disgrace.

That is the problem with activist books: in order to be more effective, they caricature the adversary. When Chamayou was asked what motivated him to write the book, he replied that “some philosophers in the United States and in Israel work hand in hand with the military to elaborate what I call a ‘neco-ethics’ that tries to justify targeted assassinations. So it is urgent to respond. When ethics is brought into a war, philosophy becomes a battlefield.”¹³

A bit like Plato looking upon his Socratic dialogues as the philosopher’s responses to the sophists – i.e. to false philosophers – Chamayou presents his *Theory of the Drone* as a response to the traitorous philosophers who collaborate with the military. I am myself one of this low species: I teach ethics and the law of war to officer students at [the French Military Academy of] Saint-Cyr, and I often work with the military (without however being “enlisted” to justify anything whatsoever). Therefore I can testify that, when you take an interest in military matters, it is helpful to work with them, to increase your precision and to avoid some clichés and factual errors.

Chamayou explains that the “philosophers who work in the small field of military ethics” and who claim that the drone is a “humanitarian weapon” are recycling “the ‘talking points’ of arms merchants and armed forces spokespersons”.¹⁴ With this kind of concoction, which through quick reading equates drone partisans with arms merchants and the military, as if it were impossible not to be anti-drone without being mercenary or biased, Chamayou polarizes the debate and paves the way for conspiracy theorists who think that all pro-drone arguments are part of some sort of military-industrial plot.

⁹ Blog of the magazine *Défense et Sécurité Internationale* (DSI), [“Sur une interview de G. Chamayou, ou de quelques mythes entourant les drones armés”](#), 16 October 2013; and Abou Djaffar’s blog, [“Toi aussi, tu aimes les films de gladiateurs?”](#), 17 October 2013.

¹⁰ G. Chamayou, *Théorie du drone*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹² J. Henrotin, “Le drone, figure aérienne du mal?”, *DSI* hors-série 30, June-July 2013, pp. 50-52.

¹³ *Libération*, 19 May 2013. See also *Les Inrocks*, 25 May 2013.

¹⁴ G. Chamayou, *Théorie du drone*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

For example, to discredit the American professor of philosophy Bradley Strawser, Chamayou finds it sufficient to say that Strawser had found his arguments “in the publicity document of an Israeli arms merchant”.¹⁵ This entertains some readers, but this kind of comment, like all objections based on institutional affiliation (a kind of *argumentum ad hominem*), should not be allowed to prevent discussing the essence of the arguments, as I intend to do here.

What are we talking about?

The most fundamental criticism that can be made about Chamayou’s *Theory of the Drone* is that his theory mistakes its target, or is mistitled. For this is not a book on, or even against, the drone. It is a book against the American policy of targeted killings, with the drone as a means. This is a basic confusion: the drone is a subject of heated debate today largely because of its use by the CIA in Waziristan, and to a lesser extent in Yemen and Somalia.

This policy of targeted killings is questionable, morally as well as legally, but the end and the means must not be confused. It is of course possible to pursue the same end with other means: airplanes, missiles, helicopters, snipers, commandos, killers on foot, polonium 210, etc. Conversely, it is also possible to use the same means for other ends: the use of drones for targeted killings is highly publicized, because it is the most controversial, but quantitatively it remains very minor in comparison to surveillance missions.

In particular, there is a legitimate use for drones in situations of armed conflict, when their use is no more problematic than that of airplanes and helicopters, and can actually help prevent combatants from attacking civilians. For example in Libya individuals using rocket launchers to fire on inhabited areas (as some pro-Gadhafi forces did) were identified, as were arms supply depots, by using French surveillance drones; then this information was transmitted to fighter jets for airstrikes. Chamayou does not cite this and many other examples showing that, contrary to what he writes, drones do not save only “our lives”.¹⁶ He is interested not in surveillance drones but only in armed drones, and then not for their legal uses in armed conflicts (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali) but in their illegal uses by the CIA in the American policy of targeted killings (Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia). In other words, what is presented to us as *A Theory of the Drone* is really a theory of the American-armed-military-drone-used-by-the-CIA-for-targeted-killings – i.e., a theory about an American policy, a policy that is of course debatable, but to which “the drone” should not be reduced. It’s a bit like calling a book about Russian cyber attacks *A Theory of the Computer*.

