

Book Review: Drone Warfare by John Kaag and Sarah Kreps

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*In the last decade, US drone strikes have more than doubled and their deployment is transforming the way wars are fought across the globe. This book aims to engage fully with the political, legal, and ethical dimensions of drones, and consider how they might be changing military strategy and the ethics of war and peace. This is a call for sociologists, ethicists, and applied psychologists to join the drone debate in an interdisciplinary way, writes **Olivia Mena**.*

Drone Warfare. John Kaag and Sarah Kreps. Polity Press. 2014.

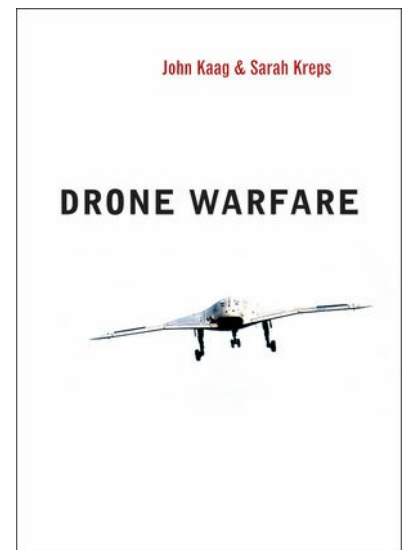
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Drone Warfare is a compact primer that speaks directly and succinctly about some of the legal, moral, and political questions borne out of the rapid rise of armed drone use during the last decade. It is an interdisciplinary intervention jointly authored by a political scientist and a philosopher who grapple with how the use of armed drones not only changes the way we wage wars, but also, perhaps, our very definitions of war and peace (p. 10).

It begins with a survey of the rapid rise of U.S. use of armed drones, from the first covert CIA drone attack in November 2001 until the present, drawing heavily on investigative media coverage. Its central theoretical arguments are organized into three neat sections on the politics of drones, the legality of drones, and the morality of drones. The book only considers armed drones, although some of its core theses could also be applicable to similar conversations and research on surveillance unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

The first section looks at the politics of drones domestically and internationally. It explores how drones as a technology minimize the domestic costs of war, both in economic terms and the human cost of soldiers' lives, making drones a politically popular option. It also probes the limits of what constitutes "immanent threat," which is invoked in targeted killing as preventative protection. It also examines the military effectiveness of drones in counterinsurgency warfare.

The second section asks if combat drone use is compatible with international legal commitments (p. 79). Kaag and Kreps critique is that drone warfare operates in a gray zone of legal justification and in practice it violates the key principles of just war. Covert drone strikes in places like Yemen and Pakistan violate *jus ad bellum*—recourse to war—and also *jus in bello*—conduct in war, specifically the principle of distinction between civilian and combatant, and the principle of proportionality of military advantages in relationship to civilian damage and injury.





The third section is a broad ethical appeal to reconsider basic assumptions of military technology as it relates to war making. It unpacks how domestic enthusiasm for drone technology dangerously conflates the increasing precision of military technologies with “humane” warfare, a stance which distances domestic citizens from democratic accountability. It also touches on some of the ethical dimensions that drone operators face inside the expanded time-space dynamic of drone warfare – that is when operators in the U.S. remotely conduct strikes in Afghanistan supporting on-the-ground forces and seeing with technologically-assisted clarity the aftermath of their actions.

The book is US-centric, both in its exclusive consideration of the United States as the leading global user of armed drones, and also in its predictions of how U.S. precedents will dominate future international drone policies and laws. The conclusion is oriented as a set of practical domestic policy-making suggestions which include having the U.S. conducting hearings on the use of drones, having broader discussions about drone use with the international community, and the U.S. Air Force examining targeting practices (pp. 142-143). Finally, it calls for sociologists, ethicists, and applied psychologists to join the drone debate in an interdisciplinary way (p. 146).

The rapidly shifting terrains of drone proliferation require us to revisit old questions of how to conduct war, but in different ways. *Drone Warfare* is an up-to-date survey of the central arguments and theoretical considerations facing scholars doing work on questions around securitization, just war and asymmetrical warfare. As the authors suggest, it is a “pragmatic” approach to thinking out some of the implications of drone warfare both in law and in practice as part of the global democratization of drones.

Olivia Mena is a PhD candidate in the Sociology Department at the London School of Economics. Her work looks at the global proliferation of national border walls in the context of contemporary immigration and securitization initiatives. She holds a master’s degree in Bilingual and Bicultural Studies from the University of Texas at San Antonio and a master’s in Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies from the London School of Economics. You can follow her on twitter [@borderwalls](#). [Read more reviews by Olivia.](#)

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