

Coup d'état

PRACTICAL HANDBOOK

DWARD LUTTWAK

Coup d'État

Edward Luttwak

Coup d'Etat

A Practical Handbook

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**To my father Josif Luttwak z.l.
And to my mother.**

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Foreword

Coup d'État, the brilliant and original book of a then very young man, first published in 1967, attracted immediate attention and appeared subsequently in the major languages. It is perhaps of even greater interest today, simply because it has become clearer during the last decade that far from being a fortunately rare exception in an otherwise civilized world order, the *coup d'état* is now the normal mode of political change in most member states of the United Nations. There are by now many more military dictatorships in existence than parliamentary democracies, and there are few cases on record in which such dictatorships have been overthrown by 'popular revolts'. Far more often the military men are replaced by one or more of their colleagues. Yet with all this there has been a virtual taboo on the study of *coup d'états*, and some critics of the present book obviously did not know quite what to make of it. It is in many ways easy to see why: the idea that a *coup d'état* can be carried out in many parts of the world with equal ease by small groups of men of the left and the right (and, for all one knows, also of the centre), provided they have mastered some elementary lessons of modern politics, is, of course, quite shocking. Marx and Engels wrote a great deal about revolution but hardly ever about the technique of revolution; the only nineteenth century left-wing leader who provided detailed instruction in this respect was Blanqui, and he was not very successful. There had been one other predecessor Gabriel Naudé, whose work was published in Paris in the late seventeenth century; an English translation by Dr. William King appeared in 1711 (*Political considerations upon Refined Politicks and the Master Strokes of State*). Some of this sounds very topical indeed:

'The thunderbolt falls before the noise of it is heard in the skies, prayers are said before the bell is rung for them; he receives the blow that thinks he himself is giving it, he suffers who never expected it, and he dies

that look'd upon himself to be the most secure; all is done in the Night and Obscurity, amongst Storms and Confusion.'

But Naudé has been forgotten for a long time, and his concept of the 'master stroke' was, in any case, much wider than that of *coup d'état* in its present meaning.

In our time whole libraries have been written on the objective conditions in which revolutions take place, about civil and peasant wars, about revolutionary and internal war, about guerrilla activities and terrorism, but almost nothing on *coup d'états*, and this despite the fact that there have been few, if any, revolutions of late and that 'objective conditions' are always only one of several factors involved in their genesis. Seen in this light *coup d'états* are annoying not only for practising politicians but also from the point of view of the political scientist. For on the basis of 'objective conditions' models and patterns can be built without undue difficulty, whereas *coups* are quite unpredictable, almost by definition they are mortal enemies of orderly hypotheses and concepts: how does one account scientifically for the political ambitions of a few strategically well placed individuals?

All this is highly regrettable but it does not lessen the need for more thorough and detailed study of *coup d'états*. For according to all indications this seems to be the 'wave of the future' – much more than other, far more often discussed, forms of political violence. A study of guerrilla warfare led me to the conclusion that the army in most third world countries is the strongest contender for domestic power: during the last fifteen years there have been some hundred and twenty military *coups*, whereas only five guerrilla movements have come to power – and three of these followed the Portuguese *coup* in 1974. The function of the guerrilla movement has reverted to what it originally was – that of paving the way for and supporting the regular army: it holds the stirrup so that others may get into the saddle, and the same applies, *a fortiori* to terrorist groups. It is true that in some parts of the world it has become more difficult to stage a military coup. Once upon a time the commander of a tank brigade in a middle Eastern country was at least a potential contender for political power. This is no longer so, partly as the result of centralization in military command, partly because the political police have become more effective. But if in these parts *coups* have become

less frequent they are still the only form of political change that can be envisaged at the present time.

But even if *coups* are unpredictable, even if they defy known methods of interpretation (let alone of prediction), they contain certain ever recurring patterns – ‘the same always different’ – from the time the conspiracy is first hatched to the actual seizure of power. The present book is a major landmark in a field hitherto almost uncharted.

