

# Beyond Agent vs. Instrument: The Neo-Coloniality of Drones in Contemporary Warfare

Written by Niklas Balbon

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NIKLAS BALBON, AUG 3 2022

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of December 2021, a new coalition government in Germany took office that contractually agreed on equipping the German military with armed drones (Koalitionsvertrag 2021: 149). To people familiar with drone programs of countries like the US, this might not seem like a newsworthy decision. However, given the year-long—and in part bitterly held—debate around the acquisition of armed drones in Germany (Franke 2021), it underscores an important point: armed drones are a highly contested technology. In fact, evaluations of drones range all the way from the most humane and accurate mode of warfare (Strawser 2012) to “inherently colonialist technologies” (Gusterson 2016: 149). While far away from unanimity, there has been a recent shift in scholarship on drones, which increasingly investigates its ties to neo-colonialism (Shaw 2016; Gusterson 2016; Parks 2016; Vasko 2013; Akther 2019; Espinoza 2018). However, literature on the coloniality of drones remains unspecific on the question of whether drones should be seen as a tool or as a driver of neo-colonialism. For instance, Akther identifies drones as “the latest technological manifestation of a much older logic of state power” (Akther 2019: 69), which implies an instrumentalist view. In contrast, other scholars argue that the development of drones has influenced our understanding of what constitutes legitimate warfare (McDonald 2017: 21), thus offering a substantivist view on technology. These diverging claims raise a fundamental question about the relationship between military technology and neo-colonialism: can military technology be seen as more than a mere tool to achieve neo-colonial ambitions?

To answer this question, I conduct a case study on drone technology, which has been discussed as an instance of the intersection of neo-colonialism and technology. The case study design is fruitful because it allows for a high degree of detail and contextualization (Gerring 2007: 103) while granting the possibility to test the theories (Muno 2009: 119) of instrumentalism and substantivism. As I will show, neo-colonial theory presupposes an instrumental character of the means through which colonial relationships are being maintained. Accordingly, drones can be seen as instruments of neo-colonialism, as they give the Global North new means to assert necropower, (re)create peripheries of insecurity and engage in social policing and ordering. However, the potential for instrumentalization of drones should not overshadow their own transformative character. As I will show, the development of drones has led to a discourse around unilateral, precise, and surgical drone warfare, which changed perceptions, policies, and interpretations of law on what constitutes legitimate warfare and intervention. Therefore, I argue that we should conceptualize drones both as instruments as well as drivers of neo-colonialism, thus challenging the dichotomy of instrumentalist and substantivist views on the nexus of neo-colonialism and technology.[1]

To make this case, I will start by reflecting upon the theoretical foundations of this essay (neo-colonialism, instrumentalism, substantivism, and agency) and by showcasing that neo-colonial theory implies an instrumental understanding of technology. This will be followed by investigating how drones can be used for neo-colonial purposes. Finally, I will illustrate the transformative character of drones and discuss its implications for our understanding of the relationship between technology and neo-colonialism.

### The Continuation of Colonialism by Other Means

In 1965, Kwame Nkrumah introduced the concept of neo-colonialism as “imperialism in its final and perhaps most dangerous stage” (Nkrumah 1965: 1). For Nkrumah, colonial relationships between states did not end with the formal

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process of decolonization. Instead, a post-colonial state is “in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside” (Nkrumah 1965: 1). Accordingly, the transition from formal colonization to neo-colonialism only changes the means through which colonial power relations are maintained, but it did not end colonial aspirations of the Global North *per se* (Rahman et al. 2017: 9f.). In Nkrumah’s work, neo-colonial means are foremost of economic nature (Nkrumah 1965: 239ff.). In this tradition, scholars have pointed out a multitude of mechanisms through which the global north exerts influence on economic decision-making of post-colonial countries (Chang 2002; Stiglitz 2003). However, neo-colonial scholarship has also considered other means, including those of cultural, political, and militaristic nature (Uzoigwe 2019: 66). This is important to recognize as there is no *a priori* justification to focus the study of colonial continuities solely on economic mechanisms. Neo-colonialism can thus be understood as a regime of interconnected economic, political, and cultural mechanisms, through which colonial power relations are (re)constructed in a (formally) post-colonial age. Or to put it in Clausewitzian words: neo-colonialism is the continuation of colonialism by other means.

