Droning on: the rise of the machines

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Five activists have been sentenced for their role in a protest against U.S. drone attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan at a New York military base last year. The activists were arrested at the New York Air National Guard base at Hancock Field near Syracuse, New York. They draped themselves in white clothes splattered with blood-red pigment and then staged a “die-in” at the main entrance to the base. The group calls themselves the Hancock 38 Drone Resisters. Thirty-three of the activists were sentenced in December. On Wednesday, the remaining five were sentenced to fines and a one-year conditional discharge¹

Mike Davis once referred to the car bomb as the “quotidian workhorse of urban terrorism” (Davis 2007). The point seems quaint these days. In the interceding half decade or so, the car bomb has changed sides, enlisted in the Air Force, and grown wings (think of the money we save on parking). We refer, of course, to the drone—that piece of solitary, guiltless, menacing, and wonderfully affordable machinery that is enabling police actions all over the oily parts of the globe. Part sterile male bee, part Robocop, part national security IUD, part engine of the San Diego economy, this amazing new toy of national diplomacy has the ability to camouflage itself even on the front page of the New York Times. Its opposite is not so lucky. Locally, the quotidian workhorse has been replace by the drone’s eerie doppelgänger: the teenager (or out of work father of three, or God help us, brainwashed undergraduate woman—do these terrorists know no shame?) in the size C-4 vest and two D batteries, the hand-to-hand version of the surgical strike that haunts police recruiting stations and military

¹ <http://www.democracynow.org/2012/3/1/headlines#13>, accessed March 1, 2012.

checkpoints in many of these same places. It is man (!) against machine, it seems, with the symmetries all but lost on the nightly newscasters.

In an essay written four decades ago, the founder of this journal, Stanley Diamond, noted that primitive warfare was more human and humane compared to civilized warfare—which had increasingly become “an abstract, ideological compulsion” (1974:156). Indeed, Diamond went on to point out that the previous modern killing machine—the mass-produced soldier—was already facing obsolescence, being replaced by automated machines that made killing from a “distance” all the more readily palatable and tolerable as the “enemy” faded further and further from view and into the ether. Diamond was a bit off, though. Anonymous killing? That is so twentieth century, with its B52s, atomic weapons and “carpet bombing sorties”. Today’s drones carry cameras and we get to watch them zero in at actual speed. Far from faceless, drone “casualties” are screen idols broadcast over and over again for CNN rubberneckers on the information superhighway. Perhaps, Don DeLillo was correct when he argued that the terrorist has replaced the novelist as the key author in narrating difference in the modern world (DeLillo 1991)—but the empire strikes back after all and the cool mechanical breathing of the drone shows us (on TV even) who gets the last laugh.

As the number of deaths attributed to drones—be they civilian or “militant” ratchet up, ever more uses are being thought up for this new monster in our midst and ever more sophisticated designs being generated (at least 50 universities in the United States alone are involved in Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Research). And, while this certainly gladdens the CEOs and stockholders of Northrop Grumman and General Atomics, the growing presence of drones abroad and here in the United States should certainly give anthropologists pause. So in the spirit of Diamond’s exhortation, we ask: What would an anthropology of the drone look like?

For starters, we know from varied reliable sources that the use of UAVs has increased dramatically since Barack Obama took office, with Somalia a new member of the target-country club. At the level of policy, it seems that *The Economist* is correct in suggesting that drone strikes represent a convenient substitute, by this president, for messy and embarrassing detentions without trial in the US Army Guantanamo Bay prison camp. At least this is what all the major news sources are saying, from *Reuters* to *Foreign Policy Magazine*. As an example of some of this discussion, Thomas E. Ricks blogs for *Foreign Policy* that:

back in the old days, air strikes were considered an act of war. But the Obama Administration sez no – and here I am beginning to change my mind. Maybe they are onto something. The drone strikes being conducted in those three countries [Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen] are not being done to challenge those states, but to supplement the power of those states, to act when they cannot or will not. More importantly, these are precise strikes against certain individuals, making them more like police work than like classic military action. Police work involves small arms used precisely. Drones aren’t pistols, but firing one Hellfire at a Land Rover is more like a police action than it is like a large-scale military offensive with artillery barrages, armored columns, and infantry assaults (Ricks 2011).

So this is it, police work. We are guessing that Ricks would not say the same thing about suicide bombing, and perhaps he is right. As he points out, drone strikes are usually meant to prop up the same sycophant-states that suicide bombers are trying to bring down. And, now that the US congress has pretty much given the green light for the use of drones in US civilian airspace by 2015, we for purposes (we are told, of “crowd surveillance” or “aiding fire-fighters”) we can expect our share of propping here as well. It is probably unlikely that we will see any predators, avengers, reapers, ravens, or barracudas raining Hellfire (rockets) down on Philadelphia at any time soon, but one never knows what police action might require. Better, says Congress, keep our options open.