Walter Laqueur
Washington – London
October 1978

Preface to the First Edition

This is a handbook. It is therefore not concerned with a theoretical analysis of the *coup d'état*, but rather with the formulation of the techniques which can be employed to seize power within a state. It can be compared to a cookery book in the sense that it aims at enabling any layman equipped with enthusiasm – and the right ingredients – to carry out his own *coup*; only a knowledge of the rules is required. Two words of caution: in the first place in order to carry out a successful *coup* certain pre-conditions must be present, just as in cooking bouillabaisse one needs the right sorts of fish to start with. Secondly, readers should be aware that the penalty of failure is far greater than having to eat out of a tin. (The rewards, too, are greater.)

It may be objected that should such a handbook be inadequate or misleading the readers will be subject to great dangers, while if it is an efficient guide to the problems it may lead to upheavals and disturbances. My defence is that *coups* are already common and if, as a result of this book, a greater number of people learn how to carry them out this is merely a step towards democratization of the *coup* – a fact that all persons of liberal sentiments should applaud.

Finally, it should be noted that the techniques here discussed are politically neutral, and are only concerned with the objective of seizing control of the state, and not at all with subsequent policies. Readers interested in pursuing this subject further may wish to consult some of the standard academic works related to the subject, among which are: *The Role of the Military in Under-Developed Countries*, edited by J. J. Johnson, *The Man on Horseback*, by S. E. Finer, and the chapter on Armed Forces Organizations in Marion J. Levy Jr's *Modernization and Structure of Societies*.

E. L.

Preface to the 1979 Edition

During the years since the original publication of this book, I have frequently been told that it has served as the planning guide for this or that *coup*. But the only case of actual use for which there is firm evidence would make a poor advertisement: the *coup* in question was at first very successful but then failed, amidst much killing. Its chief protagonist, a defence minister who aspired to yet greater things, was caught and promptly executed. When his house was searched, a heavily annotated copy of the French edition was found in his study. I could take refuge in the excuse that the book's prescriptions were not followed with sufficient care, but in reality it was not my purpose to supply a *bona fide* do-it-yourself manual. In writing this book, my true aim was entirely different: to explore the meaning of political life in those backward countries now officially known as 'less developed'.

When the ideas in this book were first conceived, the intellectual classes of the Western world were passionately interested in the affairs of the Third World. There was an atmosphere of hopeful expectation about the new states of Africa and Asia, then emerging on the world scene for the first time. Even for Latin America there was a new interest, and new hopes - greatly stimulated by Kennedy's 'Alliance for Progress' which, like all of Kennedy's projects, enjoyed excellent publicity.

But it was undoubtedly Black Africa which stimulated the greatest interest, often remarkably emotional. The dissolution of the British and French empires was then still in progress, and the new states of Africa were the newest of all. Their utter poverty was not entirely concealed by the exotic scenery, and the almost complete absence of an educated class was brutally obvious. Yet it was only a few right-wing extremists, and the still smaller number of Old African Hands, who argued that independence was being granted too soon. This small minority was easily dismissed as reactionary and racist. The enlightened knew better:

the new states would muster the fresh energies of the peoples liberated from the lethargy of colonial rule; their youth would soon be educated to provide technicians, professionals and civil servants; given some aid from the West, a great upsurge of economic development was to be expected, and this would soon remedy backwardness, and the contrived poverty caused by colonial exploitation. More than that, we were told to look for moral leadership from the new states. The idealistic young leaders who had struggled for independence would be a great spiritual force on the world scene.

As a student at the London School of Economics the present writer heard such things being said as if they were not merely true but obvious. I had no desire to join the small band of right-wingers who alone, opposed the devolution of the British Empire. But I found the common view to be hopelessly removed from reality; our best minds seemed to suffer a decomposition of the critical faculties when the subject was the Third World. This is not the place to speculate on the obscure emotional reasons that alone could explain such a failure of the intellect. What is certain is that a highly favorable vision of the future of the Third World was given wide currency, even though all the factual evidence in hand flatly contradicted the notions on which the prediction was based.

It was not the poverty of the new states that made me dubious of their future, and entirely pessimistic as to their contribution to international life. Poverty does not necessarily inhibit cultural or even social achievement, and in any case some of the least promising of the new states already enjoyed vast unearned incomes from oil exports. As for the lack of adequate administrative structures, this was certainly not a fatal deficiency; few things grow as easily as state bureaucracies. Not even the ill-effects of relative deprivation felt by the poor, confronted with luxuries by way of the mass media, seemed to me to be all that serious. It seems that the 'revolution of rising expectations' – yet another slogan made by Western intellectuals to justify forthcoming depredations – has remained unrealized.

