Book Review: *Death Machines: The Ethics of Violent Technologies*, Elke Schwarz

Elke Schwarz, *Death Machines: The Ethics of Violent Technologies*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2018. 230 pp. £80.00. ISBN 978 1 5261 1482 2. Available as e-book.

Elke Schwarz's *Death Machines* is a fascinating, stimulating, and at times frustrating book. The fascination comes from a comprehensive reconsideration of the work of Hannah Arendt and of the transformation of the meaning of politics into the biopolitical management of life which underpins ethical discourses of violence, relying on a quasi-encyclopaedic breadth of research. The stimulation arises through Schwarz's convincing demonstration of the need for a radical rejection of the "scientific-technological perspective" (158) which, along and through technologies, "clearly shift the horizon of ethical thought and practice" (119) and foreclose certain avenues for ethical thinking. The frustration, meanwhile, arises from a book that simultaneously accomplishes much more and somewhat less than what it portends.

The first thing to note about *Death Machines* is that while the subtitle might be about the "ethics of violent technologies", it deals rather tangentially with both ethics and violent technologies. Rather, Schwarz explores here "the ethicality of ethics itself" (124) in modern political violence. Her central contention in this book is that the increasing recourse to violent technological means of war – such as armed drones, or increasingly autonomous weapons systems – is undergirded by a biopolitical mode of thinking which considers the securitization of life as the central aim of politics. This replacement of proper politics by administration, in turn, shifts the ethical terrain, drawing on a medical vocabulary to justify the targeted elimination of diseases of the political body (135), enabling violent practices without consideration of their ethical justification. In other words, in a biopolitical world, the question

is no longer whether killing can be justified, but how to kill more effectively, and kill better (177).

I say this book accomplishes more than it appears due to its comprehensive critique of biopolitical modern politics, which stands very well on its own, without the context of violent technologies. Drawing on a very perceptive reading of Hannah Arendt's work – particularly *The Human Condition* – Schwarz demonstrates the presence of a clear biopolitical strain in Arendt's work, hanging on the distinction between free action in a political realm, and the administration of life – as an exercise in risk-management – in a political realm that has merged with the social. Schwarz further extends this reading by incorporating Arendt's work on violence, noting the continuity between "the biopolitical anti-politics of modernity" (96) and violence which arises as a palliative to the absence of politics. This, she argues, plays out directly in the way "violent technologies [appear] as a solution to political problems" (168-169), notably in the seemingly endless extension of campaigns of targeted killing.

This biopolitical reading of Arendt, which occupies more than half the book, extends far beyond the problem of violent technologies, and would easily have merited a book-length treatment on its own. Conversely, however, it means that the book gets to the specific problem of violent technologies rather late. When getting to violent technologies, the book offers few specifics. Schwarz discusses alternatively fully autonomous weapons systems which are expected in the near to medium future, military robotics combined with human soldiers, and remote piloted aircraft (drones). Schwarz engages very sparingly with the practices enabled by the development of these technologies, preferring to concentrate on the conditions under which the use of these technologies – in the abstract – becomes justified. While the conflation of fully autonomous, partially automated and remote-controlled weapons systems may displease certain more practically-oriented scholars of war studies, Schwarz hereby remains true to the guiding argument of her book. In her view, to engage with the specific ethics of

remote-controlled and automated weapons constitutes an acceptance of the biopolitical perversion of politics which treats humans as specimens of biological life to be secured, managed, controlled, and guided.

In Schwarz's view, furthermore, even partial automation of warfare and ethical decisions collapses ethics into "narrowed horizons for ethical debate" (172). In this frame, ethics is no longer considered as a means to engaging in political action, but rather as a code, which must be followed, notwithstanding the actual results (131). This is most visible in fully autonomous weapons, which are purported to be 'better' at ethics than humans, and in which ethics is quite literally a code, a succession of commands which a machine follows, thereby progressively erasing the human, "that must fit into logic of the machine" (184). Schwarz traces how the same language of calculating, unreflecting ethics pervades all parts of military ethics, in which computer programs simulate, estimate, and calculate casualty numbers and acceptable levels of risk (131_. Finally, in this vein, Schwarz highlights what this biopolitical, calculating form of bioethics erases: anything that cannot be systematically calculated – psychological injury, the destructive effect on social life of overflying drones, non-fatal injuries, losses of limbs, destruction of symbolic property, etc. is thereby left out of ethical assessments (198). All that matters is the most easily calculable category – life and death. In this, Schwarz argues, bioethics – the ethics of life – become necroethics – the ethics of death.

In summary, *Death Machines* offers a persuasive and richly elaborated discussion of the slippage of ethical categories which underpins the use of increasingly automated technologies of violence, leading to an ever more pervasive recourse to violence. As such, Schwarz's book should be essential reading to scholars across wide fields in (critical) war studies, political theory, and political philosophy. Furthermore, the extensive discussion of Arendt's biopolitics will appeal to Arendtian scholars and scholars of biopolitics more widely.

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