Visibility and politics:

An Arendtian reading of the US drone policy

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Introduction

Technology is radically changing security practices across the world and nothing exemplifies it better than the intensive use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) by the United States (US) in multiple theatres of operations across the world. As President Obama's "weapon of choice", these so-called drones have been used for different purposes such as surveillance and tracking, but also as a killing weapon in counter-terrorist and counterinsurgency contexts. In a three-page internal assessment released for the first time by the Obama administration on July 2016, the drone programme was defined as

> [a] combination of both independent and overlapping efforts overseen by the military and the CIA — with support from other intelligence community agencies such as the NSA [National Security Agency] — that vary in intensity and management depending on the country (Devereaux, 2016).

Effectively, the US Armed Forces and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) have been using lethal drone strikes since 2001 to disrupt and eliminate organisations labelled as terrorist such as Al-Qaeda and, more recently, the Islamic State (IS). This implies that drone strikes have occurred in countries other than those in which the US had a direct military engagement, as long as the presence of Al-Qaeda (or IS) affiliates can be verified, including countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen (Barrinha and da Mota, 2016).

This drone programme, whose intensity and management is so loosely defined by the US government, has been severely criticised and documented by legal scholars and NGO's, particularly in relation to non-combat contexts such as Pakistan or Yemen (HRC, 2010; O'Connell, 2010; Reprieve, 2014; Stanford and NYU, 2012; The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 2015). By extension, the use of drones by the CIA has been censured as well, as the overall secrecy of these operations raises important questions of accountability and legitimacy.

The wider mental configuration of the drone policy seems to occur within what Wiebe Bijker (2006) has identified as the dominant paradigm, among politicians and practitioners, of technological

determinism, which favours a standard image of technology as being positive, comforting and that mostly contributes to solving problems:

> [t]echnology is viewed as a sufficient end in itself and [...] the values of efficiency, power, and rationality are independent of context. The standard view accepts that technology can be employed negatively, but in this view the users are to be blamed, not the technology (Bijker, 2006: 683).

The perspective that users are to be blamed may be found in much of the literature on the ethics of unmanned military technology (Strawser, 2013); accordingly, intelligence failure or poor decision-making are responsible for operational mistakes (Shane, 2015).

This article aims to discuss the ultimate political consequence of a deterministic mode of thinking, according to which technology "[c]annot be subject to 'outside' control in the form of policy-making or political debate" (Bijker, 2006: 683). This article draws on Hannah Arendt's core postulates on politics, modern security, and society to problematise the political implications of using drones as a prominent security instrument in contemporary (and future) life. The starting point of this reflection is that drones are an instrument of double-invisibility: they are invisible to those that live in the areas where they are employed and invisible to those under whose name they are being used. As it will be seen, such invisibility has important consequences in terms of how political life unfolds and, ultimately, on how security as a political practice is decided and executed.

In terms of structure, the article will first unpack the idea of "visibility" as central to the study of drones and their impact upon politics, power and security. Visibility, we argue, is crucial to understand the fundamental distinction that Arendt offers in her work between the private and the public sphere, which ultimately also sheds light on the complex dynamics of political secrecy and legitimacy underlying the use of drones. The article will then analyse how drones materialise in their invisibility and discuss what that means politically. The third part will focus on the US drone policy during the Barack Obama tenure in the White House and the recent positions he adopted before leaving office. Here, it will be shown that his discourse on making the drone policy more accountable seems to express the idea of partial repent, in an attempt to give the issue more visibility on the public realm.

I.   Arendt and the political condition of visibility

Hannah Arendt's work became popular (and controversial) during the 1960's with the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of Evil* in 1963. She was by then a well-established political thinker, having published *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *The Human Condition* (1958), among other important works. Arendt's work has been progressively applied to International Relations in the last decade (Berkowitz et al., 2010; Buckler, 2011; Frazer and Hutchings,

2008; Lang and Williams, 2005; Owens, 2007), in particular by authors concerned with the conceptual and philosophical connections between war, politics, and ethics. Although Arendt is not commonly associated with the study of security – much less with the specific issue of drones about which so much has been written in the last few years – her work offers important insights on the role and the dangers of technology in society. As we are moving more firmly towards the technologically-enabled fuzziness between internal and external security (Lutterbeck, 2005), Arendt, as the philosopher of plurality and political freedom, certainly assumes an increasingly prominent role in assessing the impact that technology has in the definition and implementation of security policies.

