



# AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS AND PATRIARCHY



CAMPAIGN TO **STOP**  
KILLER ROBOTS

WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR  
**PEACE & FREEDOM**





Technology is making  
gestures precise and brutal,  
and with them men.

Theodor W. Adorno

# Introduction

Autonomous weapon systems are not just material technologies. While they are that, they also need to be understood within the wider context of power and violence. To comprehensively address the risks and challenges posed by the possible development and deployment of these weapons, we need to think about how they are positioned within militarism more broadly. In particular, the dangers of autonomous weapons should be considered in the context of the growth of the “national security state”—the conglomeration of borders, police, prisons, militaries, intelligence agencies, and other apparatus of coercive state control. They should also be considered against the pursuit of “full spectrum dominance”—the idea that a state can have full awareness and control over individuals anywhere in the world, at any time.

An analysis of patriarchy is helpful for these considerations and reflections. If we think about militarised ideas about masculinity and power, if we think about how violence and weapons are upheld as tools of security, we can imagine how weapons that are programmed with sensors and software to determine who lives and who dies, will be used to execute the mission of patriarchy.

This mission is one of domination, dehumanisation, and marginalisation. It is a mission of absolute control over who is seen—and in the context of autonomous weapons, programmed—as “the other”.

This paper unpacks the concepts of patriarchy and of militarised masculinities and explains how these are relevant for an analysis of autonomous weapon systems. It situates the development of autonomous weapon systems in the broader context of the control of human lives globally through the rise of the digital and physical “panopticon”—a system of surveillance, control, incarceration, and execution that asserts the dominance of the political and economic elite over the rest of the world. It explains how the operation of weapons programmed to target and kill based on pre-programmed algorithms against people who are racialised, gendered, and otherwise categorised, will result in the violation of human rights and dignity. Overall, it argues the importance of confronting autonomous weapons not just as material technologies that need to be prohibited, but as manifestations of the broader policies and structures of violence that perpetuate an increasing abstraction of violence and devaluation of human life.

# Patriarchal power

**P**atriarchy is a system of power. It is, in the barest sense, a hierarchical social order in which women are subordinate to men. But it is more than that. It is an order that shapes and entrenches gender as a cultural construction. It insists upon norms, roles, and conditions of being a “man” and a “woman”. It thus oppresses not just women but anyone that does not conform to norms of their prescribed gender or to the gender binary: this includes men who do not abide by the cultural expectations of “masculinity,” as well as gender non-conforming, non-binary, intersex, and trans people.

Understanding how patriarchy works requires understanding how gender works. Gender is socially constructed, both in terms of attributes it assigns to people and in terms of the hierarchies it creates among those differentiated categories. “In virtually every culture,” notes Sandra Harding, “gender difference is a pivotal way in which humans identify themselves as persons, organize social relations, and symbolize meaningful natural and social events and processes.”<sup>1</sup>

It is also important to recognise that individuals within a certain sexed or gendered group are not homogeneous. Age, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, (dis)able-bodiedness, and socioeconomic status mean that all people have vastly different experiences in the world. This intersectionality of identities and realities lends to different experiences of oppression and normativity. Patriarchy, however, cuts through nearly all social orderings, imposing power relations between gendered categories as well as along other lines.<sup>2</sup>

## Militarised masculinities

Power relations, as Michel Foucault explains, are embedded in processes of categorisation and differentiation.<sup>3</sup> In terms of gender, these processes produce a hierarchy between gender identities and hegemonic norms between genders, but also within them. Patriarchy celebrates a certain form of masculinity, namely, a “particular idealized image of masculinity in relation to which images of femininity and other masculinities are marginalized and subordinated.”<sup>4</sup> In most cultures today, this “hegemonic masculinity” is represented by a heterosexual cisgender man who makes claims to being independent, risk-taking, aggressive, rational, physically tough, courageous, and unemotional.<sup>5</sup>

The military plays a primary role in shaping images of masculinity in the larger society,<sup>6</sup> to the point where “the dominant adult male role model could largely be the product of the militay.”<sup>7</sup> Primacy in the military was, and still is, awarded to “toughness, skilled use of violence, presumption of an enemy, male camaraderie, submerging one’s emotions, and discipline (being disciplined and demanding it of others).”<sup>8</sup>

Militarised masculinities are produced in various sites, including through the policies of states, security discourses, education, media debates, popular culture, and family relations.<sup>9</sup> Boys and men are in particular socialised into militarised gender identities—and others are socialised to support this. Boys come to learn—through parenting, media, and schooling—to define themselves as men through violence.<sup>10</sup> The



norms of hegemonic masculinities—toughness, strength, bravado—teach boys to exercise dominance through violent acts and rely upon violence as a form of communication.