Moreover, when asked whether drones are not relatively more precise weapons, he replies that the targets are badly identified (“most drone strikes do not target identified named individuals”¹⁷); this reply clearly proves that the problem is not the weapon itself but the doctrine of employing it. His arguments against signature strikes – i.e. strikes based on behavioural patterns rather than on identity (personality strikes) – are excellent: signature strikes replace “an epistemology of clear observation and judgement of fact with an epistemology of suspicion in which the targeting decision is based on the recognition of conduct or a life profile indicating a presumed state of membership in a hostile organization,”¹⁸ which naturally increases the chance of striking the innocent.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

¹⁷ For example, Regards.fr, 14 May 2013.

¹⁸ G. Chamayou, *Théorie du drone*, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

This development in American strategy in Pakistan is regrettable. It was a major change when the CIA broadened its targeting, no longer aiming exclusively at “high value” targets, but at any group of suspected militants, on the basis of presumably questionable behaviour. Increasing these signature strikes led to many errors, such as attacking a group of 17 men simply because they were seen training, doing pushups and running (14 January 2010); and attacking an individual simply because he had twice met with men in his car, and had changed cars three times (23 March 2010).

These deviations, and the industrialization of targeted killings that such deviations are symptoms of, are clearly reprehensible (and the American government has in fact backed off: there were 122 strikes in Pakistan in 2010, 73 in 2011, 48 in 2012, and up to the time of writing only 24 in 2013). However, they show not that the drone is an imprecise weapon, but that it has been used in an imprecise way, just as a needle can be used imprecisely.

Provided that we do not confuse the thing with its use, it is quite possible to condemn the abuses of a permissive policy such as signature strikes without calling into question the principle of targeted killings itself and the use of drones. That has been done by Michael Walzer, whom Chamayou is fond of quoting because during the Kosovo crisis he wrote that whoever kills ought to be prepared to die.¹⁹ But Walzer also makes a distinction between terrorism, i.e. untargeted killings, “the bomb in the supermarket, the café or the bus station”, and targeted killings. Adding that “killing Hitler would have been ‘extra-judicial’ but entirely justified”, he is in fact in favour of the targeted killing of suspected terrorists: “Individuals who plan, or organize, or recruit for, or participate in a terrorist attack are all of them legitimate targets.”²⁰

Walzer is not against drone strikes, “which could be justified under tough constraints”; moreover, he considers that “their moral and political advantage is their precision”. But he also warns that “the technology is so good that the criteria for using it are likely to be steadily relaxed. That’s what seems to have happened with the U.S. Army or with the CIA in Pakistan and Yemen.”²¹ What he criticizes is the “excessive” use of drones and the abuses of signature strikes; but he does not throw out the baby with the bathwater.

An “*inhumaine*” weapon?

Chamayou makes two arguments to demonstrate that the drone is an *inhumaine* weapon. *Firstly*, he criticizes the false philosophers in the pay of the Empire for turning “the meanings of words upside down, by contending that the drone – an unmanned machine – is the most *humaine* weapon.”²² “How can it be claimed that ‘unmanned’ war machines, with no human beings on board, are the ‘most *humain*’ means of taking lives?”²³

This argument of Chamayou is a good example of the homonymy sophism (which is the second ploy described by Schopenhauer in *The Art of Being Right*²⁴), because in French the word “*humain*” has two different meanings, which Chamayou fails to distinguish: (1) belonging to the human species (equivalent to the English word “human”), and (2) humane. The fact that in the machine there is no individual belonging to the human species does not

¹⁹ M. Walzer, “Kosovo”, *Dissent*, 46:3, 1999, p. 6. See G. Chamayou, *Théorie du drone*, *op. cit.*, pp. 213-219.

²⁰ M. Walzer, “[Targeted Killing and Drone Warfare](#)”, *Dissent*, 11 January 2013.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Libération*, 19 May 2013.

²³ G. Chamayou, *Théorie du drone*, *op. cit.*, p. 191. See also *Les Inrocks*, 25 May 2013.

²⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, [The Art of Being Right](#), 1896, translated into English by Thomas Bailey Saunders, p. 7.

mean that that machine cannot be the least likely to cause unnecessary harm. (And note that, contrary to widespread belief, the absence of humans in drones does not make them “unpiloted aircraft”. They are remotely piloted aircraft; running four Reapers involves around 160 people on the ground.)

