

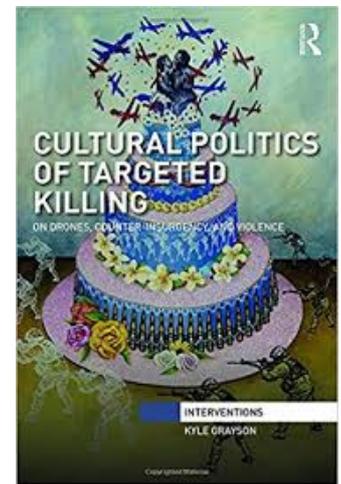
Book Review: Cultural Politics of Targeted Killing: On Drones, Counter-Insurgency and Violence by Kyle Grayson

In Cultural Politics of Targeted Killing: On Drones, Counter-Insurgency and Violence, Kyle Grayson analyses the cultural conditions that have rendered targeted killing a seemingly appropriate, even common-sense, technology of warfare. While its array of insights could at times benefit from further space than permitted in this concise volume, this is an impressive book that will be of great use to those looking to better understand our troublingly militaristic times, finds [Tom Vaughan](#).

Cultural Politics of Targeted Killing: On Drones, Counter-Insurgency and Violence. Kyle Grayson. Routledge. 2016.

Find this book: 

Targeted killings – particularly the use of remotely piloted aircraft (RPAs) or ‘drones’, but also extraterritorial raids of the kind which killed Osama bin Laden – have featured in Western political discourse and academia for decades. The MQ-1 ‘Predator’ RPA was first deployed by the United States in Bosnia in 1995, then increasingly often during the ‘War on Terror’ in support and standalone roles over Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen and Syria, among others. The RPA itself is something of an icon: former President Barack Obama is [noted](#) (and [lambasted](#)) for his embrace of the technology, and despite an election campaign brimming with anti-interventionist bluster, the Trump administration has [moved](#) to loosen Obama-era restrictions on RPA strikes and commando raids. RPAs continue to compound the civilian death tolls caused by [errant bombs and white phosphorous](#) dropped on densely populated areas. Several European militaries operate RPA technology, while the infamous [Mossad assassination](#) remains a reliable wellspring of political intrigue and airport fiction.



How can the propensity of liberal regimes to engage in targeted killing be explained? Scholars have long contemplated this problem, with [Giorgio Agamben's](#) interrogations of sovereign power and legality reigniting a fascination with the politics of ‘[the exception](#)’. Since the early 2000s, this trend has generated an extensive amount of critical insight into international law and the consequences of [liberalism's biopolitical imperative](#) to manage risk, contain threats and ‘make life live’. Kyle Grayson, however, has identified an important lacuna in this body of work: analysis of the cultural conditions which make targeted killing appear an appropriate – and indeed common-sensical – political technology. Despite some minor misfires, *Cultural Politics of Targeted Killing* is broadly successful in an ambitious investigation into how targeted killing has become possible under liberalism.

Grayson is an accomplished scholar of liberalism, violence, biopolitics and culture (with an intriguing focus on [Paddington Bear](#)), and this monograph brings together a decade’s worth of work in his field. His central claim is thus: prevalent understandings of targeted killing as a product of the suspension or subversion of liberal-democratic law are inadequate, because the boundaries of the law can be incrementally expanded to accommodate it. A focus on the legal field provides only limited insight into the wider targeted killing ‘assemblage’, and ‘misses key [cultural] dynamics contributing to the variable processes that are central to the assemblage and its future potentialities’ (65). This is an important argument and well-articulated.