The dominant form of militarised masculinity is not universal.<sup>11</sup> But militarised masculinities are embedded within the institutions of violence and perpetuate that culture beyond these institutions. For example, military institutions engage actively in the processes of differentiating and “othering” that reinforces the ideal of gendered hierarchies. Turning men into warfighters requires breaking down their sense of ethics and morals and building up a violent masculinity that is lacking in empathy and glorifies strength as violence and physical domination over others portrayed as weaker. Hierarchy is fundamental to military training. Teaching human beings to kill other human beings “requires dehumanizing others by promoting the belief that another human is somehow a ‘lesser’ creature,” Cynthia Enloe explains. “One of the central forms of dehumanization promoted by military training and the culture of daily life in the military has been the supposed inferiority of women—that women are less than men.”<sup>12</sup>

## Normative valuing

These norms have a critical role to play in how people are expected to behave, which values are held in regard, which actions are considered honourable. All of this, in turn, impacts how our world is shaped and ordered, what structures are established and reinforced, and how they are sustained. These norms also impact how things get done, what kind of processes are considered legitimate. They influence how business is conducted, how power is constructed and distributed, and what kind of techniques and technologies are deployed to reinforce and

extend that power. As bell hooks says, patriarchy is not only “a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females,” but it is a system that endows the hegemonic male “with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence.”<sup>13</sup>

This is significant in the context of autonomous weapons, particularly for considering how the patriarchy is not just part of the technology of these weapons but also in the process that has led to their development and potential deployment. Domination through violence is inscribed both within autonomous weapon technology and within the framework of thought and policy that is leading to their development and potential deployment.



Photo: Women's March to Ban the Bomb, June 2017 © WILPF

# Patriarchy and technology

Scholars of gender and technology have argued that gender relations are “materialised in technology,” through which the meaning and character of masculinity and femininity are further developed “through their enrolment and embeddedness in working machines,” as Judy Wajcman writes.<sup>14</sup> She notes that the very definition of technology is cast in terms of “male activities”—activities associated with the hegemonic masculinity. The traditional conception of technology, in this regard, is industrial machinery and military weapons—tools of work and war.

This is not to suggest that engineering technology is “masculine,” but rather, as Cynthia Cockburn suggests, the gender binary and gender hierarchies are often reinforced or even defined in relation to technology.<sup>15</sup> In this way, Wajcman notes, the “ideology of masculinity” has an intimate bond with technology. She argues that technology is more than a set of objects or artefacts; it also “fundamentally embodies a culture or set of social relations made up of certain sorts of knowledge, beliefs, desires and practices.”<sup>16</sup>

Because of this, gender relations—and patriarchal power—have become interlinked with technology in terms of the process of their development and their use. Technologies “reveal the societies that invent and use them.”<sup>17</sup> If technology is developed and utilised primarily within a framework of militarised masculinity, their creations will be instilled with their framework of thought, knowledge, language, and interpretation.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to note that regardless of the sex or gender identity of any individual engineer or developer working on a particular project, the militarised, masculinised framework persists due to its dominance in our collective culture and the material realities of our political economies.<sup>19</sup>

In the context of a culture of militarised masculinities and masculinised technological development, new and emerging technologies of violence and of war have specific characteristics that simultaneously reinforce and undermine hegemonic gender norms. These technologies also embody, reflect, and refract power relations<sup>20</sup>—including patriarchy.

Privacy International notes, technology is usually presented as being “gender neutral”—but the way it is developed and used is not. Surveillance, for example, is itself a tool of patriarchy that controls and limits the exercise of fundamental freedoms of people. While it may be presented as “gender neutral” or “race neutral” it is not—it reinforces and amplifies existing inequalities.<sup>21</sup>

## Black boxes of structural violence

Lending further to these inequalities, as with other technologies there is the strong likelihood of the “old boys club” pushing development of autonomous weapons and related systems into closed-door labs. “Algorithms will be written by small groups of coders, who are in turn given instructions by an even smaller group of decision-makers,” warns Christopher Ankersen. This will “increase both the ‘black box effect’