In *Human Condition,* Arendt establishes a connection between technology and politics, when she considers that the direction of scientific and technological progress, with its subsequent consequences for the future of human nature on Earth, result from a *political choice* (1998 [1958]: 4). Politics, in her view, should dictate the normative fate of technology, drawing on the utilitarian assumption that "[e]very tool and implement is primarily designed to make human life easier and human labor less painful" (ibid.: 151). Politics is defined as the ultimate public arena where the possibility of freedom lays collectively, and where all must be heard or seen (ibid.: 50). In the public realm of politics, individual freedom cannot be thought outside of a collective polity, as politics becomes the public arena of struggle and freedom for collective actors. This has to do with Arendt's conception of politics as *action*, whereby action is described as the only activity directly driven by men without the intermediation of things, meaning to take an initiative, to undertake, in order to make something work, move or change (ibid.: 177).

Accordingly, Arendt suggests, if man is a social animal, action presupposes society, and politics cannot be practiced in loneliness. The true basis of politics is the freedom of coming together and discussing issues of public interest. Arendt's concern was with this possibility of sharing plurality, more than with the result, or the form of the discussion.[1] This understanding of politics is placed against that of tyranny, in which there is no political conflict and no political consensus, but simply the elimination of the possibility of both. Following Montesquieu, Arendt argued that it is the principle of fear that is at the core of tyrannies: "[t]he tyrant acts because he fears his subjects and the oppressed because they fear the tyrant" (2007: 724).

Political deliberation on the use of technology, or any other matter within a polity, should obey the same principle of public, collective debate, and be subject to struggle and discussion. But in the particular case of technology, Arendt's view suggests that the discussion is

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[1] Her work has been criticised for its lack of consideration for strategic action. For Amy Allen, "Arendt's attempt to exclude strategic action from the domain of the political altogether paints too rosy a picture of our political life" (2002: 143).

> [n]ot so much whether we are the masters or the slaves of our machines, but whether machines still serve the world and its things, or if, on the contrary, they and the automatic motion of their processes have begun to rule and even destroy world and things (1998 [1958]: 151).

The object of politics should not be human mastery over technology, but its actual practical, normative effect upon human life. Arendt is concerned with the possibility that the automation of destruction depoliticises technology, thus overruling the collective, political debate and human capacity for decision. In this sense, "visibility" unfolds as the ultimate political condition for technology to remain within the public realm and within the possibility for human freedom. It is noteworthy how Arendt's predicaments on the political challenges posed by technology were an early elaboration of what contemporary technology studies have come to develop. For instance, Wiebe Bijker (2006: 689) discusses the notions of politics and democracy as used in technology studies, and highlights the centrality of knowledge, transparency, and accountability within the political system of modern democracy. Technology is now seen as "[p]roducing and upholding a modern democratic concept of *visible power* whose exercise appears *publicly accountable* to the large public" (ibid.: 690; emphasis added).

Related to the concept of visibility is that of violence. For Arendt, violence as an instrument of coercion can destroy power, but power can never grow out of it: "[p]ower and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent" (1969: 56). Actually, the particular use of violence to promote fear signifies the absence of power (Arendt, 1969). The use of violence tends to be opposite to politics, as it usually leads to the silencing of plurality. Contrary to power, violence can only be politically used if justified, for it must be a means to a given (political) end – war or violence in general cannot be justified in any other terms, such as morality.[2] Violence is only justified if used briefly and in order to establish new political spaces (Beardsworth, 2008: 507). In *On Violence* (1969), Hannah Arendt defines two contexts in which violence is justified – as a response to extreme injustice, and as an opener for political space. The use of non-violence requires, as a pre-requisite, that there already is some space for politics. As she suggests, Gandhi's campaign would not have succeeded in anti-political places such as Nazi Germany or Stalin's Soviet Union (Frazer and Hutchings, 2008: 102). In that sense, violence is never political, but it can open the space for its creation. As explained by Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberley Hutchings (ibid.: 104),