These are two different things, with no logical connection between them. Paris Métro trains on Line 14 are not less humane just because they don’t have a human driver on board. And robotic surgery is not less humane just because in some operations it means that the surgeon prefers remotely controlling a robotic device rather than putting his or her big fingers into the patient’s body; on the contrary, robotic surgery is motivated by humanitarian, potentially life-saving considerations: the robotic device is more precise and less invasive, and the operation can be carried out at a distance.

This homonymy sophism also occurs when Chamayou says that British anti-drone protesters have “a great slogan”: “We don’t want to lose our humanity”²⁵. The humanity in question is the humanitarian sentiment, and the contention is that drones threaten it because there is no human being in the cockpit. But there were humans in the Halifax and Lancaster bombers that attacked Hamburg (1943) and Dresden (1945), as well as in the Tornado aircraft that bombed Iraq, Serbia, Afghanistan and Libya in the past two decades, yet Chamayou does not conclude that these British planes were more “humane” on account of being manned.

Secondly, behind this homonymy sophism and the fallacious conclusion that drones are necessarily inhumane because they are unmanned, is the assertion that drones are necessarily inhumane because they kill. This assertion is based on a naïve view of ethics as a doctrine of the good, whereas it is rather a doctrine of the lesser evil, and a place in which there are moral disagreements, often tragic. “How can we call methods designed to destroy human life ‘humanitarian’?”²⁶ In fact, no one says that drones are humanitarian. Many – including myself – do say that they can be *more* humanitarian than other weapons. This is a very different statement, a relative position rather than an absolute one.

Chamayou cannot deny that there are degrees of humanitarianism in “killing machines”²⁷, unless he treats all weapons as equal. Yet International Humanitarian Law (IHL) distinguishes among them, forbidding some, permitting others, precisely on humanitarian grounds: expanding bullets, chemical and biological weapons, landmines and cluster munitions are prohibited by Conventions; while nuclear weapons, not expressly prohibited, have aroused and continue to arouse much controversy. This is because all of these weapons violate fundamental principles of IHL such as the distinction between civilians and combatants, proportionality, and the prohibition of unnecessary suffering. Moreover, if there were no such degrees of humanitarianism in different ways of killing, a principle like the prohibition of unnecessary suffering would never have come about, because it distinguishes between weapons that cause too much injury and others that cause only necessary injury.

Assuming that Chamayou supports these humanitarian principles, he has no choice but to recognize that some weapons respect them more than others, and therefore that it is possible to say that one “killing machine” is humanitarian, in comparison to another.

²⁵ Regards.fr, 14 May 2013.

²⁶ G. Chamayou, *Théorie du drone*, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

²⁷ *Télérama*, 18 May 2013.

John Brennan, then President Obama's Deputy National Security Advisor for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism (now Director of the CIA), stated that drones have an "unprecedented ability... to target a military objective with precision, while minimizing collateral damage". Chamayou calls this a "flagrant sophism" because "the precision of the strike says nothing about the relevance of the targeting. It's like saying that the precision of the guillotine's blade gives the guillotine the capacity to distinguish better between the guilty and the innocent."²⁸ Except that the drone, unlike the guillotine, does produce knowledge; that is its characteristic feature. The guillotine takes no part in identifying the guilty; the drone does. The whole point of the armed drone is precisely to combine the two roles of sensor and effector, which were previously separated, as in the Balkans in the 1990s when the American Predators, which were surveillance-only drones, had to send the information they collected to the command structure, who would then order an airstrike. Today, armed drones, which are simply surveillance drones equipped with missiles, combine these two functions.

Suppose someone buries an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) on a road, as often happens in Afghanistan. If we have an armed drone in the area, it can see this, identify it, and immediately strike it. The IED is thus located and neutralized. If there is no drone, we can't see the IED, its presence is unknown, and when it explodes, there are casualties (not necessarily military personnel). Then we strike those presumed to be responsible, say the nearby village chosen a little randomly (as did the U.S. Marines in Haditha in 2005). In a situation like this, an armed drone saves not just "our" lives, but also "theirs", to use Chamayou's language.

What is the alternative to the drone?