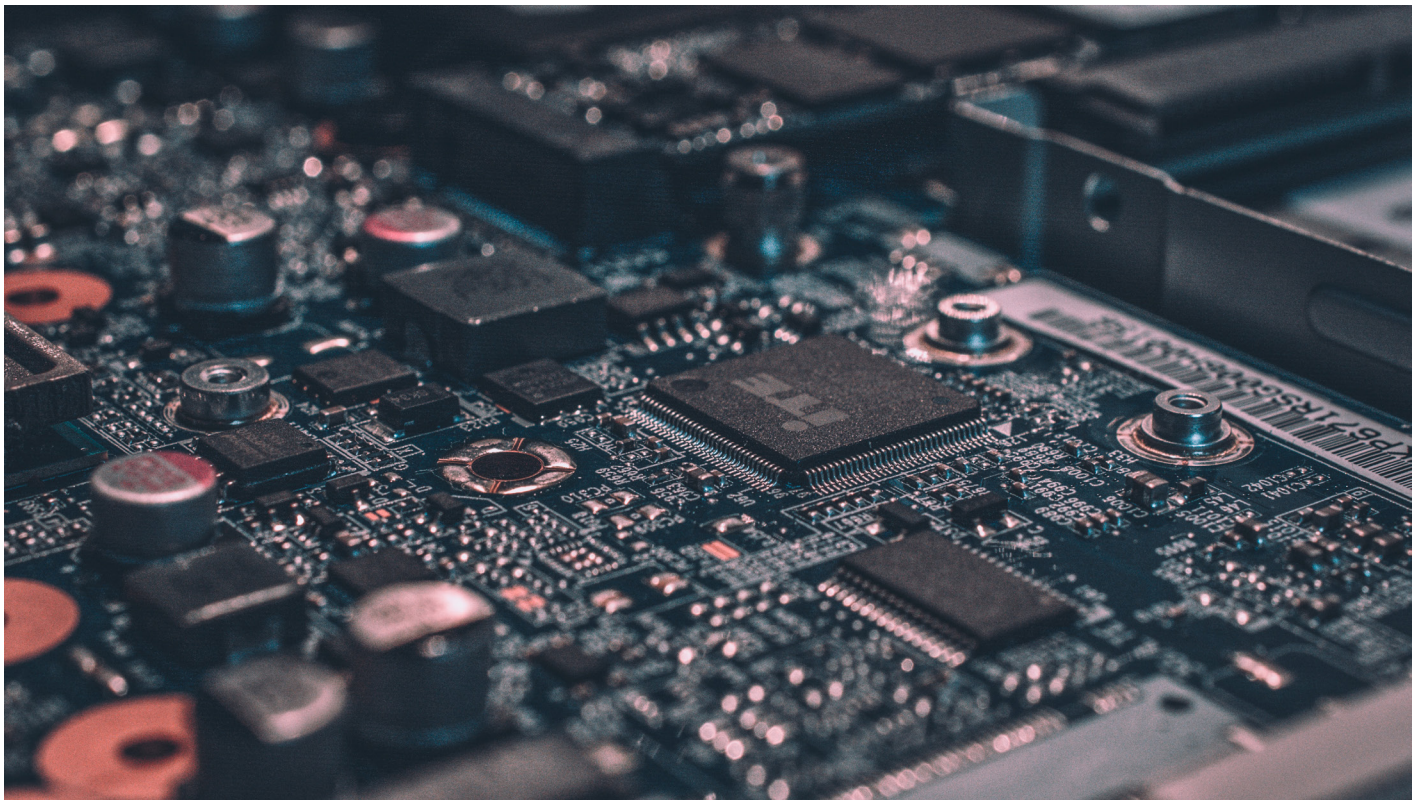
and the in-built biases that already plague the [artificial intelligence] universe.”<sup>22</sup>

The “black box”—an artificial intelligence (AI) system whose inputs and outputs are not visible—is one of many concerns raised by engineers and tech workers opposed to the development and use of autonomous weapons. Machine-learning applications provide systems with the ability to automatically learn and adapt based on experience, without being explicitly programmed. This raises extreme risks if machines are programmed to kill human beings: if a system can change its behaviour, without its programmer or user understanding how or why, the weapon has the potential to do things for which it was not originally programmed.

Former Google engineer Laura Noland has warned, for example, “There could be large-scale accidents because these things will start to behave in unexpected ways.” If an autonomous weapon confronts unexpected radar, bad weather, or nuanced human

behaviour, how will it respond? Whether the machine is programmed with AI machine-learning or not, its response will be unpredictable, including to the designer and the operator.<sup>23</sup>

If the weapon system is programmed within a patriarchal, racist society—which it will be, if created in today’s world—it will not only be inscribed with these biases at the outset and, if it is a machine-learning system, continue to advance itself within this world order. The black box of AI is likely to perpetuate and reinforce existing norms of gender and power, possibly in ways that the engineers of these systems do not anticipate or deliberately programme—and certainly in ways that they do.<sup>24</sup> As Alison Adam recognised back in the 1980s, “not only could AI systems be used to promulgate what might be undesirably normative views about women and other groups, they are also to be implemented in the process of refining away the plurality of views which is such an essential part of the feminist project, and in particular the feminist political project.”<sup>25</sup>



*Photo © Alexandre Debiève / Unsplash*



## Adaptive patriarchy

As power relations are increasingly mechanised through technology, they can also adapt to changing information and feedback. Patriarchy, racism, and other structural inequalities can themselves be thought of as “black boxes”—systems that reify themselves overtime, adapting to changing circumstances and norms while ensuring their continuous reproduction.