Much of the discussion of drones thus far has centered on the questions of sovereignty, rather than death, which seems in keeping with the aura of in-humanity for which the drone itself is known—and human-less statecraft (I believe they call it rationality) has a long history in the social sciences. But this sounds a bit more like the state looking in the mirror and asking who is the fairest of them all than anything very anthropological. This, we suppose, is the reason for the die-in at Hancock Field in upstate New York—for people to say that we are not buying...that at the other end of those camera images are people. So while we can leave the international law and diplomacy questions to greater minds studying bigger phenomena, for us anthropologists it is “everyday people” that count.

At the level of ethnographic inquiry, we might want to know, what is the impact of drone strikes on everyday life in a target-country? How do people narrate these attacks? Is it the same or different from the way they talk about suicide bombings in these same places—and if not, what does that teach us about the place of state power in all this? Does the extraterritorial violation of sovereign nations really cause anger and anti-Americanism, xenophobia, religious fundamentalism, and radicalization of belief? Or are these really people without a lot to do because the global marketplace has passed them by (an ironic question for suppliers of the smack of the current economy)? Does this anti-Americanism add up to more terrorism as liberals fear, or is this just a stand-in for anti-capitalism? Is there a class component? Are the aspirant national petty bourgeois elites the ones who respond most hatefully to drones? Is it the manual laboring working class? Who is the peasantry listening to and why? How do legitimate, illegitimate, underground and aboveground leaders organize differently around this issue?

Does the fear that a missile could burst from the sky and take out your taxi cab lead individuals and communities to the leaderless political passivity that the Obama administration hopes for or are there always other taxi cabs with other angry men? What impact do these attacks have on governance? This claim that the strikes may actually improve governance is the basis of the assertion by Ricks and other policy pundits that this is not war. Is this true, do drones aid more and destabilize less than imperial advisors in foreign military fatigues.

Do these drone strikes deter because of the incredible impunity they give to distant terrorcrats in Washington, Canberra, Ottawa, and Tel Aviv or do they fail to deter because of their unpredictable seemingly random lottery-like sudden appearance from above? Perhaps, old fashioned “wet-work” with its predatory agents wearing Rolex watches and getting closer and closer to a target has more of a

deterrence, due to its more personal and human quality. Does the personal touch of a Mossad calling card left on hotel security videos in the United Arab Emirates make all the difference in deterrence? It may even be the case that the randomness has democratized “the enemy” and made them spread the leadership farther and wider from the queen bee to all the worker bees. This would certainly have important political implications.

What impact does the drone have on gender relations? While this might seem sarcastic (as perhaps this entire essay does) it is something that must honestly be interrogated, because the big political events of the day impact men and women in different ways. Surely, the condition of targeticity is experienced and narrated differently by men and women. And in veering somewhat into the realm of psychology, are there community traumas that develop from such drone-justice coming from above that have a special impact on children? If there are, how are these terrors and contradictions woven into social narratives that reinforce and reassert daily life? Surely, some student of Weberian webs of significance should tell us how different cultures construct the drone. Is there, for instance, a “cultural intimacy” of the drone, where individuals assert a shared connection by joking about having their tuk-tuk incinerated by a predator? Is “suffering” that results from a drone attack different from that of a missile or IED? Is this a “suffering” that can be spoken about or is this one more call to talk about “silences”?

It is easy to get tongue in cheek about all this, but Obama is reconfiguring war, peace, and global governance with his policy of widespread political assassination by drone. He is creating a global police force that he may not be able to control that answers to no courts, no civilian review boards, and no civil society, while creating new and disturbing lived experiences and mythologies across the planet. We may start with sarcasm, but it behooves us to finish with ethnography. Whether it turns out, as so many policy wonks say, that drone strikes are police work or as so many radicals are saying, undeclared war, either way we would observe that these questions are easy for anthropologists to miss. We wish it were not so.

Jim Petras told us last year, in this journal, that anthropologists should never work for the empire. However, some of these questions might be very fundable, as part of a national security agenda in any of the launcher countries. It is true that they might help the empire figure out what it is doing, why and how better to do it, but there is nothing ghoulish about studying the impact of capitalist brutality on everyday life and nothing untoward about studying new forms of “justice” and “governance” no matter how vicious and unfair they are. It is not like we are calling for anthropologists to go out there and unreflectively study the comparative efficacy of using targeted bombing (Libya, Serbia, and Gaza) to soften up a community’s support for its leaders versus carpet bombing (Vietnam, Korea, Japan, Germany, Iraq, etc.). It is our contention that such applied work might also, by taking these new policies seriously, help those who seek a better world to more fully understand what is really going on, what experiences, and concerns varied peoples across the planet share in relation to this new form of warfare, and how to dismantle this monster. Any takers out there?

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