> Arendt certainly wants to say that [violence] is not political, strictly grammatically speaking. But there seems to be no particular reason, on just this account, why political actors should reject non-political (strictly speaking) actions if they bring about desired political effects. Such as the one that she has in view – making the

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2 Regarding morality in politics, Arendt follows the Schmittian critique, by refusing to acknowledge its role. As Patricia Owens concludes: "[b]oth Schmitt and Arendt shared a belief that morality in political and international affairs could only lead to disillusionment and the further intensification and brutalization of war" (2007: 508).

public world in which political action is possible. Of course, for the most part Arendt argues that violence is politically ineffective. However, the concession that violence might be the only way significantly weakens this strand of her argument.

Although visibility appears as a fundamental condition for politics and plurality, Arendt accepts as an exception to the public realm, that the public going private is beneficial for things that need to be hidden from publicity. Private property is "[t]he only reliable hiding place from the common public world, not only from everything that goes on in it but also from its very publicity, from being seen and being heard" (Arendt, 1998 [1958]: 71). Within the protective security of four walls, humans meet a location, a space that is reserved for concealment.

In Arendt's view, visibility is an essential criterion for the practice of politics, but invisibility is no less important as a space for reclusion, where one can get on with the aspects of life that are not politically relevant, or what Arendt calls "life processes". As mentioned by Patricia Owens,

> [t]he dominance of security does not reside in empowering the sovereign to decide the law and exceptions to the law […]. The dominant discourses and practices of security are exemplary instances of the modern rise of the social, as understood by Hannah Arendt. The social is the realm where the 'life process' has achieved its own public domain; the discourse of security has provided the central justification and mechanism for the expansion of the 'life' of society under capitalism and the related modern belief that life is the highest political good (2011: 16).

Arendt sees this rise of the social as "the modern discovery of intimacy" (1998 [1958]: 69), in which the private realm dissolved. This represents an intrusion into the public space, because the fixation of the social with the life process of mankind sacrifices *action* – as the work in concert of a collective (Gordon, 2001: 100). As a consequence, both public and private spheres are ruined: "[t]he public because it has become a function of the private and the private because it has become the only common concern left" (Arendt, 1998 [1958]: 69). To Patricia Owens (2016), this phenomenon equals to "household governance", a form of governance based on the "ministration of life processes" in which populations are essentially domesticated and depoliticised – an understanding that is not far from Michel Foucault's biopolitics (2000). In all, the rise of the social makes discourses and practices of security more visible, but only to the extent that they exacerbate life's necessities of security, thereby overcoming the private realm, and minimising the security of concealment for the sake of social control. In other words, although security is provided by, and through, high visibility, it remains fundamentally depoliticised and disregards the freedom of populations.

As the next sections will show, it can be argued that the use of drones produces an inversion of this visibility-invisibility relation: the politics of security and its execution become invisible to the public eye, whereas the notion of a secure private environment disappears from the areas in which drones are operating. In that regard, drones invert the relation between visibility and politics: they

hide what is political and highlight what is supposed to be private.

II. Drones and low visibility: the security of American life over politics?

This section highlights how the low visibility of drone policies results from a "disassembled"[3] (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2009) relationship between control and outsourcing that has been managed by the Obama administration in terms of covertness and political secrecy. Within that ambiguous equation, political visibility has become secondary to the provision of security in the name of North American citizens, and has affected both the public realm of other countries, and the very possibility of freedom for the citizens in foreign territories where drones are used as lethal weapons. In this sense, depoliticisation occurs due to an accentuation of the US private realm as the realm of freedom, and to the preoccupation with the life process (Gordon, 2001: 105-106) within the security of the US' four walls.