Cynthia Enloe writes, for example, about adaptive or sustainable patriarchy—the efforts to coopt movements or activism by appearing to change. “A few select women can be let into the boardroom—or onto the television sportscast or into the law school—but on (usually unwritten and denied) conditions,” she warns, including “that those few women do not insist that many more women of diverse races join them; that those allowed inside internalize masculinized ways of thinking (about profits, war, sexuality, inequality); or, by contrast, that those few selected women act out a form of patriarchal

femininity that complements but does not supplant masculinized privilege.”<sup>26</sup> The same is true of racism, anti-queerness, and any other system of structural inequality. We can see the sustainability of these systems in corporate “whitewashing,” for example—capitalist enterprises that adopt the slogan Black Lives Matter or have a float in a Pride March, yet simultaneously exude anti-Blackness and anti-queerness in their policies and behaviour, including by investing in or supporting policing, surveillance, and incarceration rather than helping to redistribute wealth and build equitable communities of care.

The adaptiveness of patriarchy is why adding underrepresented voices to discussions or negotiations is not enough on its own to enact political change. The answer is not to add “diversity” to the black boxes but to eliminate the boxes altogether. Otherwise, the project of patriarchy, racism, or whatever system of discrimination we are trying to confront will continue to adapt and evolve.

# Panopticon and power

This can be seen clearly in the production and use of technologies already being built to serve our existing capitalist order. Rather than redistribute power and wealth, the capitalist system relies on the differentiation and hierarchisation among people that is provided by patriarchy and racism in order to build out its structures of control and domination. These structures include the rising digital and physical panopticon provided by technologies of surveillance, biometrics, facial

recognition, predictive policing, precrime reporting, drones, and, if developed, autonomous weapons.

The panopticon was a prison structure designed by Jeremy Bentham to establish and maintain physical and psychological control over those incarcerated within it at all times. While Bentham’s panopticon was never built, notes Ian G.R. Shaw, it generated a blueprint that could be endlessly replicated.<sup>27</sup> Over time, the

technologies developed by the US military for surveillance of “enemy combatants” abroad and by the carceral system for the monitoring and control over racialised populations at home, are used increasingly by police forces and border patrols.

In the 1980s, Donna Haraway described what she called the “god-trick” of Western scientific epistemologies—the illusion of the panopticon granting the ability “to see everywhere from a disembodied position of ‘nowhere’ as an integral component of histories of militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy.”<sup>28</sup> More recently, Lauren Wilcox has described how this “is seemingly perfected in the weaponized drone, with its global surveillance capacities and purported efficiency and accuracy in targeting weapons.”<sup>29</sup>

Drones, Shaw agrees, have led to the development of a “Predator Empire”—a state that unabashedly pursues “full spectrum dominance” over the entire world through war making, economic coercion, and information persistent surveillance. Full spectrum dominance is the ability to monitor, control, and deploy weapons at a moment’s notice to anywhere the world.<sup>30</sup> Drones are an essential part of this dominance, allowing the military and “intelligence” agencies to hunt their prey—human beings—wherever they are, regardless of geography, borders, or international laws of war.

## Predators of the patriarchal panopticon

Through a suite of technologies that make up the digital and physical panopticon, the world is being made into a battlefield. The patriarchal instinct for total control of others, especially those it deems inferior, is brilliantly manifested in the concept of full spectrum dominance.

Patriarchy underwrites national security with the practice of transnational monitoring, policing, incarceration, sanction, and execution, asserting its authority regardless of geography or legality.

It is in this context that Shaw describes the “extrajudicial predation” of full spectrum dominance, executed through the predators of mechanised killing made possible with armed drones. This predation echoes the age-old predator of patriarchy: the violent assertion of control over bodies, in particular women’s bodies, and the bodies of racialised, queer, and disabled people.

One technology that has helped facilitate the achievement of full spectrum dominance is the drone. The policies developed by the US government in relation to the use of surveillance and armed drones have enabled the predatory pursuit of awareness, control, and potential execution at a level that other technologies or troop deployments, such as fighter jets or special forces operations, have not.

## “Signature strikes”

One of the key policies in relation to the use of armed drones is that of “signature strikes”. Documents leaked to *The Intercept* in 2015 show how armed drone attacks are generally conducted on the basis of “intelligence” collected from video feeds, email, social media, spy planes, and mobile phones. This information is analysed for patterns through the use of algorithms.<sup>31</sup> People—individuals or groups—are then attacked on the basis of observed characteristics, with no substantial intelligence regarding actual identity or affiliations.<sup>32</sup> They are attacked based on “packages of information that become icons for killable bodies on the basis of behavior analysis and a logic of preemption.”<sup>33</sup>

This process is not immune to interpretation, bias, or mistakes by those using the information to determine targets for drone strikes. As Kyle Grayson explains, targeted killings, including with drones, depend on the identification and surveillance of a target, but these processes are underpinned with cultural dispositions that determine what is seen and how it is seen.<sup>34</sup>

## From signature strikes to target profiles

The practice of signature strikes could presage the function of autonomous weapons. With autonomous weapon systems, the “cultural dispositions” will be programmed right into the machine. That is, targets—based on the “signatures” of human beings—will be written into algorithmic code, which the weapon system will then use to execute its mission without further human intervention or guidance.

