



Remote Warfare

Interdisciplinary Perspectives

ALASDAIR MCKAY, ABIGAIL WATSON
& MEGAN KARLSHØJ-PEDERSEN

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Interdisciplinary Perspectives

EDITED BY

ALASDAIR MCKAY, ABIGAIL WATSON AND
MEGAN KARLSHØJ-PEDERSEN



E-INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS
PUBLISHING

E-International Relations
www.E-IR.info
Bristol, England
2021

ISBN 978-1-910814-56-7

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Production: Michael Tang
Cover Image: Ruslan Shugushev/Shutterstock

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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Abstract

Modern warfare is becoming increasingly defined by distance. Today, many Western and non-Western states have shied away from deploying large numbers of their own troops to battlefields. Instead, they have limited themselves to supporting the frontline fighting of local and regional actors against non-state armed forces through the provision of intelligence, training, equipment and airpower. This is remote warfare, the dominant method of military engagement now employed by many states. Despite the increasing prevalence of this distinct form of military engagement, it remains an understudied subject and considerable gaps exist in the academic understanding of it. Bringing together writers from various backgrounds, this edited volume offers a critical enquiry into the use of remote warfare.

Acknowledgments

The editors would like to thank the many people who gave up their time and helped with the review process for this book. Some of them have preferred to remain anonymous and are not named here. None of them have responsibility for any of the opinions (or errors) in this book, which are the authors' own: Feargal Cochrane, Florence Gaub, Hijab Shah, Ian Davis, James DeShaw Rae, James Igoe Walsh, James Strong, John Hutchinson, Kjetil Enstad, Louise Wiuff Moe, Marco Jowell, Maria Ryan, Nigel White, Nikolaos van Dam, Philippe Frowd, Ryan Jenkins and Simone Papale.

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5

Outsourcing Death, Sacrifice and Remembrance: The Socio-Political Effects of Remote Warfare

MALTE RIEMANN AND NORMA ROSSI

Late modern warfare is increasingly characterised by ‘the technical ability and ethical imperative to threaten and, if necessary, actualise violence from a distance – with no or minimal casualties’ (Der Derian 2009, xxi). The term remote warfare has been coined to capture this process where states and societies of the Global North are progressively distancing the effects of war. New technologies, such as drones, and actors, such as private military and security companies (PMSCs) and special forces, are a fundamental feature in enabling such types of warfare, and their importance has attracted increasing attention (Chamayou 2015). In this chapter, we focus on what Der Derian has referred to as the ‘ethical imperative.’ This imperative, we argue, underpins the commitment towards forms of remote warfare and actively shapes the direction and focus of the techniques it employs. In order to think about remote warfare, it is necessary to recognise the normative commitment that underpins this way of war. This is a commitment which emerges clearly from the definition of remote warfare as a series of methods and approaches, such as the use of proxies, special operations forces, PMSCs and drones, to ‘counter threats *at a distance*’ (Watts and Biegon 2017). The chapter focuses on the ethical imperative sustaining the process of distancing by looking at the normative commitment embedded within forms of remote warfare. We do so by exploring remote warfare’s socio-political effects on intervening states, which so far has generated only limited attention from scholars.

Recent literature on remote warfare, or variously termed ‘liquid warfare’

(Demmers and Gould 2018), 'surrogate warfare' (Krieg and Rickli 2018) and 'vicarious warfare' (Waldman 2018), has mainly focused on the very spaces and times in which remote forms of warfare are enacted. In this, the literature has moved its focus away from an analysis of remote warfare's legal and technical aspects (see Rae 2014; Boyle 2015), and towards the socio-political effects this form of warfare has on the everyday social realities of people living within the areas where remote warfare takes place. Studies have shown remote warfare's impact on the lived realities within theatres (Calhoun 2018), demonstrated how drone strikes undermine the legitimacy of states and governments at the receiving end of these interventions (Boyle 2013), exposed how PMSCs blur the distinction between civilians and combatants, extending the space of the battlefield and blurring its borders (Kinsey 2006), and highlighted how intervening states are increasingly privileging long-distance air strikes and the training of local forces over long term state-building processes with detrimental effects for local security (Kaldor 2012, 151–184; Knowles and Watson 2018). By exposing how remote warfare contributes to turning war into the permanent socio-political condition for people living within the vicinity of these interventions, this literature offers a powerful critique of this method of engagement. Indeed, remote warfare's socio-political effect of turning war into a permanent condition for underprivileged spaces and times makes remote warfare everything but remote. War rather becomes perpetually present in space and time as expressions such as 'everywhere war' (Gregory 2011) and 'forever war' (Filkins 2008) capture.