Secrecy and deception have been recurrently used throughout history as a "means to achieve political ends", and can therefore be seen as "justifiable tools" (Arendt, 1972: 4). However, Arendt raises the question of to whom is concealment destined. Is it ever aimed at the enemy, or is it destined to domestic consumption? (ibid.: 14) Are there any tactical considerations for secrecy,[4] concealment, or lying? As Katharine Kindervater shows (2016), the covert use of military technology is not uncommon in the evolution of Western warfare, often combined with different techniques of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. In this context, the role and involvement of the CIA in the US drone programme is nothing particularly new or surprising. Although it has never been clearly acknowledged or held accountable, "The highly classified CIA program to kill militants in the tribal regions of Pakistan [...] is the world's worst-kept secret" (Bergen and Tiedemann, 2010). The insistence on maintaining CIA's actions non visible has effectively been endorsed by Barack Obama, who has referred to legal arguments such as the "state secrets privilege" to deflect inquiries into the government's use of lethal force in foreign countries from the beginning of his presidency, and has never forced the Agency to publicly answer for the deaths of non-Western civilians during the eight-year covert bombing campaign (Devereaux and Emmons, 2016). As Simon Chesterman explains:

> Intelligence services have a chequered history of abuse, but their legitimate
> activities tend to be justified in established democracies by reference to their

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[3] Rita Abrahamsen and Michael C. Williams (2009) draw on Saskia Sassen's notion of state "disassembly", according to which national states disassemble and develop new global assemblages incorporating privatisation and globalisation, to approach the growth of private security within broader shifts of global governance. They show how the public-private and global/local distinctions and relationships have been re-articulated into what they term "global security assemblages".

[4] In the US, secrecy is no novelty. In 1969, for instance, President Nixon and Henry Kissinger decided to bomb Cambodia without any notice to Congress or the public, and the raids were conducted in deepest secrecy (Cockburn, 2015: 429).

grounding in the rule of law – a relatively recent requirement in some countries – and the existence of an accountability chain to democratic institutions (Chesterman, 2008: 1069).

Not only is this political secrecy a real challenge to visibility and accountability, as it is reinforced by the "scientific development and knowledge production and practices of killing and control" (Kindervater, 2016: 234). Security increasingly depends on a form of specialised and technical knowledge that can only be provided by a restricted epistemic community of experts, such as in the fields of information systems, engineering, robotics, and cybernetics. Many notions and procedures from those fields are unknown to most of the policymakers and require very specific skills and information. Such form of knowledge is so technical that it is not meant to be public, in the sense that it is not understood or mastered by a vast majority of individuals.

Therefore, developing technologies such as drones, and applying them in contexts of warfare, counter-terrorism or counterinsurgency, can ultimately be considered as a sophisticated form of contemporary social and political control that is "[m]uch better symbolized by manipulation than coercion, by remote and invisible limits than by guns or handcuffs", implying "[b]eing more covert, embedded and remote, and often without the awareness or consent of its subject (Bijker, 2006: 687). For the Obama administration, this lack of publicity began in the very decision-making process designed for drone strikes. Every week during his presidency, Obama held a meeting in the White House Situation Room with two dozen of security officials, during which he was given a list, or PowerPoint of suspected terrorists, and approved each individual name to become a target to kill, based on the suspects' personal biographies (Becker and Shane, 2012). According to the "Drone Papers" – a series of secret military documents disclosed by *The Intercept* in 2015 – there was a kill list with selected individual targets for assassination, according to which the President only approved the targets, and not each individual strike. As for the CIA, it is reported that it has created its own list and rules for strikes, meaning that there are additional strikes and deaths to those authorised by the kill list that occur in the shadow (Currier, 2015).

Politically, the apology of the use of drones is made in reference to their effectiveness, and sustained by a discourse of rationality in risk avoidance:

> Our actions are effective. Dozens of highly skilled core al Qaeda commanders, trainers, bomb makers, and operatives have been taken off the battlefield. Plots have been disrupted that would have targeted international aviation, US transit systems, European cities and our troops in Afghanistan. These strikes have saved lives (The White House, 2013).