The critical difference between drones and autonomous weapons is that the latter would operate without meaningful human control—

while a drone is piloted remotely, with a human operator analysing data and deciding if or when to launch an attack, an autonomous weapon system would be programmed to identify, select, and engage targets on its own. The use of force or act of violence would not be carried out by a human being, but by the machine, using sensors and software rather than human judgment.<sup>35</sup>

Certain weapon systems already rely on broad signifiers to assess whether a certain object in an area of operations represents a valid target. In existing systems, this may be a particular “heat-shape” pattern or a particular radar signature. An autonomous weapon, using sensors and algorithms to not just determine but also to engage—to use force or violence against—targets, without human analysis or control, goes further in this than any previous weapon technology.

A weapon system operating without meaningful human control will rely on “target profiles” to establish “the set of conditions under which such a system will apply force.”<sup>36</sup> A target profile



could include infrared emissions, shape, or biometric information.<sup>37</sup> It will actively reduce human beings to objects—into ones and zeroes—marked by sensors and software for death or detainment on the basis of their sex, race, age, or other physiological or sociological characteristics.

In this sense, autonomous weapon systems can be seen as categorisation machines. They will sort human beings, using sensors and software, into preprogrammed categorisations of race, gender, sex, or other “marker”. These “categories” or “classifications” will be patriarchal and racist and will further embed—both explicitly and inadvertently—within the weapon system. In that sense, patriarchy and racism *will be given persistence within the technology*.

In using sensor data to sort people into categories will further mechanise the processes of categorisation and differentiation that Foucault describes as being essential to power relations. Autonomous weapons will thus extend the possibilities of patriarchal control and full spectrum dominance beyond those offered by remotely piloted drones, by removing meaningful human control from the equation and relying on machines programmed to target certain *types or categories of people*.<sup>38</sup>

## Algorithmic bias

This sorting and categorising of people makes an intersectional perspective—one that considers the experience of people based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc., and analyses the ways in which these social categorisations result in overlapping and independent oppressions and discrimination<sup>39</sup>—so important to help illuminate the risks posed by autonomous weapons.

As noted above, human biases about race, class, ability, sexual orientation, and more are implicated in the algorithms and the data used to train machine-learning programmes and autonomous systems. This can be seen in the performance of many relevant systems already. Facial recognition software struggles to recognise people of colour; voice recognition struggles to respond to women’s voices or non-North American accents; photos of anyone standing in a kitchen are labeled as women; people’s bail is denied because a programme decided that a woman of colour was more likely to reoffend than a white woman.<sup>40</sup>

We can imagine the ways in which these “mistakes”—which already have led to people being held without bail before their trial,<sup>41</sup> or have misidentified members of Congress as people who have been arrested,<sup>42</sup> or claimed to be able to determine sexual orientation based on faces<sup>43</sup>—will be catastrophic when these algorithms are weaponised.

Since many of these systems have demonstrated racial bias with lower performance on darker skin,” warns the Algorithmic Justice League, “the burden of these harms will once again fall disproportionately on Black people.”<sup>44</sup> Recent studies by researchers including Inioluwa Deborah Raji, Joy Buolamwini, and Timnit Gebru shows how facial recognition software exhibits gender and racial bias for gender classification.<sup>45</sup> A key problem is that many “benchmark datasets” are biased—they are composed predominantly of male and lighter-skinned faces.<sup>46</sup> When used by police or military, these types of technologies risk leading to the arrest, incarceration, detainment, or death of individuals on the basis of mistaken identity.

But beyond the horrifying problem that the bias embedded in programming will translate into



mistakes in identifying targets, there is also the risk that the machine's bias would not be a mistake at all. It could be deliberately programmed to target people bearing certain "markers" or identities.

