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Grégoire Chamayou, *A Theory of the Drone*, translated by Janet Lloyd, The New Press: New York, 2015; 9781595589750, \$26.95 (hbk)

"The police is a hunting institution," Grégoire Chamayou contends in his history of the manhunt (2012: 89). Entrusted by the state with tracking and capturing those who violate its laws, the police adopt rational, scientific practices for pursuing their quarry, even as they cannot entirely escape their association with the criminals they aim to understand. In his latest book, Chamayou argues that the global war on terror has given rise to a novel form of state violence, one that marries police tactics with those of the military to stage a manhunt that knows no borders and that prefers killing to capture. For Chamayou, this unholy marriage flouts the existing law of war and obscures the political roots of conflict by imposing a logic of criminality. "Within the categories of policing," he writes, "political analysis dissolves" (p. 69).

Scholars like Mark Neocleous (2014: 587) have questioned the novelty of this conjuncture, tracing the use of military technologies back to their use in colonial policing and arguing for "a critical theory of state power that assumes that war and police are always already together." But in *Theory of the Drone*, Chamayou offers a materialist analysis of the unmanned aircraft as the technology that makes the militarized manhunt possible. By turning piloting into shiftwork, he argues, drones afford the possibility of persistent aerial surveillance which, when fused with other sources of data, can create an archive of movements or establish a generalized pattern of life. Once armed, drones can target individuals with what their advocates insist is a high degree of precision, reducing collateral damage. Chamayou proposes to make a method of reading the aims of drone warfare from the design of the systems used to carry it out, although

scholars of science and technology studies may find him somewhat incurious when he asserts, programmatically: “What is important is not so much to grasp how the actual device works but rather to discover the implications of how it works for the action that it implements” (p. 15).

Instead, I suggest, *Theory of the Drone* should be read as a contribution to exchange theory. Chamayou’s fundamental objection to the use of drones for targeted killing is “the elimination, already rampant but here absolutely radicalized, of any immediate relation of reciprocity” (p. 14). By making it possible to kill without putting one’s own life at risk, drones mark a breakdown in circuits of exchange that, for Chamayou, are bound up with both soldierly courage and democratic accountability. To withhold the gift of the soldier’s body is, on the one hand, to replace combat with slaughter and, on the other, to remove a constraint on war-waging sovereignty in the form of a citizenry whose lives might be exposed. *Theory of the Drone* hits hard when it underscores the hypocrisy of protecting some lives by removing them from the battlefield, while rendering others killable with impunity (see also Suchman, 2015). But Chamayou’s apparent disdain for drone pilots—he dismisses reports of telemediated trauma as “the crocodile shedding tears, the better to devour its prey” (p. 108)—leaves their motivations unexamined and opens the door, in turn, to ethnographic insight.

During my fieldwork with unmanned pilots at the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) National Air Security Operations Center in Grand Forks, North Dakota, I learned that pilots were far from confident in their own invulnerability. “I never want to be photographed in this building,” an agent named Wes explained to me. A former Army helicopter pilot, Wes did not wear the brown flight suits issued to agents in CBP’s Office of Air and Marine, not because the fire-retardant uniform seemed out of place in a ground control station, but because his last

name was stitched on the nametag above his breast. “There are a lot of people who don’t like us,” he went on. “The majority of us, we’re privacy advocates, we’re advocating for the Fourth Amendment. People say, you’re one of them. And I’m thinking: ‘I work for them, but I’m with you.’” Of course, the vulnerability that Wes experiences in the controlled environment of his workplace is categorically different from that of, say, the border crosser whose movements across the desert Wes detects from the air and who soon finds himself in the custody of the Border Patrol. Yet what has stuck with me from this interaction is the image of the unworn flight suit, hanging in a locker: it speaks to the fact that unmanned pilots, even when they are far from the front lines, are hardly those “for whom death is impossible” (p. 84).

Chamayou acknowledges that not all unmanned aircraft are armed, but *Theory of the Drone* focuses on platforms like the MQ-9 Reaper, whose silhouette graces the book’s cover and whose history, Chamayou writes, is that of “an eye turned into a weapon” (p. 11). CBP uses an unarmed variant of the MQ-9 to conduct border surveillance and drug interdiction missions, a fact that would come as no surprise to Chamayou. “We should not forget,” he warns, “that when this new weapon becomes a piece of equipment for not only the military forces but also the state’s police forces, it turns us into potential targets” (pp. 202–203). Anthropologists are sometimes too quick to assume that weapons of war inevitably come home to roost, reaching for militarization as a readymade explanation instead of charting local effects and assemblages. Yet Chamayou’s warning rang true in 2015, when a bill in the North Dakota legislature intended to require a warrant for drone-based police surveillance was amended at the behest of law enforcement lobbyists to authorize the use of nonlethal weapons. The fact that no Tasers or riot guns are buzzing around the skies of North Dakota yet somehow fails to reassure.

As a theoretical intervention, Chamayou's latest book is inseparable from its normative claims about reciprocity. Yet a small issue of translation indexes another unresolved tension in his work. In the original French, Chamayou (2013: 26) charges armed drones with the elimination of "*tout rapport de réciprocité*." It is telling that Janet Lloyd translates this phrase as "any immediate relation of reciprocity." The language of immediacy is Lloyd's, and yet it aptly diagnoses an opposition in Chamayou's thought between mediation and reciprocity. In *Manhunts*, he condemns slaveowners for using intermediaries, whether mercenaries or hunting dogs, to capture fugitive slaves: "This is a schema with three terms rather than two" (Chamayou 2012: 67). In the end, it is the presence of this third term, of a medium for violence, that discomfits Chamayou most about drones. "One is never spattered," he writes at one point, "by the adversary's blood" (pp. 117–118). In his mistrust of mediation, Chamayou is in good company as part of a theoretical tradition that Alexander Galloway (2014) has glossed as iridescent. But to critique drone warfare on this basis risks making a fetish of copresence, as if all that was needed to resolve the problem of state violence was to shut down the servers and to stare each other in the face.

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