This kind of security decisions are part of "reflexive politics" (Rasmussen, 2001), as a politics in which meaning is constantly constructed in a rationalisation of risks, in order to manage them despite their latent inexistence. This move promotes preemptive action according to "pre-active politics" (Beck,

2009: 41), which privileges prevention, expert knowledge and technical solutions over problem-solving properly said (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2007: 135). As threats such as terrorism are hardly controllable or eliminated, governments prefer to act by anticipation than run higher risks by not intervening (Coker, 2002: 62).

The targeting and subsequent killing of Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen in 2011, an American citizen, has been one of the most controversial cases to date, giving rise to much questioning and partial attempts at public justification by the Obama administration. Andrew Cockburn exposes the case as follows:

> Anwar al-Awlaki, for example, billed for a time as "the most dangerous man in the world," was publicly nominated to the CIA's kill list in April 2011. Awlaki had already retreated to the heartland of his tribe, the Awalik. It was easy to believe that the fugitive was hidden in the desert fastness, but in fact, as Guardian reporter Ghaith Abdul-Ahad discovered when he visited the tribe's ruling Sultan, although everyone in the neighborhood knew where the notorious preacher was living, no one seemed interested in arresting him. "The government haven't asked us to hand him in," Sultan Fareed bin Babaker told the reporter. "If they do then we will think about it. But no one has asked us."
> A few weeks before this conversation took place, a pair of Justice Department lawyers in Washington had obligingly provided the Obama administration with a secret legal justification for summarily executing Awlaki, accepting as a premise that he posed an "imminent" threat and that his capture was "infeasible" (Cockburn, 2015: 3907).

The fact is that, further to a lawsuit filed by the *New York Times* and two of its reporters, the US federal court has refused to require the Department of Justice to disclose a legal justification for the targeted killing of Awlaki (Liptak, 2013). The motivation behind this lawsuit was to question US government and to know its legal position on the use of targeted killings against persons having ties to terrorism. To the lawyer of the *New York Times*, Jameel Jaffer, this ruling "[d]enies the public access to crucial information about the government's extrajudicial killing of US citizens and also effectively greenlights its practice of making selective and self-serving disclosures" (ibid.). Ultimately, this is related to what was mentioned earlier as the intromission of security in the individuals "life processes" (Owens, 2011).

Within the context of the US drone policy, concealment is a principle destined to the enemies of the US – as in the case of the CIA operating in foreign sole – but it is also intended for domestic consumption when the criteria for drone targeting are not transparently discussed in the public realm. What we also see with the use of drones overseas is a transformation of both the private and public sphere of the countries subject to US drone strikes, where contestation or discussion is absent from the public view, and where the principle of safety of "private life" is taken as a disposable principle even in non-conflict settings. In Pakistan, for instance, the security of four walls is something that has virtually ceased to exist, as the number of citizens subject to the fear of drones largely exceeds the number of potential terrorists (Allinson, 2015; Stanford and NYU, 2012). As argued by Barrinha and da Mota (2016), drones have produced fundamentally uninsurable security subjects in the territories in

which they operate: they are subjects perceived as not being entitled to any form of secure or securable life. The ultimate consequence is the depoliticisation of those contexts (Bijker, 2006: 693-694).

III.   The expiation of Obama: attempting to regain the political

As seen so far, the drone programme under the Obama administration has been surrounded by secrecy, covert decisional processes, obsolete congressional oversight and public silence, outdating to great extent the political condition of visibility, and eluding a parcel of US public space and freedom. This section focuses on how, as its mandate approached to the end, the Obama administration became aware of the negative consequences of that political invisibility, and, using Patricia Owens words, attempted to re-create a "political island of security" by reconstituting the idea that political promises had been kept, thus re-securing a "space for freedom" (2011: 28). These notions are offered by Hannah Arendt as well, and help reflecting on the possibility for Barack Obama's presidency to regain the political in what regards its drone policy. To Owens, "securing a space for freedom" (2011: 18) enables a public space of speech and action, in which islands of security can be created by making and keeping promises. To sustain this idea, one may illustrate Obama's promises prior to his mandate about how he envisioned his administration would conduct counter-terrorism and counterinsurgency. Back in 2007, Obama stated:

> I will not hesitate to use military force to take out terrorists who pose a direct threat to America. This requires a broader set of capabilities […]. I will ensure that our military becomes **more stealth, agile, and lethal in its ability to capture or kill terrorists**. We need to recruit, train, and **equip our armed forces to better target terrorists**, and to help foreign militaries to do the same (Obama, 2007; emphasis added).