## Target profiles and intersectional violence

We can already see this in action. Trans people have been marked surveillance on the basis of the clothing they wear.<sup>47</sup> Women and girls have been targeted for sexual violence and trafficking during conflict. Certain ethnic groups have been targeted for genocide. The increasing availability and use of technologies of surveillance, categorisation, and identification will only further enable such violence. At the US-Mexico border, for example, the "Integrated Fixed Tower" is designed to detect and identify "items of interest," enabling Border Patrol agents "to more efficiently and effectively respond to border incursions."<sup>48</sup> Developed by Israeli company Elbit Systems in Israel's apartheid laboratories of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, the Tower is comprised of 55 towers equipped with cameras, heat sensors, motion sensors, radar systems, and a GPS system. This system is also used to persistently surveil the Tohono O'odham Nation's reservation that is roughly one mile from the border.<sup>49</sup>

This is not the only example of "border security" tools being used for domestic policing in the United States. Drones belonging to the US Customs and Border Protection have been used for surveillance against the Standing Rock protests in 2016 and in 2020 to crack down against protestors rallying against white supremacy and police brutality.<sup>50</sup> In July 2020, the US government unleashed Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers loose on Portland to pull

protestors off the streets into unmarked vehicles, following the same playbook of "low-intensity warfare, death squads, forced disappearances, and massacres" the US military has been exporting for decades.<sup>51</sup>

Signature strikes and target profiles are also already in use by US police forces. "Much like the Obama administration's policy of signature strikes—lethal drone attacks on young men who might be terrorists or may one day commit acts of terrorism—the presumption of guilt based on racial profiling is an essential component of broken windows policing," writes Robin D. G. Kelley.<sup>52</sup> Others like Jackie Wang have warned how predictive policing technologies, even when it does not explicitly use race to make predictions, "can facilitate racial profiling by calculating proxies for race, such as neighbourhood and location."<sup>53</sup> This is similar to how signature strikes operate in establishing sex (maleness) as a proxy for being a militant and thus a justifiable target.<sup>54</sup>

The entanglement of tactics of military and policing in the United States has a long history. Since 1987, when Congress began allowing the US military to transfer "surplus equipment" to US police forces across the country, billions of dollars of military weapons, vehicles, and other gear has been transferred to state and local police departments.<sup>55</sup> This has included assault weapons, ammunition, grenade launchers, armoured vehicles, helicopters, battle armour, night-vision equipment, and more. US police forces also receive direct training from the US military and from private military and security companies, including in "counterinsurgency" tactics.<sup>56</sup>

These strategies and practices inform the types of technologies being developed and used right now. Tech firms are already providing US police forces with increasingly autonomous

technologies, including remote-controlled surveillance robots, along with cloud computing networks, facial recognition systems, and more. Big and small tech companies alike are working actively to develop systems for police, border control, and militaries.<sup>57</sup>

This is not just a US phenomenon. Police, border control, and militaries in many countries are integrated. Around the globe, militarisation of borders is on the rise and racialised brutality of police against migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers is commonplace. Police and other forms of violence and discrimination against Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour is also rampant, particularly in settler colonial states. In all of these contexts, technology is increasingly enabling repression, as well as cataloguing of people.

## Autonomous violence against “inherent criminality”

The cataloguing and processing of human beings relies on the idea that human beings can and should be targeted *on the basis of what they could potentially become*. For example, Ian G. R. Shaw describes the ways in which states seek to “protect” or “immunise” themselves “against not only actualized forms of danger ... but also potential threats, those patterns of life that may become threats in the future.”<sup>58</sup>

This concept of “inherent criminality”—that risk resides within people on the basis of their skin colour, ethnicity, sex or gender, or geography—is problematic and damaging.<sup>59</sup> Criminality, risk, or threat is not a state of being. Categorising people as such is done by the most privileged in our societies, by those who have something to lose materially from equality and peace. It is used as a justification for both mass incarceration and extrajudicial killing. It has led

the US military to develop policies and practices for “hunting” individual people designated “terrorists,” with the entire global as its hunting ground. It has enabled many governments to target migrants as “inherently criminal elements” that require either complete assimilation or expulsion.

It is not a stretch of the imagination to consider ways in which autonomous weapon systems will play a role in repressing those deemed to have “inherent risk”. Such systems could enact or facilitate violence against specific groups of people. Just as drones, police, and border officials can be deployed against “foreign militants,” migrants, or citizens alike, autonomous weapons could be programmed to target Black activists, or Indigenous Water Protectors, or women in a public space, or entire ethnic or religious groups.



# Automating dystopia

It is exactly this that makes the idea of autonomous weapons so attractive to certain governments. Autonomous weapons are a logical step in the ever-expanding technological panopticon that is threatening global peace and freedom, leading to a dystopian future of total surveillance and control.

All of the structures of violence in our societies—police, prisons, borders, militaries—will inevitably utilise autonomous weapon systems in the future, if they are developed. At the heart of this project of patriarchal domination, which necessitates the monitoring, control, and militarisation of all aspects of human life, is the fact that *our reality is being constructed by the technologies that enable this*.

We are building a world in which the majority of people are being seen and treated as “other”—as objects to be categorised, controlled, confined, and killed. As disposable subjects that are in the way of the profit-making of the elite, wealthy few. As this world further develops, more and more people will be pushed into this category of “surplus population”. The technologies being deployed and developed now further facilitate the caging of this population through mass incarceration and detainment; with drones and perhaps soon autonomous weapons, these technologies also facilitate their death.