Remote warfare's socio-political effects on the states and societies from which it originates, however, have so far received only limited attention. This chapter turns to this overlooked aspect by analysing the socio-political effects the seeming absence of war has on the societies of the intervener. Our argument unfolds in three steps.

First, by focussing on the etymology of the term 'remote', we expose that remote not only entails a physical distancing but also encapsulates a specific normative commitment to temporalise the states in which remote interventions take place, framing them as morally backwards and thus paving the ground for military intervention. Second, we show that remote warfare challenges the traditional ways in which societies in the Global North have sustained their projects of nation-building through the production of a collective identity based on/in sacrifice (Kahn 2013; Taussig-Rubbo 2009). Third, we analyse the practice of military outsourcing as a tool of remote warfare. Specifically, we show how the outsourcing of death to private proxies exposes the ways in which neo-liberal states are renegotiating the very meaning of what it means to sacrifice for the collective identity that the nation has historically claimed to express.

The space and time of remote warfare

As argued above, remote warfare contains the ethical imperative to distance war. Indeed, the very act of distancing is hidden in plain sight within the very term itself: *remote* warfare. The etymology of 'remote' allows us to shed light on remote warfare's normative dimension by exposing that remote encapsulates both spatial as well as temporal distancing. Etymology is a useful tool in this regard as it uncovers the whole range of various meanings that a term can carry, thereby contributing 'to the understanding of the performativity of language in making the world in which "we" live in.' (Riemann 2014, 3).

Remote, deriving etymologically from the Latin adjective 'remotus' for 'distant in place, afar, set aside, removed' shows how the term expresses the spatial logics sustaining remote warfare (Castiglioni and Mariotti 1996, 1097). As such, remote in space signifies the commitment for distancing war from 'over-here', while simultaneously maintaining the possibility of fighting it 'over there.' Perpetuated by 9/11, elements of this spatial logic found expression in the Bush Doctrine's notion of pre-emption based on the proposition that, 'we will fight them over there, so we do not have to face them in the USA' (Bush 2007). This approach of fighting wars at a distance continued under the Obama administration's extension of the US drone programme and has further intensified since Trump took office (Rosenthal and Schulman 2018). Besides its spatial logic, the meaning of 'distance' entailed within the term remote warfare also contains a temporal quality. New technologies, for example, not only permit interveners to recede 'further in time and space from the target of military operations' (Ohlin 2017, 2) but also 'bring "there" here in near-real time' (Der Derian 2009, xxxi). However, the use of virtual technologies to conduct military operations from afar with near verisimilitude, is not the sole temporal aspect of remote warfare.

Remote in time, we argue, is also linked to imaginaries of underdevelopment, civilisational standards and ideas of backwardness that are often associated with the places in which remote warfare takes place. This temporal connotation is deeply embedded into the very term remote, even though contemporary English privileges the word's spatial dimension. Remote's etymology is again indicative, as the Latin *remotus* refers to '*distance in time*', but also '*different, adverse, alien*' (Zalli 1830, 492–493). Even in English, both the temporal as well as the aspect of difference, were included in its meaning until the nineteenth century. Samuel Johnson's (1828, 286) *A dictionary of the English Language* exemplifies this, as it defines remote as '1. Distant in time, not immediate, 2. Distant in Place ... 4. Foreign ... 6. Alien; not agreeing.' What we find within remote warfare, therefore, is what Barry Hindess (2007)

has characterised as the 'temporalisation of difference', through which certain contemporaries and the spaces they inhabit are assigned to an anterior time. Moreover, subjects inside these 'backward' spaces are portrayed as morally bankrupt and fundamentally different in comparison to their contemporaries (Ibid., 325–326).