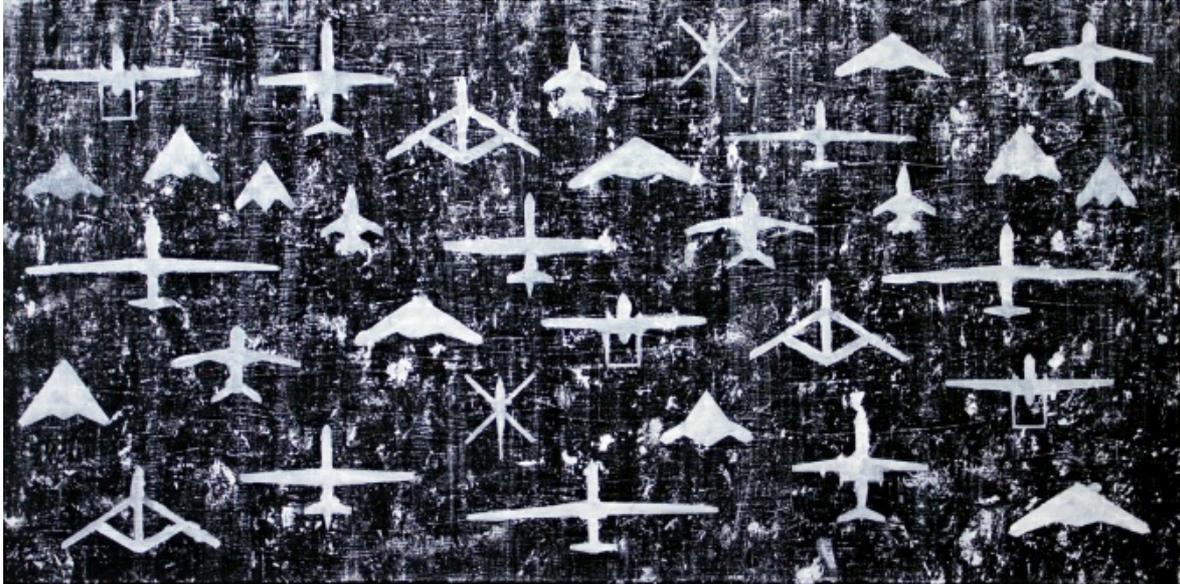


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For Grayson, there are six specific components of liberal political culture which enable recourse to targeted killing: legitimating narratives of violence; the interaction of technology and sensory regimes; the political-economic values placed on automation, information, speed and decentralisation; the gendering of ‘assassination’ (coded as a perfidious, dishonourable and thus ‘feminine’ act) versus the masculine and warlike ‘targeted killing’; legalistic understandings of targeted killing; and cultural perceptions of what acts are permissible against the ‘other’.

Grayson does not deal with each of these components in turn, instead choosing to pursue each thread concurrently in chapters loosely arranged around law, politics, economy, subjectivity and the everyday. This occasionally threatens a disjointed reading experience, but Grayson is meticulous in signposting the reader, stating and restating his (complex) arguments. *Cultural Politics of Targeted Killing* takes a broad view which requires careful explications of concepts such as assemblages, biopolitics and the exception before the analysis can proceed. This is done very well, albeit at some length. However, Grayson is somewhat over-reliant on other secondary literature when performing his analysis, which gives a relatively short work (209 pages) a claustrophobic feel. Concepts are deployed in a scattershot manner, and certain influences – such as the work of Richard Sennett and Antoine Bousquet – are traced very closely, in a manner which crowds out further analysis. This is not to imply that Grayson is emulative in his thinking: on the contrary, there is much original content here, and this reviewer sometimes wished the author would strike out further and devote more page space to exploring his own interesting conclusions.

Chapter Six, which examines ‘the sacred relationship between Islamic faith traditions and the home’ (180) – and the subsequently amplified violence of RPA strikes against houses – also suffers from an incongruous piece of quantitative analysis which adds little insight. Grayson gamely explores the extent to which houses have been targeted by RPAs: a worthy endeavour, notwithstanding that this has [already been done, with the same dataset](#), and yielded similar results, as the author himself acknowledges. The benefit of Grayson performing the analysis again – justified by using a ‘different timespan’ (186) – is not obvious. The chapter’s otherwise important qualitative analysis is weighed down by a quantitative element which borders on superfluity.

Minor weaknesses aside, *Cultural Politics* is a formidable achievement and an overall success. Grayson has seized upon a significant knowledge gap and mined it productively. A highlight is Chapter Four, 'Science, Capitalism, and the RPA', in which Grayson masterfully demonstrates how the managerial hallmarks of the neoliberal economy – including processes of deskilling, decentralisation, delayering and just-in-time provision – have helped to constitute our understanding of targeted killing: this is what Donald Rumsfeld called 'an entrepreneurial approach' to modern war-fighting (111). The source material of his cultural analysis is also impressively broad, ranging from a twist of eschatology courtesy of the biblical Book of Judith (76-88) to accounts of RPA pilots posted on Reddit (152).

With this work – 'an initial mapping', in his own words – Grayson has substantially widened the opportunity for scholarly analysis of the targeted killing assemblage, and rightly foresees a more vibrant conversation resulting from his impressive book (208). It also improves our understanding of militarism which, as [Bryan Mabee and Srdjan Vucetic have argued](#), suffers from a narrow conceptualisation. A compact volume, *Cultural Politics* sometimes struggles to contain its impressive array of insights and implications, but interested readers and researchers will undoubtedly follow the routes of inquiry that Grayson illuminates. This will be of great benefit in our troublingly militaristic times.

This review originally appeared at the [LSE Review of Books](#).

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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