In response to the argument that drones are more precise than the Dresden bombers, Chamayou says "that this is the wrong comparison; the drone's precision has to be weighed against that of other currently available weapons for the *same tactical function*. The correct comparison is not between a current aerial weapon and one from the past, to conclude that there has been some progress, but between this current weapon and other current means of accomplishing the same kind of functions."²⁹

He is absolutely right about that. So what does Chamayou compare to the drone? What alternative should we prefer? He has two answers to this question. *His first answer* is "ground troops", which drones "only very imperfectly" replace.³⁰ He remarks that "to liquidate Bin Laden the choice was between drones and commandos, not between drones and a Dresden-like bombardment of Abbottabad."³¹ But in fact, the choice was between the drone, the commandos, aerial bombardment (by modern bombers, not Dresden-epoch), and the Tomahawk missile. And the decision was commandos, not to minimize collateral damage but in order to gather intelligence (a "treasure trove" of more than 6000 documents recovered from computers, hard drives and USB flash drives), to confirm Bin Laden's identity and death, and to remove his body (so the Bilal house would not become a shrine).

However that may be, it is clearly in the realm of ground operations that Chamayou judges drone strikes, comparing them with the use of hand grenades, concluding that drones are imprecise because the lethal radius of their missiles is 15 to 20 meters, while that of a

²⁸ G. Chamayou, *Théorie du drone*, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 261-262.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

hand grenade is 3 meters.³² Defenders of drones compare them to the Tomahawk missile (which in its standard version has a lethal radius of about 30 meters) or to GBU 12 (laser-guided) bombs (with a blast radius of about 200 meters); from this point of view, drone-fired missiles are much more precise.

So the question is, which comparison is more relevant: the hand grenade in a ground operation, or the missiles and bombs in an airstrike? In other words, what would replace drones if they did not exist, or if we were to stop using them tomorrow? Infantrymen armed with hand grenades? That is not very likely, for reasons that Chamayou himself points to: aversion to losses – not to mention the political dimension and issues of sovereignty. Lacking drones, Americans would not have invaded Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. Instead, they would have fired missiles and dropped bombs, as they did before they had drones. Or they would have waited until the problem called for a larger-scale air campaign. And then it would be not “one drone strike every four days” to complain about,³³ but perhaps 10,484 strikes in 78 days, as over Serbia in 1999 – i.e., more than 134 strikes per day.

So it is pointless to say that the Hellfire missile is less precise than the hand grenade, because the alternative is not the hand grenade. Instead, it can be noted that Hellfire missiles are more precise than their real alternatives, i.e. Tomahawk missiles or bombs dropped from planes.

But let’s play Chamayou’s game: if we did replace the drone by a ground operation, would that really be better for the civilians? Chamayou avoids saying that, and with good reason. On the one hand, this nostalgic of conventional war favours ground actions because they allow Clausewitzian duels ~~expressing~~ **to express** authentic warrior virtues, the ethics “of courage and sacrifice” that drones would corrupt into the ethics of “self-preservation and more or less presumed cowardice”.³⁴ This statement attributes to the drone a transforming role that it does not have (for the drone is a symptom of this older change), and more importantly it equates self-preservation with cowardice. Ah, how much better it was when we died in war! Basically, and quite paradoxically, Chamayou’s model is “the Crusader, a figure who more than any other in European history was enamoured with classical armament and a desire to kill at close range”.³⁵

On the other hand, he has to notice that at least two recent examples that are difficult to ignore – Iraq and Afghanistan – show how much a bad ground strategy can be disastrous for the civilian population. In criticizing Obama’s stealth strategy (the trio of drones, special forces and cyber warfare), he fails to understand that this “smart power” is a reaction against Bush’s “global war” and that its purpose is precisely to move beyond the era of large deployments, which are very harmful both to the occupants (in human, financial and political costs) and to the occupied. This movement away from invasion to sporadic drone strikes reduces the level of violence for everyone.

Chamayou’s second answer to the question of the alternative to drones is very simple: nothing. He argues against the “claim that using drones is justified because there are fewer collateral casualties than there would have been if other weapons had been used instead. But

³² *Ibid.*, p. 200.

³³ *Basta !*, 16 October 2013.

³⁴ *Télérama*, 18 May 2013.