This understanding of neo-colonialism implies an instrumentalist view of the means through which (neo)colonial power relations are maintained. It assigns agency to the colonizing subjects while reducing the mechanisms through which colonial power is exerted to mere tools, thus offering a distinction between colonial aspirations and colonial capabilities. When looking at the intersection of neo-colonialism and military technology, the instrumentalist character of neo-colonial theory corresponds with instrumentalist views on the relationship between war and technology. Instrumentalist theory conceptualizes technology as a neutral tool, which can be used by actors to achieve a variety of ends (Bourne 2012: 142). This principle can be illustrated by the National Rifle Association in the United States, which argues that it is not the gun that harms people, but the person using the gun (Jones 1999: 70). In instrumentalist theory, technology is understood as “subservient to values established in other spheres i.e. politics and culture” (Jones 1999: 70), which means that technology as such is not involved in the construction of social norms on the use of violence. Rather, the use of technology is determined by socially constructed norms (Bourne 2012: 143). Despite their resonance in the literature (Jones 1999: 70), instrumentalist accounts of the relationship between war and technology do not remain uncontested. As hinted at in the introduction, they are challenged by substantivists (also known as deterministic) understandings of technology (Bourne 2012: 143). Substantivist approaches identify technology as a driving force of social change and thus war (Jones 1999: 108). Accordingly, substantivist theory understands technology as more than just a mere tool and attributes technology with agency (Bourne 2012: 143).

As agency is a very contested term in the social sciences and in philosophy, it is worth taking a closer look at what the concept means. Understandings of individual agency range all the way from voluntarism, which sees society as the mere sum of decisions of autonomous individuals, granting them full agency; to determinism, which sees individual decision-making as solely determined by societal structures and norms, thus neglecting individual agency (Sibeon 1999: 139). Embarking from a social-constructivist perspective, I join deterministic theories in acknowledging the importance of social norms and structures in influencing the decision-making of individuals (March/Olsen 2004: 3; Dahrendorf 1965: 45f.). Nevertheless, we should not fall into a deterministic trap, thinking that this denies individuals any form of self-determined decision-making or agency (Weissmann 2020: 47). Additionally, as structures and norms are social constructs, individuals also possess agency in their (re)construction (Hess et al. 2018: 253). Therefore, I reject both a strictly voluntaristic as well as a deterministic view on agency. The identification of agency is further complicated by the question of whether material objects can possess agency, as for instance argued by Latour (2005), or if agency is exclusive to humans. Based on the understanding of agency introduced above, it is possible to conclude that the ability to make autonomous decisions should not be seen as a necessary condition for agency. Instead, it can be argued that by influencing the construction of social norms, even material objects can possess agency.

The understanding of agency introduced above corresponds with both instrumentalist and substantivist theories. From an instrumentalist perspective, it is possible to argue that agency lies exclusively with humans because they construct norms about the instrumentalization of technology. A substantivist perspective challenges this assumption by arguing that technology determines the construction of social norms and therefore deserves to be attributed with agency. In the following, I will examine both assumptions by looking at the nexus of neo-colonialism and drone

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technology.

## New Methods for Old Games? Neo-Colonialism and Drone Technology

As argued above, the concept of neo-colonialism implies an instrumentalist interpretation of the means through which neo-colonial power relations are maintained (e.g. technology). Indeed, the literature on drone technology[2] offers accounts that support this claim. For instance, there is a growing amount of literature that ties drone technology to neo-colonial forms of necropolitics (Allinson 2015; Espinoza 2018; Qurratulain/Raza 2021; Wilcox 2017). Deriving from Foucault's notion of biopolitics (Foucault 1976), Mbembe developed the concept of necropolitics to problematize how (colonial) states subordinate the lives of people they deem worthy to die, to people they deem worthy to live (Mbembe 2003). Accordingly, the "ultimate expression of sovereignty resides (...) in the power to dictate who may live and who may die" (Mbembe 2003: 11). Necropolitics are a decisive characteristic of colonial rule (Mbembe 2003: 18), which for example could be observed in the province of Punjab in colonial India, where the British colonizers terrorized and killed parts of the population to protect themselves and their colonial rule (Condos 2017). In Punjab, the British established a practice of 'cannonading', during which Indian rebels and individuals suspected of undermining the British colonial state were placed in front of a cannon and brutally killed (Condos 2017: 158).

