

**A Predatory Empire of Surveillance and Control**

Tobias Burgers

**Review of: Ian G. R. Shaw (2016) *Predator Empire: Drone Warfare and Full Spectrum Dominance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 327 pp.**

The Predator UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle), or as it is more popularly known, the Predator drone, has become something of an iconic image in the recent decade. It has become the manifestation of the new way of warfare, which started in full with the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Now a decade-and-a-half later the Predator is still flying, the GWOT has changed in nothing but name, and the practice of targeted killing – something with which the Predator is most closely associated with – has become an accepted norm in the field of international security relations. It comes therefore as no surprise that in the recent years a number of books on drone warfare have been published. Among others, books such as P.W. Singer's *Wired for War* (2009), William Arkin's *Unmanned: Drones, Data, and the Illusion of Perfect Warfare* (2015), *Drone Warfare* by John Kaag and Sarah Kreps (2014), and Medaa Benjamin's *Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control* (2013), have in great detail discussed, explained, and elaborated upon the rise of the drones, the notion of “clean” warfare and how the future of conflict could become even more unmanned and robotic. Worthy and needed as these books are, they focus,

however, primarily on the military application of drones. In this regard, Ian Shaw's *Predator Empire: Drone Warfare and Full Spectrum Dominance*, offers a refreshing and much needed alternative point of view on the world of the Predators, and other unmanned systems. Rather than viewing his research from a singular, military angle, Shaw, a social geographer currently at the University of Glasgow, takes the Predator as an example of a larger issue – one that is fueled by, and is a constituent of, the rise of robotics. In his book, Shaw seeks to answer the question of what it does mean to live on a planet that is enclosing its populations inside controlled, artificial, and dronified environments (Shaw 3). In this, Shaw illustrates how the rise of the drones is further contributing to the ever-increasing state of surveillance, of over-watch of our societies and a world of dronified state violence. A system of full spectrum dominance – once more Shaw borrows from the military realm here, where the concept of full spectrum dominance has been long established – enables the control of every physical (land, sea, air and space) and non-physical (e.g. cyber) space. Shaw argues that this will lead to the development of a world that is increasingly, digitally and physically, enclosed. A world of a “single immunity configuration”, one that is controlled by new technologies, enabling a pacification of societies, and to quell unrest, resistance, and objection before it becomes apparent (Shaw 256-257). Of particular importance, and worthwhile reading, is his description of how over the years humans have reacted, and to some extent even adapted to, this ever-increasing securitization of public space. In this, he offers a much-needed critique of how, in the last decades, the notion of what consists of public space has radically changed, arguing that contemporary public spaces have morphed into spaces of oversight, surveillance, and control that have become the norm.

Shaw illustrates that this development has not been novel and recent. He goes as far back as a few centuries, arguing that this desire for surveillance, policing and control is nothing new under the sun: he traces the roots of this current drone empire back to the societal developments in England during the Industrial Revolution, where the first precedents for building the security state were established. The analogy and reference to this period is a highly interesting one. It allows Shaw to illustrate how the foundations for this Predator Empire have been

long in the making, eventually materializing more comprehensively with the start of the Vietnam War. From this era on, Shaw describes how a state of affairs gradually emerged in which the full-spectrum-dominance concept allowed the US to militarize much of the world, and to bring it under a state of surveillance enabled by technology. In this, Shaw illustrates how this mechanization of society, with an increasing presence of machines and a growing reliance on them, has changed not only the physical spaces but likewise political spaces too. In particular, the limited need for boots on the ground – the result of the increasing presence of Predator machines – has changed the political discourse, enabling what Shaw describes as global surveillance operation. This too has morphed, in the words of Shaw, into a state of extreme dominance by the US national security apparatus, fuelled by the unprecedentedly new levels of surveillance technology, enabling a formation of spaces in which every person is continuously watched over by machines of non-loving grace. With his work Shaw makes a clear rebuttal of the optimism found among the 1960 and 1970 cyberneticists, who believed technology would enable a better world in which we are all watched over by machines of loving grace, to reference Richard Bautigon's poem.

Primarily, what makes this book worthwhile reading is that it allows the reader not only to connect the era of drone warfare to war and conflict, but also creates a greater understanding of how this affects societies at large. He tracks the history of drone warfare, and the extent to which the rise of these machines has been a logical development from within societies, connecting the military realm with political, social, ethical and moral ones. Thereby it becomes clear how the emergence of drones is a logical extension of the ever-increasing growth of the national security establishment – foremost in the post 9/11 world. In this, he offers a much needed critique of, in the author's opinion, the growing militarization and securitization in the United States, which in the light of the recent election victory of Donald Trump, and his strong focus on security and anti-terrorism, seems even more likely.

Despite being an insightful and much needed book, Shaw's focus on the US is a shortcoming however. The Predator has become a new icon, a symbol of the new way of war. A way of war in which an increasing dehumanization is taking place,

in which the battlefield is becoming a remote place, leading to a growing disconnection between the state of conflict and the public's perception of it. However, although indeed this development largely originated in the United States, in recent years the Predator has been getting competition. The Chinese Ch-4 and Ch-5 drones, for example, are now among the world's most exported drones, with nations in the Middle East and Africa eager to obtain them and use them for their own purposes. In this, the realm of the Predator is somewhat declining, slowly but gradually being replaced by a Drone Empire of many nations and of many actors (state and non-state). The full spectrum dominance is now becoming a global full spectrum dominance. This is a topic of increasing importance, and one that should be discussed much further.

The book is a worthwhile read both for readers with an academic background and those with a broader interest in contemporary political, social and ethical affairs. It provides much-needed clarification of the development of Predator drones and other unmanned systems that emerged so rapidly in the last fifteen years. Additionally, the book contributes to a much broader discussion about the future direction of society: which roles machines will play in this, and how will future governments – in particular the US government – use, or not use, machines such as the Predator, and for what political purposes? Anyone interested in questions such as these would be more than advised to read Shaw's book.

## Biography

### Tobias Burgers

Tobias Burgers is currently a Doctoral Candidate at the Otto Suhr Institute, Free University Berlin, from which he holds a diploma in political science. His research interests include the impact of cyber and robotic technology on security dynamics, East-Asian security relations, maritime security and the future of conflict. Email: [burgers@zedat.fu-berlin.de](mailto:burgers@zedat.fu-berlin.de)

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