³⁵ Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*, University of California Press, 2000, p. 14.

that assumes that ‘other means’ would certainly have been used, i.e. that military action would have taken place in any case.” That is just what Chamayou questions, recognizing in passing that the other means “would have meant many more” collateral casualties; for that reason, “perhaps they simply could not have been used, because of their reputational prohibitive costs”.³⁶

In other words, the United States uses drones in Pakistan because that is easy and there are relatively few casualties (it’s good to recognize this), but in fact they intervene in the first place precisely for that reason – i.e., without drones, “perhaps” they would simply not have intervened. Perhaps. That belief is very optimistic and historically ignorant.

But let’s play Chamayou’s game again. Let’s accept the hypothesis that without drones there would have been no American intervention. The question that he does not answer is then: would that really have been better for the civilians? In fact, the American actions would not have been replaced by a gaping void, letting terrorism prosper in the region. They would have been replaced by operations that already complement them: actions by Pakistani forces.

For example, from the end of 2008 to the end of 2010, the Pakistan Air Force made more than 5500 sorties and dropped 10,600 bombs on 4600 targets in the northwest tribal areas.³⁷ There were many casualties of these operations. It is even likely that some of the casualties attributed to American drones were in fact casualties of Pakistani aircraft, for village witnesses blaming drones contain some incoherencies (drones do not fly “in pairs sometimes three together”, and they do not make a “loud sound”).³⁸

Moreover, Pakistani forces conduct major ground offensives that cause large population displacements. The Second Battle of Swat (26 April – 15 July 2009) killed nearly 2000 people and displaced 3.4 million.³⁹ There is no evidence that drones have this perverse effect. Amnesty International’s recent report on drone strikes in Pakistan (*Will I Be Next?* October 2013) reports that every week the Pakistan Army uses indiscriminate weapons, firing mortars on villages, dropping unguided bombs on places where combatants and civilians mingle, etc. They even have a specific report on that Army’s abuses: thousands of extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detentions, and torture of men and children.⁴⁰

Drone strikes have to be compared not to nothing, and not to “peace”, but to these imprecise weapons and brutal methods of the Pakistan Army. Obviously peace is preferable to drone strikes, but if they were to stop tomorrow, peace would not descend on Waziristan, insurgents would still mount their attacks (as they had before the appearance of drones), and the Pakistani Taliban would still want to overturn the government; the only difference would be that Pakistani forces would redouble their efforts to conduct more anti-Taliban operations.

What the Amnesty report unintentionally demonstrates is that actually there are far fewer civilian casualties of American drones than of the armed groups that they are fighting against, or of the Pakistan Army which is also conducting operations against those groups. However, by taking the absolutist position of denouncing everyone – the armed groups, the Pakistan Army, and the American drones – Amnesty can express indignation about the

³⁶ G. Chamayou, *Théorie du drone*, *op. cit.*, pp. 260-261.

³⁷ *Flight Daily News*, 13 November 2011.

³⁸ Amnesty International, *Will I be Next?*, October 2013, p. 19, 31.

³⁹ *OneIndia News*, 30 May 2009.

⁴⁰ Amnesty International, *The Hands of Cruelty*, December 2012.

civilian casualties of the drones, without noticing the relationship to the others, because Amnesty's point, like Chamayou's, is simply that *it is wrong*.

Against this attitude – seemingly generous, but in fact supporting a policy that would maximize the misery – I would appeal to Raymond Aron's realistic observation: "politics is never a conflict between good and evil, but always a choice between the preferable and the detestable. It is always so, especially in foreign policy."⁴¹ In the case in hand, this means that one cannot consider two evils equally reprehensible if removing the lesser one means strengthening the greater one: stopping the drone strikes would encourage the Pakistan Army to conduct more operations and to produce many more civilian casualties than are currently produced by American drones.

Are terrorists rabbits?

The Amnesty report argues against the strikes, but even before elaborating the predicament of civilian casualties of drones, it recalls that civilian casualties are produced not just by drones, but also by the armed groups (al-Qaeda and its affiliates, and Afghan and Pakistani Taliban) who are precisely the targets of the drones and the Pakistani armed forces. Amnesty has the honesty not only to put a face on the drones' targets, but also to recognize these groups' responsibility for what are by definition terrorist attacks. They note that these armed groups are responsible for indiscriminate attacks that have "killed and injured thousands of people in Pakistan and Afghanistan over the last decade".⁴² They remind us that these groups target marketplaces, schools and mosques, deliberately to produce a large numbers of civilian casualties. And they report some of the deadly attacks such as the twin suicide terrorist attack on the Peshawar church that killed 81 Christians – men, women and children – and wounded 120 others during a service on 22 September 2013.