In retrospective, it may be considered that the drone programme implemented during Obama's two mandates respected scrupulously what he had planned – the lethality in capturing and killing terrorists, but also civilians by extension. Accordingly, the number of drone strikes increased very significantly under the Obama administration. Although the data officially released in 2016 indicate that between 64 and 116 civilians were killed by US drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Libya during the two terms of Obama's presidency, and 2,372 to 2,581 combatants, it is estimated that the Obama administration conducted nearly nine times more strikes than his predecessor Bush (Devereaux, 2016). However, these numbers remain very far from the most conservative estimations presented by investigative journalists and independent researchers, as they contrast with the estimations of at least 200 and as many as 1,000 civilians killed by American drone strikes by

organisations like the Long War Journal or the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (Devereaux and Emmons, 2016).

In 2006, still as Senator for Illinois, Obama had been publicly critical of the Congress overseeing its responsibilities regarding Guantanamo, as he defended the fundamental human rights of the detainees as being "bigger than politics" (Obama, 2006). Later, as a candidate to presidency, Obama referred that the Bush counter-terrorist policy had become "an excuse for unchecked presidential power", and that America's "most precious values" had been compromised (Obama, 2007). In this sense, he promised he would act differently from George W. Bush in terms of political visibility, foretelling the need to foster the capabilities of intelligence and law enforcement agencies without undermining the Constitution and freedom (ibid.). These political promises help to understand how

> Sooner or later, U.S. officials and diplomats toiling to implement what they believed was American policy came to realize that there was really only one issue at stake: the domestic U.S. political fortunes of the Obama administration. " 'No bombs on my watch,' that's all they wanted to be able to say," explained one former Obama White House official to me. "Drones were a cheap, politically painless way of dealing with that. No one even talked about it very much" (Cockburn, 2015: 3799).

Seemingly, the drone programme might have been painless and uncontroversial within the political arena of partisan opposition, but it rapidly became extremely controversial among scholars, investigative journalists, and humanitarian organisations. As Arendt says, "There always comes the point beyond which lying becomes counterproductive" (Arendt, 1972: 7). Many reports were published throughout Obama's presidency, denouncing the illegality, disproportionality, and overall wrong-doings of drone targeting (HRC, 2010; HRW, 2012; O'Connell, 2010; Reprieve, 2014; Stanford and NYU, 2012; The Intercept, 2015). The US kept defending, throughout Obama's tenure, its drone programme, rebuffing the accusations of secrecy and significant death of civilians in Pakistan and elsewhere.

During this period, there were, however, two changes worth mentioning. The first regards the significant reduction in CIA's drone operations, which saw its activities curtailed in places such as Yemen and Syria, with the White House openly preferring the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) to undertake drone lethal operations whenever possible (Miller, 2016). The second has been unfolding since last summer, when the administration released the internal assessment of the drone policy in July 2016. This was justified in terms of the nation's imperative commitment to comply with its obligations under armed conflict, "[i]ncluding those that address the protection of civilians, such as the fundamental principles of necessity, humanity, distinction, and proportionality" (Devereaux, 2016). Later in October 2016, Obama granted an interview to Jonathan Chait of the *New York Magazine* that is essential to understand his attempt at regaining the political before he went out of

office. In it, he acknowledges, among other things, the institutional constraints preventing him from discussing more freely issues related to the US drone programme: "We can't advertise everything that we're doing without inhibiting our effectiveness in protecting the American people" (Chait and Obama, 2016). About his drone policy he argued that although he does not want the US "[t]o get to the point where we're that comfortable with killing", he thinks people " don't always recognize the degree to which the civilian-casualty rate, or the rate at which innocents are killed, in these precision strikes is significantly lower than what happens in a conventional war" (ibid.). After avowing his discomfort with the practice of targeted killing based on a list, Obama basically justifies the civilian deaths by minimising their rate in comparison to conventional warfare. Ultimately, there is a consequentialist rationale at play that justifies and legitimises everything else. In spite of that, this interview displayed Obama's attempt to "institutionalize rigorous debate and an attitude of aiming before you shoot", and his overall concern with "constructing greater transparency" in an effort to institute accountability measures for future presidents to come:

> [I] haven't lost **my preference for good old-fashioned debate, bills, and the democratic process.** If there's one wish that I have for future presidents, **it's not an imperial presidency, it is a functional, sensible majority-and-opposition being able to make decisions based on facts and policy and compromise**. That would have been my preference for the majority of my presidency. It was an option that wasn't always available. But I hope the American people continue to understand that that's how the system should work (Chait and Obama, 2016; emphasis added).

This statement contains all the elements essential to the realisation of political action within the public realm, as Arendt idealised – debate, democracy, political pluralism, compromise. However, it seems this was a promise that was not available for Obama to keep, and that by speaking of it after all the political shortcomings were taken, it is a way of re-bonding with the political. To Naureen Shah, director of national security and human rights at Amnesty International,

> What's so interesting is that President Obama acknowledges this problem — that future presidents will be empowered to kill globally, and in secret. What he doesn't acknowledge is how much of a role his administration had in making that a bizarre normal (cit. in Devereaux and Emmons, 2016).

Regardless of Obama's personal views on the topic, and late measures in order to curb some of the most pernicious effects of his policy, he set the template of how drones can be used in international affairs. Obama himself recognises he

> [c]ould see, over the horizon, a situation in which, **without Congress showing much interest in restraining actions with authorizations that were written really broadly**, **you end up with a president who can carry on perpetual wars all over the world, and a lot of them covert, without any accountability or democratic debate** (Chait and Obama, 2016; emphasis added).

The minor changes implemented in the last few years of his tenure do not over-trump the fact that the new president of the US will be able to continue the same policy without needing to provide any significant political justification for it.

Conclusion

This article suggested looking into Obama's drone policy from an Arendtian perspective. By doing this, it enhanced the critical connections existing between a contemporary technological device of control and killing, material and political visibility, and the very possibility of politics.

When exploring the conceptual and philosophical possibilities of visibility for technology in the first part of the article, it was seen that visibility is fundamental for the public realm to exist, for politics to work on behalf of human freedom and agency. Arendt helps understanding that the application of technology in society is to conform to that very principle of visibility, meaning that it should be thought and debated having public interest as an ultimate goal. Moreover, when considering the violence that may derive from technology such as drones, a central concern arises with the possibility that gratuitous acts of destruction through technological devices could fundamentally depoliticise violence. What this implies for the way security policies are defined is that the invisible application of invisible technology denotes the total absence of any political choice, understood as a collective transparent action *of* men *to* men.

These utterances were sustained in the second part of the article, when approaching more specifically the overall drone policy of the Obama administration. Indeed, it was seen that the violence drones entail has not been used as a response to extreme injustice, or as an opener of political space. On the contrary, the environment of institutional secrecy in which drones have evolved as a security policy indicate an ambiguous interplay of visibility, as they both hide the visibility of politics domestically and externally, and expose the lives of civilians, guilty or not, across the globe through constant surveillance and threat of lethal action. As a consequence, with drones, it is the privilege of a few to know how, and to have access to, their functioning, their effects, and their actual contribution to enhance security or freedom.

Finally, the last section of the article provocatively suggested that Obama's late attempt at acknowledging some of the political frailties underlying his drone policy was in fact an attempt at "regaining the political". Despite Obama's effort to promote accountability measures and make sure presidents after him follow a different practice than his, the reality is he still set a blueprint, whose consequences escape his control in the future. Remarkably, looking at another work from Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1976), one cannot dismiss the boomerang effect within history. Racism and

the practice of bureaucratically organised violence were initially materialised outside Europe by Western imperial powers but would eventually return to the metropolis to haunt them. This is a warning from history that one should carefully consider.

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