However, as the example of drone technology shows, necropolitics is not exclusive to the age of formal colonization but can still be observed as tools of neo-colonialism today (Vasko 2013: 86). Espinoza argues that within the 'global war on terror', drones are used to identify and attack people that are deemed dangerous and thus subordinate to the national security of the west (Espinoza 2018: 383). Beyond targeted killings, this logic of protection is taken even further by so-called 'signature strikes'—a version of drone warfare in which unknown individuals are identified and targeted by drones because they resemble characteristics similar to those of terrorists (McQuade 2021: 2). In a case study on drone warfare in the Afghan region of Uruzgan, Allinson shows how Afghan military-aged men are essentialized as "a threat that must be eliminated by death" (Allinson 2015: 126) and consequently met with lethal force. The similarities between the necropolitics during the time of formal colonialism and current necropolitical forms of drone warfare can therefore be seen as an instance of the neo-colonial instrumentalization of drone technology.

Necropolitics further manifest themselves through assigning the colonized *others* with spaces of insecurity, while creating spaces of security for colonizers (Mbembe 2003: 26ff). As pointed out by Fanon (1967), this practice of spatialization is an integral part of colonial endeavors that can also be observed in neo-colonial drone warfare (Akther 2019; Gregory 2017). With the help of drones, states can create neo-colonial spaces, where racialized groups are subject to surveillance and state violence (Akther 2019: 65). Drones are therefore constitutive for the construction of global peripheries that are subordinate to the security of the center, i.e. western nation-states (Akther 2019: 65). The resulting construction of socio-spatial inequalities between center and peripheries resembles practices observed during the formal age of colonialism and can thus be seen as another instance for the neo-colonial instrumentalization of drone technology.

A final example of the neo-colonial instrumentalization of drones can be seen in their use for social ordering and policing. This is important to recognize because the impact of drone warfare on civilians goes far beyond lethal violence (Cavallaro et al. 2012: 73ff.). In a case study on the effect of drones on civilians in Afghanistan, Edney-Browne found that drones have an ordering and policing effect on civilians in two ways. Firstly, populations that are aware of the possibility of them being surveilled by a drone at any given time, change their behavior by avoiding social gatherings and not leaving their houses at night (Edney-Browne 2019: 1942). This benefits western militaries as it makes civilians restrained from forming groups that could organize resistance (Edney-Browne 2019: 1349). Secondly, the possibility of signature strikes forces Afghans to consider their appearance to drone operators and self-police their behavior to avoid being identified as possible threats (Edney-Browne 2019: 1350)—a behavior similar to what could be observed during the time of colonial air policing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Edney-Browne 2019: 1350).

In sum, the above-mentioned practices of necropolitics, peripherization and social policing and ordering provide evidence for an instrumentalist view on drone technology. As demonstrated, the phenomena *per se* are not new. Instead, drone technology provides new opportunities to pursue colonial ambitions. Nevertheless, this should not

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lead us to the conclusion that drones are mere instruments of neo-colonialism, as I will show below.

## More Than Means to an End? Drones and the Construction of Norms

Despite their potential for instrumentalization, the transformative character of drones should not be overlooked. The development of drones has led to a discourse around so-called humane forms of warfare that are characterized by “efficiency, surgical precision, and minimal casualties” (Parks/Kaplan 2019: 4). This is important because through promoting the idea of ‘clean wars’ (McDonald 2017), drones have changed our collective perception of what forms of violence are deemed appropriate (Bode/Huelss 2018: 404f). and thus promoted neo-colonial intervention. To understand this normative shift, it is necessary to unpack how drones have influenced our perception, policies, and interpretations of law on the use of violence in international relations.