The term 'remote' thus hides in plain sight the ways in which subjects and spaces where remote interventions take place are constructed as backward and distant in time through the process of temporalisation. And it is precisely this temporalisation which makes these subjects and spaces 'targetable.' This is most visible in relation to discourses on fragile and failing states, which form the backdrop for most remote interventions (Fernández and Estevez 2017, 149; Watts and Biegon 2017; Waldmann 2017). Debates on these spaces deploy a variety of metaphors and characteristics to locate fragile states on a temporal scale in which these are variously defined as 'medieval' (Forrest 1994), belonging to a Hobbesian state of nature that precedes the social contract (Kaplan 1994) or simply 'pre-modern' (Cooper 2003). Such representations 'inferiorise difference by interpreting it as backwardness' and delegitimises these spaces 'through a comparison – explicit or implicit – with temporally more advanced identities' (Moreno 2015, 72). Furthermore, these 'discursive practices, based on a Eurocentric account, construct the "failed state" as deviant' thereby creating 'favourable conditions for interventionist practices' (Moreno 2015, 1).

Rita Abrahamsen (2005) observed the open-ended nature of these interventionist practices in the discursive change on fragile states that appeared after 9/11. Where previously 'development' and 'humanitarianism' were key terms of reference in debates on fragile states, these were gradually replaced with an insistence on categories of risk, fear and threat, that are in need of being continually contained to safeguard temporally advanced spaces (Ibid.). The spatial and temporal logics of remote warfare, therefore, contain the normative commitment of removing war from some privileged spaces and times even at the costs of turning war into a permanent social condition for underprivileged spaces and times. In doing so, remote warfare establishes a radical duality between spaces and times in which war is consistently present, and spaces and times from which it is removed. Put differently, from the perspective of societies in the Global North, the effects of 'being at war' are rendered invisible and its costs are largely placed on the societies that have become the object of remote forms of intervention.

Yet, the normative commitment of removing war from 'Western' societies is neither uncontested nor without consequences. First, because this attempt is consistently resisted. Terrorist attacks conducted in the 'West', for example,

have often been framed as retaliatory actions to Western military interventions, including those under the label of remote warfare. For instance, on multiple occasions Islamic State justified attacks within Western societies as direct responses to what is happening in the theatres of remote warfare (Greenwald 2016). Second, remote warfare does not leave societies from which it originates untouched. Critical scholarship has been instrumental in exposing the profound political and legal effects that remote warfare has on liberal democracies, such as the lack of democratic accountability in the enactment of these wars (Baggiarini 2015; Chamayou 2015) and the increasing use of emergency/exceptional legislation (Neal 2010, 2015). Critical terrorism studies exposed the deep socio-political effects of remote warfare in Western states by raising awareness of the militarisation of domestic security and the use of techniques that travel from COIN 'abroad' to counterterrorism at 'home' (Owens 2015; Dunlap 2016; Sabir 2017). The ways in which Muslim communities in Western societies are increasingly the target of security practices, such as surveillance, stigmatisation and policing, is a case in point, (Awan 2011) suggesting that for some sections of the population in the 'West' remote warfare's effects are anything but remote. The reasons above highlight the importance of considering how the normative commitment of conducting remote warfare produces concrete socio-political effects within the societies from which war is supposedly removed. In the remaining part of this chapter, we turn our attention to how remote warfare affects a key component of the construction of modern statehood: the citizenship/sacrifice link (Hutchinson 2017).

Sacred soldier bodies and the citizenship/sacrifice link

Max Weber (2009, 78) famously defined the state as a 'community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence within a given territory.' A sole focus on the physical/material aspects in Weber's definition, however, overlooks his engagement with the emotional foundations of political authority/community. In *Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions*, Weber (2009, 335) highlights the important emotional foundations of the legitimization of force, arguing that 'the location of death within a series of meaningful and consecrated events ultimately lies at the base of all endeavours to support the autonomous dignity of the polity resting on force.' Sacrificial authority, therefore, underlies the state's political authority and power (Marvin 2014). Bargu (2014, 124) calls this emotional foundation of Weber's monopoly of violence, the *monopsony* of sacrifice. Monopsony derives from the ancient Greek *monos* (single) and *opsonia* (purchase). As such, '[b]uilding on Weber, we can say that the modern state is not only the sole provider of legitimate force; it is also the sole receiver of political self-sacrifice' (Bargu 2014, 124).