## Retrenching hierarchies and violence

It's also important to note that the process of cataloguing and processing human beings will serve to further entrench differentiations

between people, and the power relations among them. The establishment of target profiles, the sorting of human beings into categories as a basis to determining their fates at the “hand” of a machine, has implications well beyond just any specific act of violence. It retrenches hierarchies and normalises violence on the basis of these hierarchies in ways that our current methods of coercion and control facilitate but have not yet completely automated. Autonomous weapon systems will make automatic—and thus increasingly unopposable—our patriarchal, racist world order.

Right now, one of the critical ways a population can resist state violence is mass protest. Particularly when such action is nonviolent, the government risks losing legitimacy if it engages in violent repression of protest. But, as Peter Asaro warns, while the current human apparatus of state violence—police and military—may be deterred from engaging in violent acts against their own population, autonomous weapons could be used to suppress protest and attack activists. “Insofar as democratic revolutions or peaceful political protests are seen as among the few remedies to political tyranny,” Asaro notes, “the automation of violence would serve to greatly undermine or eliminate that remedy.”<sup>60</sup>

The automation of the work of police and militaries through killer robots would lead to an increasingly narrow distribution of political power, “resulting in the concentration of ever greater power in fewer hands, more easily and efficiently than before.” This will make it even more difficult to oppose this political power—it may mean that “only others with similar access

to automated violence would have the means to challenge those who hold power.”<sup>61</sup>

Thus, at the same time that the process of categorising human beings—and automating that process by building target profile algorithms into weapon systems—further enables violence against certain groups or entire populations, it simultaneously increases the violent capacities of those that deploy such weapons and risks limiting the nonviolent capacities of any opposition or resistance.

### “Productive violence” and “functional death”

Yet the narratives from those advocating for the development of autonomous weapon systems, and other technologies of violence and the growing digital panopticon, are that these weapons will make killing more ethical, make war less deadly. The equation of “surgical precision” with less violence, for example, positions autonomous weapons as more inherently “ethical”. In this context, as Elka Schwarz writes, the development of these kinds of weapons, and practices such as extrajudicial killing, “shift the horizons of ethical thought and practice.”<sup>62</sup>

The technologies, policies, and practices of drone warfare, surveillance, and now, autonomous weapon development, seek to frame acts of political violence as “necessary technical acts” for security and survival. They perpetuate and normalise the idea that security must be achieved through violence, and that this violence is facilitated best by weapons and technologies that are “rendered as inherently ethical.”<sup>63</sup> In this way, state-sanctioned violence becomes infused with moral language. Think of the terminology used by nuclear-armed governments or within mainstream national

security discourses, which bear the mark of moral righteousness when it comes to justifying violence, militarism, and weaponisation to “protect the homeland” or ensure “strategic stability. This is about establishing a notion of “productive violence,” Schwarz describes—violence that is “necessary” to secure life or liberty.

But as Thomas Gregory notes, this kind of violence completely ignores the people that are harmed—both their bodies and their embodied experiences.<sup>64</sup> It suggests that not only are human beings objects to be processed, categorised, and catalogued, but that once that is complete, they are expendable. “Some lives are not grievable,” writes Josie Sparrow. “Some deaths are functional.”<sup>65</sup>

### Automating patriarchy

This brand of “ethics” bestows virtue upon violence to further retrench the militarised masculinities described earlier. “Men at war need to forge for themselves a special moral world in which, unlike in the civilian world, killing is a virtue, not something prohibited,” argues Grégoire Chamayou.<sup>66</sup> The myths and narratives around “ethical weapons” and “honourable violence” are products of the dominance of patriarchy in our culture and structures.

In contrast, an intersectional feminist approach to ethics<sup>67</sup> questions the perspective and positioning that leads to a notion of “productive violence”. Feminists ask, whose interests are served by policies like extrajudicial killing? Who profits or benefits from technologies that enable this kind practice? Rather than accepting at face value claims to justified violence, feminists look underneath the narratives of power to investigate the realities of those affected by the unequal distribution of power and wealth.



Such an investigation finds that first and foremost, these technologies and policies serve the interests of those who already have power, for it is those with power who can circumvent the rules they themselves have set out for the rest of the world and the rest of the people in it. It also finds that the technologies and weapons for surveilling, sorting, controlling, incarcerating, and killing human beings are about maintaining the current inequitable order of privilege, prosperity, and power.

The policies and technologies of full spectrum dominance are rooted in a position of privilege established through patriarchy, white supremacy,

cisgendered heteronormativity, and able-bodiedness. Violence is used by the patriarchy as a tool to achieve this control. This kind of violence is performative—it is used to demonstrate power, to coerce, to dominate. The increasing automation of violence thus also serves to *automate patriarchy*—to entrench further the norms about who is in charge, whose “interests” matter, whose “security” matters, and what is justifiable in order to achieve it. The act of using characteristics of individuals to determine and define who is targetable and who is expendable,<sup>68</sup> is perhaps the most violent expression of patriarchy imaginable.