In contrast, Chamayou totally ignores the terrorist attacks, making it seem that drones are the only killers in the region. This is the great cleverness of his *Théorie du drone*: by erasing the reasons for drone strikes, he makes them illegitimate in the eyes of readers who no longer understand what the Americans are doing in Pakistan. It is rather sophistical to deplore the consequences without presenting the reasons. Chamayou laments that the means are asymmetrical, without observing that they are a response and that what is being responded to is also asymmetrical. It as if you were to reproach the police for having broken down an apartment door at six in the morning and brutally arrested someone, describing this violence at length but without saying who the person was and why he or she was being arrested. Your purpose is to make the reader outraged at police violence, so the less you explain, the better.

Amnesty recognizes the relationship between drone strikes (for example their sharp increase in 2010) and the real threats to which they are a response (the uncovering of plots to set off bombs in New York and Europe, the planning for which was done by al-Qaeda in North Waziristan). Their report notes that drone strikes inflicted "significant losses" on the Taliban and other armed groups, and eliminated important leaders such as Abu Yahya al-Libi (al-Qaeda) or Wali Ur Rehman Mehsud (Pakistani Taliban).

Chamayou, on the other hand, says nothing about this, so the drone strikes appear to be actions taken for no reason at all, with no connection to any credible threat; we can only

⁴¹ Raymond Aron, *The Committed Observer: Interviews with Jean-Louis Missika and Dominique Wolton*, Regnery Gateway, 1983, p. 246. See J.-B. Jeangène Vilmer, "Pour un réalisme libéral en relations internationales", *Commentaire*, 141, Spring 2013, p. 13-20.

⁴² Amnesty International, *Will I be next?*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

condemn this pointless war making, and we have to assume that only imperialism can explain it – bringing in Lenin to support that assumption: “capitalism becomes imperialistic from the moment when, the national framework having become too restricted, capitalism’s objectives can be attained only by exporting war and by becoming imperialistic.”⁴³

At the same time that this book makes the terrorists disappear from view, it also treats them as victims. As victims of manhunts resembling previous ones, they are implicitly compared with the slaves of antiquity, foreign workers in Paris in 1848, Jews and Gypsies during the Second World War, illegal immigrants of France today, and the “children of the most impoverished” hounded by [former Minister of Immigration] Eric Besson.⁴⁴ Chamayou explicitly constructs a parallel between “hunting down Indians” as discussed by the sixteenth-century Spanish theologian Sepúlveda and “hunting down men in the caves of Afghanistan” as ordered by G.W. Bush.⁴⁵ Comparing the hunt for Osama Bin Laden to the massacre of the aboriginal peoples in America silently exonerates Islamic terrorists of the twenty-first century, by making believe that hunting them down is as arbitrary and unjust as the genocide of “Indians” in the sixteenth century.

Also troubling is the animal metaphor, seeing the state as a hunter that stalks its enemies as prey. Portraying the problem as “a hunter who moves forward and a prey that flees or hides”⁴⁶ effectively assimilates the drone operator to an evil hunter who has killed Bambi’s mother, and arouses in readers hatred of drones and compassion for drone victims. But is this really an accurate portrait? The animal has done nothing to the hunter, who chooses it at random and kills it for either food or entertainment. The target of the drone, who in principle is supposed to be a terrorist, is not chosen at random but precisely because of what he has done, is supposed to have done, or is potentially capable of doing to the hunter, who kills for self-protection. For example, take Mullah Fazlullah, the new Pakistani Taliban leader who had established terror in the Swat Valley before the Pakistani offensive of 2009, and ordered the murder of the young Malala Yousafzai who campaigned for girls’ right to education; to what extent is he “a prey that flees or hides” like a terrified deer trying to escape from a hunter?