Nationalism links individual sacrifice to the state, implying 'a transfer of authority and meaning from God to originating peoples and their cultures' (Hutchinson 2017, 9). In war, this assumes an especially strong meaning, 'when cults of the national dead are potent, extolling that those who die will live forever in the memory of the nation' (Ibid.). Military remembrance rituals express this link by generating, in the words of Hutchinson (Ibid., 3–4), 'a sense of in-group commonality.' The year 2018, for example, saw nations around the globe commemorate the centenary of the end of the First World War (1914–1918).

At the centre of these commemorative events lay the remembrance of those that died, with a specific focus on military fatalities. London, for example, displayed parts of the gigantic artwork of 888,246 poppies that flooded the Tower of London in 2014, in which each poppy represented a fallen member of the British armed forces.¹ Such events form an integral part within the construction of national narratives, because it is the remembrance of those who passed that creates a sense of unity and national belonging (Marvin and Ingle 1996), which in turn forges a relational identity between citizen and state.

In the words of Jens Bartelson (1995, 189), 'the modern subject and the modern state are linked inside knowledge, and the concepts of nation and community are used to express their unity.' Nationalism, as David Campbell (1992, 11) has argued, therefore needs to be understood as one of the many ways through which the modern state pursues its legitimacy. Roxanne Doty (1996) argues similarly, asserting that state sovereignty is endorsed by, and finds expression in, national identity.

Military remembrance rituals thus have a constitutive function in the production and reproduction of sovereign claims and the creation of national identities. Specifically, commemorative rituals contribute to the state's ontological security. Ontological security differs from physical security by being 'not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is' (Mitzen 2006, 344). In this, ontological security is essential for the body politic as its 'capacity for agency' derives from it (Ibid.). Commemorative rituals are therefore crucial in establishing claims to political identity and authority, as they construct the constitutive link between self-sacrifice and a sense of collective identity. Thus, soldiers play a prominent role in the state's construction of political authority, as the idea of the nation, and with it the modern conception of citizenship, is intrinsically linked to the idea of soldiering as a prerequisite for citizen rights (Janowitz 1976; Millar 2015; Kier and Krebs 2010).

¹ For pictures and a description of this installation visit: <http://www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/history-and-stories/tower-of-london-remembers/>

The idea that military service represents a prerequisite for citizenship emerged from French Revolutionary thought (Janowitz 1976; Heuser 2010; Osman 2015). In this timeframe we must also situate the emergence of the soldier's death perceived as a sacrifice (Denton-Borhaug 2011; Riemann 2014; Baggiarini 2014; Baggiarini 2015). With regards to the French Revolution, Durkheim observed that a community's aptitude 'for setting itself up as god or for creating gods was never more apparent than during the first years of the French Revolution. At this time [...] under the influence of the general enthusiasm, things purely laical by nature were transformed by public opinion into sacred things: these were the Fatherland, Liberty, Reason' (Durkheim 2009, 116). This sacredness in due turn was then conferred to the actor, who swore an oath to protect these sacred abstractions. This actor was the citizen, who, only by becoming a soldier enrolled in the national armed forces, could defend the community that guaranteed his citizenship. It is, however, not the act of defending this abstraction, but rather dying in its defence, which provides the nation and consequentially state sovereignty with a veneer of legitimacy and political authority. Paul Kahn (2010, 205) expresses this vividly: 'We maintain the nation by sacrificing the sons.' National identity, citizenship and sacrifice are thus intrinsically linked (Baggiarini 2015), and, as such, sacrifice plays a key function in the constitution of political authority. The historical link between citizenship and sacrifice, however, is increasingly challenged by outsourcing practices (Riemann, 2014; Baggiarini, 2015).