Photo: Women look at security cameras in Toronto © Matthew Henry / Unsplash

# Conclusion

In a world where weapons are treated as tools of power, where violence and subordination of others is how governments and the economic and political elite maintain their authority and their privilege, increasing the remoteness and abstraction of violent technologies is incredibly perilous.

Autonomous weapons pose an egregious threat to the safety and security of the majority of people in the world. Weapons that target and attack certain individuals or groups, based on characteristics or behaviour coded in algorithms and detected by sensors, has implications for the normalisation and abstraction of violence beyond that to which our world is already subjected.

While many weapons may be deployed in the project of patriarchal power, the unique ways in which autonomous weapon systems are likely to use signals intelligence, target profiles, sensors, and software means that unlike with other weapon systems, the target will be disembodied digitally and metaphorically before being physically disembodied by the attack.

The execution of human beings by machines points to not only an increasing abstraction of violence, but also to further erosion of the value of human life.

Autonomous weapons will not only separate those executing violence from the battlefield or the cities upon which these weapons will be unleashed but will also alienate the targets of this violence further from an experience of human dignity in death. Killed by a machine.

There is little else the imagination can construct that does more to dispossess or displace humanity.

## Opposing patriarchal, autonomous violence

To this end, understanding how autonomous weapons fit into the structures and apparatus of militarism, surveillance, and exclusion that are necessary for the “national security state” and the pursuit of “full spectrum dominance” is vital. It is important to oppose not just the development of autonomous weapons as material technologies, but also the broader policies and structures that facilitate and seek to justify their development and use.<sup>69</sup>

This is about the way our societies are ordered as patriarchal, white supremacist, able-bodied; and how this is imposed and reinforced through violent technologies built to surveil, cage, restrict, and kill those who interfere with or challenge that order. It is about how intersectional oppressions of people will be amplified by the weaponisation of technologies that are designed to process people as objects, to categorise and compartmentalise human beings and mark them for death.

Challenging these structures, and the weapons that enable and perpetuate them, means understanding the philosophies at their backbones: patriarchy, racism, and other systems of normativity and control over human behaviour and human bodies underwrites how we conceive of security, what we describe as peace, who we see as valuable or expendable,



whose lives we see as worth protecting and who is to be excluded, controlled, or killed in order to maintain the privilege of those in power.

Feminist, anti-racist, queer, disability, and other perspectives and schools of thought can help inform these debates and analysis in ways that dominate discourse on security or militarism refuse to do.

Studying autonomous weapons in this context is imperative for not just our opposition to their development and our work for their prohibition, but for much broader fights for social and economic justice. This includes work for the demilitarisation of, divestment from, and abolition of the structures of violence—militaries, police forces, border patrols, carceral systems—that will deploy autonomous weapons.

Technologies of increasingly automated violence need to be considered in the context of technologies for coercive state power that already exist, and where it looks like we are heading absent any effective challenge.

Thus, while we work to prevent the development of autonomous weapons, we need to also stand against those who seek to develop them and the cultures of social ordering and othering that these forces perpetuate. All of this is essential for the pursuit not just of disarmament or demilitarisation when it comes to any given weapon system, but to peace and justice more broadly. To be effective, we need to look beyond the “killer robot” itself and turn our eyes, and our efforts, against the systems of oppression and domination that seek its construction.



*Photo: Campaign to Stop Killer Robots in Berlin, March 2019 © Ralf Schlesener*

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United States. While the US military may be the most explicit and aggressive in its attempt to dominate the world military, politically, and economically, it is by no means the only government that looks to weapons and war to achieve or maintain power. There are nine countries already armed with nuclear weapons for this purpose; dozens of countries deploy armed drones; there are already a handful of governments investing in research and development of autonomous weapon systems and the weaponisation of artificial intelligence.



# Reaching Critical Will



## CAMPAIGN TO **STOP** KILLER ROBOTS

The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), the oldest women's peace organisation in the world. It is a global feminist movement for peace, disarmament, economic and social justice, and environmental protection.

Reaching Critical Will, WILPF's disarmament programme, works for disarmament and for an end to war, militarism, and violence. It also investigates and exposes patriarchal and gendered aspects of weapons and war. RCW monitors and analyses international processes and works in coalitions with other civil society groups to achieve change, provide timely and accurate reporting on all relevant conferences and initiatives, and maintain a comprehensive online archive of all statements, resolutions, and other primary documents on disarmament.

WILPF is a steering group member of the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, a global coalition of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working to ban autonomous weapon systems and thereby retain meaningful human control over the use of force.