But there was one deficiency that was, and is, fatal, which would inevitably cause the new states to misgovern at home, while degrading international standards abroad. There was one thing that the new states lacked which they could neither make for themselves nor obtain from abroad, and this was a genuine

political community. It is difficult to give a formal definition, and perhaps it is best to begin by evoking the familiar concept of the nation, in contrast to the state. The new states came into existence because the colonial authorities handed over their powers to political leaders who had agitated for independence; more specifically, the new leaders were given control over the army, police, tax collectors and administrators who had worked for the colonial government. The old servants of the empire served their new masters, ostensibly for new purposes. But their methods and their operational ideology were those of the imperial power, moulded by notions which reflected the values of *its* political community. There was no organic nexus between the native cultures and the instruments of state power, and neither could such a link be formed. For one thing there were usually several, quite different, native cultures, often incompatible. Moreover the methods and operational ideologies that the native cultures *would* organically sustain were usually utterly unsuited to the needs of modern life, that is Western life. The problem was not that this dissociation would make the state apparatus weak, but rather that it would leave it entirely unconstrained and much too strong. The consequences are now fully evident. The administrators of the new states are vested with all the great power over the individual that the entire machinery of files and records, vehicles, telecommunications and modern weapons give to the modern state. But their conduct is not constrained by legality, or by the moral standards which any genuine political community must enforce, even if only in requiring hypocrisy on the part of violators. Above all, their conduct is not restrained by political pressures, since the oppressed are neither afforded the electoral opportunities available in Western democracies, nor do they have social frameworks within which political action may be concerted. Hence the universal misgovernment which has replaced colonial non-government throughout the territories of the new states. Always present, bribery is now a quite normal part in any transaction between citizen and state; a detailed and pervasive oppression has replaced the distant authoritarianism of colonial days, since neither bureaucrats nor policemen are restrained by the rules of legality – or at least the procedures of legalism – which restrained the colonial power. As a result, exactions may increase without limit, and no citizen may assure his liberty, life or property by complying with the law – since the law offers no protection

against the violations of its custodians. If colonialism was a crime, the greatest offence was in its undoing when fragile native cultures, embryonic modern societies, and minority peoples ill-provided to protect themselves, were everywhere abandoned into the hands of political leaders equipped with the powerful machine of the modern state. The brutalities of Idi Amin have been sufficiently spectacular to attract the persistent attention of Western media. But Idi Amin is fully justified in his complaint that the Western media are unfair to him: from Algeria to Zanzibar, the peoples of Africa are ruled by autocrats whose unfettered control over the machinery of the state allows them to indulge every vice and every excess of virtue: in one country the ruler may be an alcoholic, in another he may forbid alcoholic drink to all, because *he* deems it irreligious; in one country, the ruler may openly claim for himself any woman or boy that meets his fancy, in another he may have adulterers executed; in one country the most useless of luxuries may be freely imported while there is no foreign currency with which to buy essential medicines, in another the ruler may proclaim that even books may not be imported, although foreign currency is accumulating uselessly in foreign bank deposits. Above all, there is the systematic use of the instruments of defense and order for internal oppression, and the appropriation of public wealth on a fantastic scale. When the American Vice-President was forced to resign because he had accepted bribes, or what were deemed to be bribes, there was amazement at the size of the sums involved: in the Third World not even a junior minister could be purchased for so little. The logic whereby public power may easily generate private wealth is universal, and the enrichment of the powerful is a pervasive phenomenon found all over the world. But there is a difference in the workings of this logic in the new states, and not merely of scale: it is not an ancillary phenomenon but rather the essential process of governance for those in control, and it is not moderated by the need for discretion. The overt corruption commonly found in the new states reveals the full consequences of the absence of political community. Only from the latter can effective norms arise, norms felt in the consciousness of each citizen. Without political community there can be no effective norms, and without the norms that arise quite naturally from the values and beliefs of the community, the state is no more than a machine. It is then that the *coup d'état* becomes feasible since, as