Military outsourcing and the absence of death

One of the central elements of remote warfare involves shifting the burden of risk and responsibility onto others thereby increasingly externalising the burdens of war (Krieg 2016). This is by no means to say that such practices are without historical precedents. Barkawi (2010) cautions us to be aware of the international context of state-force-territory relations that sustain the nation-state centric monopoly on violence. Subaltern agents like colonial soldiers, for example, were not only used to fight in European wars, but also used to police the vast European colonial empires (Barkawi 2010). However, remote warfare intensifies these long-term tendencies, as 'Western' societies are increasingly shifting the burdens of war onto external actors, while simultaneously removing the experience of battle from their own nationals. While colonial forces were used to augment 'Western' forces in both World Wars, 'Western' forces were nonetheless engaged in fighting and dying. Today's wars, such as those that fall under the remote warfare label, show, however, a decreasing commitment of 'Western' societies to accept casualties and consequentially war. To capture this change, several scholars in the last two decades have argued that Western societies have entered a 'post-heroic age' (Lutwack 1995; Coker 2002). Although this notion drew extensive

criticism (Frisk 2017), societies of the Global North are increasingly contracting out security tasks to an assortment of proxy actors beyond the regular armed forces to shield their own societies from the effects of war, while continuing to engage militarily abroad (Bruneau 2013; Mumford 2013). PMSCs fulfil a key function in this regard by enabling states to fight war remotely in a fashion that obfuscates the very presence of war (Schooner and Swan 2012). Media reporting on contractor fatalities exemplifies this point.

While every regular military fatality is extensively covered in the press, contractor deaths receive limited attention. The *Washington Post's* website 'Faces of the Fallen' is a case in point (Washington Post n.d.). This website, 'not only identifies deceased soldiers, but humanizes each loss with a photograph, biographical information, and a description of each service member's final action' (Schooner and Swan 2010, 16). But information about contractor fatalities appears to be of no particular interest to societies that hire their services, as the 'faces' of fallen contractors are omitted from this website. A news story that hit the American media in late summer 2004 confirms this. It stated that US casualties had passed the 1000 killed in action mark, putting a great deal of pressure on the Bush administration. What this story missed, however, was the blunt reality that such figures had long been passed, if contractor deaths would have been included (Singer 2004, 10). With regards to the theatres in Iraq and Afghanistan, Schooner and Swan observed in 2010 that 'contractor deaths now represent over 25 percent of all US fatalities' in those conflicts (Schooner and Swan 2010, 16). But it is more than possible that contractor fatalities are far higher, since there is no indication that non-US deaths have been tracked with any reliability. Schooner and Swan (2012, 3) as such conclude that, '[o]n the modern battlefield, contractor personnel are dying at rates similar to – and at times in excess of – soldiers.'

Nevertheless, contractor casualties go unnoticed. As Avant and Sigelman (2010, 256) note: 'There is no running count of contractor deaths on the network news or on the DOD website. Photos of PMSC personnel who have died in Iraq are not part of the "honour roll" flashed across the screen at the end of the *PBS News Hour*.' Some of the effects the non-recognition of contractor deaths produces, have already been pointed out. As contractor casualties often escape public attention, they shield policymakers from negative press (Avant and Sigelman, 2010, 243–249; Schooner 2008, 78–91), while simultaneously lowering 'the political and financial costs of intervention by desensitizing home populations' (Porch 2014, 700) to reduce possible public opposition and circumvent public oversight (Knowles and Watson 2017).

The externalisation of the burdens of war to private contractors, we argue, not only provides potential savings to the state in hiding the true costs of war, but also poses a very real challenge to the state's political authority, as the next section shows.

Private military corps and the relocation of sacrifice

Having elaborated on the importance of sacrifice in the construction of sovereign claims and how states are increasingly outsourcing sacrifice, we now turn to the effects that the increasing reliance on seemingly non-sacrificial actors in pursuit of remote forms of warfare has on the political authority of states. Three effects stand out in this regard.

First, by removing death from the equation of war, remote warfare weakens the relationship between citizenship, sacrifice and national identity. As the above analysis has shown, through the commemoration of particular soldier bodies, the state is able to express the unity of particular citizens living within the shared territorial confines of the state. The soldier's dead body is therefore a powerful tool that expresses the unity of man and state articulated in terms of national identity grounded in sacrifice. Reliance on non-sacrificial actors threatens to sever this unity as their profane deaths do not generate the necessary collective practices of commemoration, which 'secure the unity of the "imagined (national) community", and its associated narratives and rituals, in the face of sometimes acute social divisions' (Ashplant 2000, 263).