Readers are obviously going to be moved by an abstract statement like “enemies are no longer fought against, they are eliminated like rabbits being shot”⁴⁷: poor enemy, poor little rabbit. But what enemy? Nowhere does Chamayou focus on the nature of the enemy, and on the reasons to kill them. If he would just mention that the enemy are not traditional combatants in uniforms and battalions, but part-time civilian bombers, we would better understand why the method we use must be different, and why drone strikes are an asymmetric response to an asymmetric threat.

⁴³ R. Rémond, “Le pacifisme en France au 20^e siècle”, *Autres Temps: Les cahiers du christianisme social*, no. 1, 1984, p. 12-13.

⁴⁴ *Basta!*, “Quand le pouvoir recourt à la chasse à l’homme”, conversation with G. Chamayou, 9 December 2010. See also “D’Aristote à Besson... Petite histoire des chasses à l’homme”, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 6 May 2010.

⁴⁵ *Les Inrocks*, 17 June 2010.

⁴⁶ G. Chamayou, *Théorie du drone*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

Are drones right-wing?

Chamayou emphasizes the contrast between suicide bombers and drone operators: “The contrast is first of all economic, between those who have capital and technology and those who no longer have anything but their bodies to fight with.”⁴⁸ In other words, “‘suicide attacks’ are the weapon of the poor, of those who have only their bodies; drones are the weapon of the rich, those who have technology and capital.”⁴⁹ That is a simplistic contrast: the Japanese suicide bombers (*kamikaze*) during the Second World War were not particularly poor, and they did not have “only their bodies” to fight with; they had Mitsubishi Zero fighter bombers carrying 250-kilogram bombs. Today, Islamic terrorism is not poor either (just consider the Bin Laden financial empire that fed al Qaeda for so many years). And the drone is being popularized: it is already not confined to the rich, and it will be less and less so.

There is a reason why Chamayou depicts the targets of drone strikes as innocent victims, “prey” as much as any hunted animal, and as the “poor” who have “only their bodies” to fight with (thus justifying attacks by suicide bombers, or at least showing understanding if not complacency about them). It is the same reason why in reading *Théorie du drone* one gets the vague impression that its author has a certain admiration for Islamic suicide bombers who are “ready to die in their struggle” and who demonstrate “contempt for death” that it would be wrong to consider as “contempt for life”.⁵⁰ The reason is his political bias: he considers those that the West calls terrorists as freedom fighters, resisters to American (i.e. capitalistic) oppression. *Théorie du drone* has to be read like a continuation of Emile Pouget’s *Sabotage*, for which Chamayou has in fact written notes and an afterword; in 1911 or 1912 Pouget drew an explicit parallel between war properly speaking and the social war.⁵¹

To prove that drones are definitely not left-wing, Chamayou – a past master in what Schopenhauer called “the art of producing the appearance of truth” – this time uses ploy 32: “If you are confronted with an assertion, there is a short way of getting rid of it, or, at any rate, of throwing suspicion on it, by putting it into some odious category; even though the connection is only apparent, or else of a loose character.”⁵² Thus he multiplies the parallels between drones and “marketing based on the analysis of data”⁵³, Amazon, and the automation of financial systems – but also “the recent NSA scandal” (which “creates the image of a bourgeoisie that no longer has either the capacity or the will to defend the historical achievements of the modern rule of law”⁵⁴), cluster bombs, and even torture.

Regretting that there was no reaction to the French purchase of (unarmed) American Reaper drones, Chamayou exclaims: “If a Defence Minister had announced the intention of importing CIA torture techniques, that would have caused an uproar!”⁵⁵ Chamayou writes as if, in the first place, importing the means necessarily implies importing the way of using it. This implication is logically absurd: importing American cars does not imply that their owners will follow American driving regulations, any more than importing American

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁴⁹ Regards.fr, 14 May 2013.

⁵⁰ G. Chamayou, *Théorie du drone*, *op. cit.*, p. 126-127.

⁵¹ E. Pouget, *Le Sabotage*, Paris, Mille et une nuits, 2004, chap. IV.

⁵² Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Art of Being Right*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁵³ *Les Inrocks*, 25 May 2013.

⁵⁴ *Basta !*, 16 October 2013.