As pointed out by Chamayou, public opinion on the use of force in foreign policy is heavily shaped by the fear of losing their own troops (Chamayou 2013: 127f.). This makes the drone the optimal weapon for intervention as it removes troops from battlegrounds and eliminates any chance of reciprocity, leading to a ‘unilateralization’ of violence (Chamayou 2013: 13). Additionally, the alleged precision of drone technology allows governments to present drones as the solution to the problem of collateral damage (Espinoza 2018: 377). This is important because it seemingly increases the congruence of drone warfare with the liberal values of the western public (Agius 2017: 371). In conjuncture, these factors can be seen as constitutive for a normative liberalization of our perception of when the use of violence is deemed appropriate (Bode/Huelss 2018: 405). The translation of this normative shift into policy becomes visible when looking at the proliferation and the use of drones. For instance, the Obama administration had administered ten times more drone strikes than the previous Bush administration (Purkiss/Serle 2017), despite its seemingly more liberal stance on foreign policy. The change of policy is accompanied by a change in interpretations of international law. This was necessary because—be it for manned or unmanned weapons—international law requires justification for (violent) intervention in foreign countries (Hajjar 2017: 72ff). To describe the process of states re-interpreting international law to legalize their actions such as drone warfare, Hajjar has coined the term “state lawfare” (Hajjar 2017: 61). For instance, Israel and the United States have re-interpreted the right of self-defense to accommodate for conducting drone operations against non-state actors within countries that they have not been attacked by (Hajjar 2017: 64ff).

The abovementioned examples illustrate that drones pose transformative power regarding the construction of norms in warfare. But how does this tie to neo-colonialism? As explained in the previous section, drone warfare can be regarded as inherently neocolonial (i.e., necropolitics, peripherization, social policing). The transformative power of drones however questions assumptions that drones are only involved in neo-colonial power relations as instruments. Because drone technology causes a liberalization of norms, policies, and interpretations of law on warfare, it can be argued that drones do not merely execute, but also actively promote neocolonial violence. In other words: by inflicting normative changes on the use of violence, drones have contributed to a normalization of neo-colonial warfare. Therefore, they should be regarded both as an instrument and as a driver of neo-colonialism and attributed with agency. This offers valuable insights into the relationship between military technology and neo-colonialism in general: instead of thinking about technology and neo-colonialism in the dichotomous categories of instrumentalism and substantivism, we should embrace an approach that considers the co-constitutive relationship between the two. Both perspectives offer valuable insights into the relationship between neo-colonialism and technology and must not be seen as mutually exclusive. Simply put, military technology both executes *and* constitutes neo-colonialism.

## Conclusion

By conducting a case study on drones, I have investigated the relationship between military technology and neo-colonialism and examined instrumentalist and substantivist theories on technology and war. The case study shows that the dichotomy between instrumentalism and substantivism is overly simplistic and cannot accurately capture the relationship between technology and neo-colonialism. Instead, I have argued that drones provide an example of military technology that executes and drives neocolonial power relations. These results are important as they underline that military technology, even (or especially) when described as humane and precise, can never be politically neutral. The multilayered relationship between military technology and neo-colonialism further indicates a

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fruitful avenue for future research. For instance, despite being touched upon above, the role of capitalism and the military industry remains under reflected. In this regard, the role of the drone industry is to promote the narrative of a 'clean war' to increase revenue from drone sales. Questions like this can help to better understand the multilayered entanglement of neo-colonialism and technology and should thus be investigated in future research.

## Footnotes

[1] This technopolitical understanding of drones leads to a more nuanced analysis of multiple agencies involved in neocolonial drone warfare. From a critical perspective, this is crucial as it helps to assign responsibilities as well as to identify points for resistance and emancipation. Accordingly, I situate myself within the domain of critical scholarship, which – alongside knowledge production – regards emancipation as a fundamental scientific objective (Horkheimer 1992: 58; Fierke 2015: 180f.).

[2] As pointed out by Chamayou (2013: 13), drone technology encompasses a variety of remote-control devices that operate on land, in the sea, and in the air. In this essay, I restrict myself to the analysis of unmanned, airborne drones that can be used for surveillance and to apply lethal force through rockets.

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