Second, by rendering death invisible through the increasing practice of outsourcing sacrifice, not only is the very national identity of citizens threatened but also the very institution of the state itself, as sacrifice lies at the heart of the polity resting on force. In the words of Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle (1996, 4); 'Without the memory of blood sacrifice, the nation state cannot exist, or at least, not for long.' Or, put differently by Paul Kahn (2011, 153), 'without sacrifice, no sovereign.' The potential savings for states conducting remote warfare via outsourcing practices, expressed in blood and treasure, therefore, bear significant overlooked costs in relation to the construction of political authority.

Third, and most significantly, though remote warfare increasingly omits deaths from public attention, sacrifice and consequentially sovereignty, are not disappearing but rather relocated. At first sight, contractors could be framed as conforming to Agamben's articulation of *homo sacer*, as actors who can be killed but not sacrificed (Nikolopoulou, Agamben and Heller-Roazen 2007). However, although contractor deaths lack the state sanctioned component of sacrifice, it would be misleading to conceptualise these actors as *homo sacer*.

Instead of an absence of sacralisation, we rather find a relocation and rearticulating of sacrifice. Taussig-Rubbo (2012) identified initial points of this rearticulation in his analysis of the military medal system in which medals, like the US Purple Heart, function as a public honour that recognises sacrifice. Initially, the award of these had been exclusively restricted to members of the armed forces, but a privatised economy of commemoration is beginning to emerge. In 2008, for example, Blackwater introduced the Worldwide Defense of Liberty Medal which recognised the sacrifices of killed or wounded contractors, and the US government made contractors eligible for public honour as civilians (Taussig-Rubbo 2009). However, the 'deaths may be called "sacrifices" and recognised as deaths in the name of the nation, but the ceremonies where those awards are given are often private events and exclude the media' (Taussig-Rubbo 2012, 316). As such, both state and private sector recognition 'share an awkwardness in being neither public nor private events' (Taussig-Rubbo 2009, 124). The 'awkwardness' of this newly emerging privatised and state sanctioned medal system, we argue, has the function of re-designing the state and inscribing the logic of the market within it. Blackwater's ability, for example, to insist in a court case in 2007 that it was both, a private corporation as well as part of the sovereign body is a case in point (Taussig-Rubbo 2009, 134–135). Remote warfare thereby moves the site of sovereignty rather than undermining it. It is this commemorative aspect which distinguishes PMCs from other non-human means aimed at making war remote, such as, for instance, drones.

Baggiarini (2015, 130) has noted that the use of drones constitutes a 'logical extension' to the rationality of military privatisation in the quest for a 'bloodless' war on the side of the 'West.' She makes the valid point that the privatisation of war and drones respond to the same quest of removing the effects of war from the societies and the political bodies from which they originate, severing sacrifice from the body politic. Yet the socio-political effects of military privatisation and the use of drones are rather different; simply put, while drones cannot die, private contractors can. Instead of an eradication of death we rather find a relocation of death. Underplaying this fundamental difference risks ignoring the distinct socio-political effects that the displacement of death has on state sovereignty. While in the case of drone strikes the sacrificial component is removed, privatisation relocates it from the state to the market.

Conclusion

This chapter began by engaging with the normative commitment hidden in plain sight within the term 'remote warfare.' Remote warfare's normative commitment is the attempt to remove war from certain privileged spaces and

times, even at the price of maintaining a perpetual and limitless condition of war elsewhere. While definitions such as 'everywhere war' and 'forever war' are effective in exposing how remote warfare contributes to extending war in time and space, these terminologies risk overlooking the centrality of the normative commitment to remove war from privileged spaces and times. We demonstrated this normative commitment through an analysis of the very etymology of the word remote, which implies the commitment to both spatial and temporal distancing. Remote Warfare, thus, works as an expression of a radical duality, in which war must be removed from the space and time of the self, while relocating it into the space and time of the 'Other.'

After exposing this normative commitment, we also argued that the attempt of removing war has important socio-political effects on the states and societies which wage war remotely. We explored these effects by analysing how the increasing use of private military and security contractors is an attempt to outsource death and render it invisible. We argue that this process undermines the link between the state and its citizens expressed through the imaginary form of the nation-state, in which the exceptional and commemorated sacrifice of the soldier fulfils a central constitutive role for claims to state sovereignty. But this differs from the use of unmanned drones because the outsourcing of death to private contractors does not eliminate sacrifice, it only displaces it. This on-going process of the displacement of death from state to market deserves further investigation.

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