

COUP D'ÉTAT: A PRACTICAL HANDBOOK

(EDWARD LUTTWAK)

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Given that zombie survival manuals and similar how-to books are today all the rage, on sale at every Costco, Edward Luttwak's *Coup d'État: A Practical Handbook* seems like a selection from the same genre. Namely, of somewhat jokey books that purport to tell you what to do in a strange, disastrous situation, while effectively acknowledging that if you do end up being chased by zombies, hurriedly turning to the index, finding the entry "When Being Pursued," then scrambling to locate page 102, isn't probably the best tactic for survival. But instead, this book is the real thing, I think—an actual practical handbook on how to overthrow the state. More precisely, how to overthrow a weak state, a banana republic, though I will give some thought to relevance in the modern American context.

You could look at this book through the other end of the kaleidoscope, too, as an analysis of how all this has happened before and will happen again—or, as Luttwak claims, in his typical cynical and ironic way, as a way "to explore the meaning of politics in many backward countries politely described as 'emerging.'" As a "practical handbook," a lot of details are missing—it doesn't tell you, for example, whether you need artillery or can instead get by with just man-portable weapons, or give you the exact words to use to convince Captain Jones to join your coup. I think that's intentional, though, since one of the key takeaways from the book, obvious but still worth repeating, is that every situation is different, flexibility is key, and therefore general principles are what should be focused on. This is what I used to call, in my younger days advising (poorly) my friends on tactics with the fairer sex, "broad strokes"—not getting bogged down in obsessive plus/minus analysis of narrow decisions or happenings, but to view the overall picture and goals while hewing closely to a few basic principles (what I codified as "Charles's Seven Or So Rules"—no, you may not have a copy).

Before we get to how to actually seize power, I should note the original book was written fifty years ago, and substantially revised and updated in 2016. It doesn't seem that Luttwak changed much, though I don't know for sure, and one or two errors slip through (Reza Shah

has not been “the father of the present shah of Persia” for quite some time). In 1968, the glow was still partially on the post-colonial world, and nearly everyone assumed it was just a matter of time before post-colonial countries joined the First World. Fifty years ago, therefore, coups seemed like a transitory phase in the march toward stability and wealth, but now we know they are permanent, since there is basically no indication of any post-colonial country joining the First World, other than a few smaller Asian countries—which are themselves not necessarily as stable as they appear, which isn’t very stable anyway. Luttwak notes this, in his typical mocking way, saying that he predicted it, not because of instability due to the “revolution of rising expectations” (“yet another slogan made up by Western intellectuals to justify forthcoming depredations”), but because stable political community is a rare and fragile thing, not found in any post-colonial country (or in their pre-colonial versions, either). By this he means, though he uses other words, adherence to the rule of law. His conclusion is that, if very slowly, sub-Saharan Africa may be rising, or rather, “it is no longer feckless optimism to expect cumulative progress in more places than not.” In North Africa and the Middle East, conversely, Islam has proven an insuperable barrier to the creation of stable regimes recognizing the rule of law (Luttwak is very anti-Islam). The result is continued coups, and more in the latter area than the former. Luttwak wrote before the 2016 coup attempt that effectively cemented Erdogan’s Islamist hold on power, but he was doubtless not surprised by that turn of events.

So how does Luttwak advise seizing power? The basic pedagogic method of this book is to divide the topic into core categories (definition; feasibility; planning; execution), and within those, provide rules that flow from logic and from a range of historical examples Luttwak provides. As far as definitions, Luttwak defines a coup as “a special form of politics that requires guns as an aid to persuasion, although coups rarely succeed if guns are much used and fail totally if the situation degenerates into civil war.” A coup is a swift and complete seizure of the mechanism of state power. Luttwak notes that what makes a coup possible is the modern separation of much of the mechanism of governance from the political rulers themselves, allowing control of the former to be peeled away from the latter (which also means that a state such as Saudi Arabia, cross-linked throughout by “traditional

bonds,” is hard to execute a coup against). In short, a successful coup “uses parts of the state apparatus to seize the controlling levers over the rest.” Notably, a coup is not a revolution (it seeks to control the current system, not destroy it), the masses are not directly involved, and it has no necessary bias toward being executed more by either Left or Right; this is all about power, although it may have an ideological overlay.

Luttwak claims that coups are usually only feasible where the country is “backward.” By this he does not mean poor (and, in fact, if the country is poor enough not to have a bureaucracy, a coup is not feasible at all). Rather, he means there is no diffusion of power, that “the social and economic conditions of the target country must be such as to confine political participation to a small fraction of the population.” In a more advanced country, such as a modern Western state, power is too diffuse to be easily and quickly seized, and the bureaucracy is widespread and sophisticated, unlikely to simply take orders from those it regards as breaking the rules of political community—and therefore a coup there is much harder. Other preconditions to coup feasibility include actual political independence (not being a client state of a great power) and having “organic unity,” not being merely a collection of regional power centers under a diaphanous central government.