⁵⁵ *Libération*, 19 May 2013.

pharmaceuticals entails importing the American health care system. The implication is also empirically unsound: the Italians have Reapers that remain unarmed, and the fact that the British have armed Reapers has not led them to adopt the American strategy of targeted killings. In the second place, Chamayou's exclamation also assumes that using armed drones is comparable to using torture, whereas in fact the former, unlike the latter, is not intrinsically wrong; this is recognized by Amnesty: "some US drone strikes may not violate human rights or international humanitarian law".⁵⁶

Therefore, contrary to Chamayou's view, the fact that the news of the purchase of Reapers did not set off a scandal in France did not show that "French public opinion is badly informed about the drones issue".⁵⁷ It showed that the French public sees the difference between buying unarmed drones and using them as the Americans do, and does not see here any relationship with importing torture.

Since Chamayou takes an interest in drones only in order to condemn American imperialism, his approach is relevant only in a world in which the Americans are the only ones to have armed drones – which is no longer the case. He is aware that the Israelis and the British also have them, but that poses no problem for his theory, since they are vassals of the American Empire, so he can still describe the drone as the imperial weapon of big money. But drones are proliferating and actually becoming quite popular; today, 87 countries have them, a dozen are very interested in armed drones, and, to say the least, not all of these countries can be classified as liberal capitalistic regimes.

As pointed out in *Le Monde*, Chamayou's "grand philosophical discussions about the choice of weapons do not take up a lot of space in the intellectual scene in a country like Iran, for example, whose surveillance drones assist Bashar Al Assad's regime, which is also supported by the mighty Russia. On that front, is the drone (in the author's words) 'a coward's weapon' used by imperial and 'postcolonial' powers? That is doubtful."⁵⁸ In fact, Chamayou says nothing about the Iranian drones that Tehran supplies to the Syrian regime and to Hezbollah, and which will one day or other carry non-conventional warheads over Israel.

Neither does he say anything about China's drones, the production of which is increasing exponentially. Beijing does not seem to exclude the possibility of their carrying nuclear warheads (which is rather implied by their being deployed with the Second Artillery Corps), and might adopt a policy of targeted killings either internally (Tibet, Xinjiang) or in its sphere of influence. The Chinese copy of the Reaper (Wing Loong), which is armable, costs between 12 and 30 times less than the original (1 million dollars), and is already being exported to Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan, and other countries – Kenya, Myanmar, and Russia – are also likely buyers.

Nor does Chamayou talk about the Venezuelan surveillance drone, a product of Sino-Russo-Iranian collaboration. And he says nothing about the fact that Pakistan, which he discusses only as a victim of American drone strikes, is so persuaded by the efficiency of drones that it asked the United States to sell them some, and when that request was denied, Pakistan then turned to China, which helped Pakistan develop its own program. Who says that drones are really a capitalist and postcolonial weapon?

⁵⁶ Amnesty International, *Will I Be Next?*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁵⁷ *Les Inrocks*, 25 May 2013.

⁵⁸ J. Birnbaum in *Le Monde*, 19 June 2013.

Chamayou does. He likens drone strikes to colonial massacres, in which “natives were killed in masses while the armies of white men were hardly scratched.”⁵⁹ He is convinced that “the drone is the weapon of postcolonial violence”⁶⁰ – from which is deduced that its victims are as innocent as were those natives whose land and wealth the whites wanted to grab a century ago. Showing that “the ‘desire to eliminate the enemy from a safe distance’ has never been better satisfied than in glorious episodes in colonial wars,”⁶¹ he chooses his period well.

In fact this matter is much simpler. As animals, human beings have an instinct for self-preservation, and as tool-making animals (in Benjamin Franklin’s expression) they have always used their ingenuity to protect themselves while killing others, i.e. “to eliminate the enemy from a safe distance”, with javelins, catapults, bows and arrows, firearms, artillery, submarines, airplanes, missiles, and today with drones and computers. This behaviour is universal. It is clear that during a certain period it served colonization, but the fact that Chamayou chooses this period rather than another reveals again his political bias.

Chamayou is scandalized by the Reaper drone slogan, “That others may die” (which he uses as a chapter title [II.2]). Does he sincerely believe that when Iran, China, Russia and Pakistan have squadrons of armed drones, their slogan will be something like “Let us die as much as the others”?

Books&Ideas.net, 6 November 2014. Translated from the French by John Zvesper with the support of the Florence Gould Foundation.

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First published in French on laviedesidees.fr, 4 December 2013.

⁵⁹ G. Chamayou, *Théorie du drone*, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 134.