As far as strategy, Luttwak focuses on “maximum speed in the transitional phase, and the need to fully neutralize the opposition both before and immediately after the coup.” Lack of speed exposes weakness, which there is certain to be, and makes it harder for the large “wait and see” contingent of uninvolved government workers to maintain neutrality. They will come over to the side of the coup if it succeeds, though—so it needs to succeed fast, to prevent them from instead choosing to back the existing rulers. Furthermore, achieving speed permits easier neutralization of both the armed defenses of the state and possible sources of major political (or religious) opposition. (Although Luttwak doesn’t mention it, lack of speed, because of lack of planning, along with “too many chiefs and not enough Indians,” was the problem with the Stauffenberg coup against Hitler.) To achieve speed, you must recruit adequate numbers of people, who can then be used, at the right moment, “to displace the government from its control of [the state].” Usually, that means you have to recruit from within the armed forces of the state you are trying to subvert (unless there is a party militia or similar group—but

that requires money). Luttwak spends quite a bit of time analyzing at what level and with what tools to subvert the military, using real-life examples such as the Portuguese army in 1967 (when there was not a coup—it's just a structural example). He distinguishes how to approach leaders, who can bring along fighting men, and technicians, such as air traffic controllers, who can help by preventing effective response by the opposition (and by running television and radio stations, etc.). He recommends how to frame the initial discussions with those one is trying to subvert (this part is especially good). Luttwak also discusses quasi-military potentially oppositional forces, such as the Paris police force, concluding that in most cases they should be ignored and dealt with after the coup. Finally, he offers rules for compartmentalization and maintaining as much secrecy as possible, while recognizing that the existing regime will certainly get wind that “something is up.” Thus, minimizing actual information that gets to the state security services (and limiting the damage if someone turns), while maximizing “noise,” is necessary.

Next Luttwak covers planning, here focusing on the 1961 Algerian/French coup attempt, which de Gaulle successfully defeated, and also on a successful attempt (one of many) in Syria in 1961. Luttwak's main point is that mere control of the military is inadequate; some thought must be given to planning to control, neutralize, or defeat political opposition during and immediately after the coup, especially with the role that social media plays today. (Again, Luttwak wrote before the 2016 Turkish coup attempt, but social media played a critical role in defeating that attempt.) Here, Luttwak focuses heavily on “personalities,” by which he means charismatic leaders who must be “neutralized”—i.e., kidnapped or killed at the very beginning of the coup, although he only refers obliquely to that second option. He also discusses geography of control, the blocking of roads, and so forth. Finally, he focuses on group neutralization, from trade unions to religious bodies to political parties, where a powerful enough political group (he uses as an example the National Rifle Association) can slow down the consolidation of an initially successful coup such that it “provokes conflicts that re-open the whole issue.”

And, finally, we get execution of the coup. What is necessary is total commitment, immediately as soon as adequate infiltration of the armed

forces is achieved, along with execution of the plan such that the warning functions of the state are simultaneously triggered at all areas of action (rather than sequentially), and avoiding actual fighting if at all possible, strongly preferring immobilization of opposing forces, while the actual levers of government are seized. Creating ambiguity and confusion on the part of the forces of the state is critical; when presented with what looks like a *fait accompli*, it will be a *fait accompli*. The coup plotters also must not allow a single “headquarters” target on their side to exist such that it can be decapitated. Each team executing the coup must know enough about their own mission (with the details only provided at the last minute), but only about their own mission. And once opposing forces are immobilized and the coup plotters have the levers of power, and control media outlets, they broadcast messages intended to both reassure and intimidate. QED.

This is all incisively and well written. I suspect it is not quite updated enough from 1968; for example, I think that while it mentions social media, it does not emphasize its role enough, nor how best to neutralize its effect, whether you’re the state trying to prevent a coup or plotters trying after the coup begins to neutralize political opposition that may slow down your coup or prevent coordination of civilians against your actions. How does one kill Twitter or Facebook in a country, other than by wholly shutting the internet down (because it is quite easy to evade filters and blocks, if you are motivated enough)? This question is a bit more complex than it seems, though, because it assumes that Facebook, Twitter, and the other “GAFA companies” are opposed to tyranny and will allow themselves to be used to combat tyranny, or at a minimum remain neutral in a conflict. This is false; their decision dynamic is totally different. It boils down to (a) in large markets, actively cooperate with tyranny, and (b) in small markets, assist leftists in power and harm any Right activity, whether in power or not. Thus, in large markets like China and India, the GAFA companies already actively cooperate to suppress opposition (or would in India if the Indian government wanted it), and would certainly eagerly subject themselves to total clampdown at the demand of the state, as during a coup attempt. For example, Google in recent weeks has been openly coordinating with the Chinese government to allow the suppression of any information searches frowned on by the government. We can be certain if there were

active opposition to the Chinese government, the GAFSA companies would fall all over themselves to obey the Party and do their very best to keep the Party on top, although I should note that as of now, this is of limited importance to the Party, because none of the GAFSA companies are as dominant as local Chinese options for the same activities, such as Baidu and Weibo, all of which are also under the iron control of the government. (Whether the GAFSA companies would cooperate with a large Right tyranny is uncertain, though; the desire to harm the Right might override the desire for profits. If, for example, the Russian government faced a coup, Vladimir Putin, unlike Xi Jinping, could not count on Google's and Jack Dorsey's help.)

As to smaller markets, the GAFSA companies were happy to allow Erdogan to use social media to combat the 2016 coup, not because Erdogan was democratically elected, but because he is Islamist, and Islamists are a "victim group" in the eyes of the Left, in essence honorary leftists. (Sure, his opponents were Muslims, too, but not real Muslims for leftist victim-card purposes, since they were secularist military men in the Kemalist mold. Whether the GAFSA companies also actively suppressed use of social media by them, I don't know, but it seems unlikely social media was part of their plan.) But we can be certain that if the Left launched a coup against, say, the Hungarian or Polish governments, the GAFSA companies would do all in their power to assist the coup to overthrow the legitimate government, and to harm the government's ability to use social media to coordinate a response. Democracy is irrelevant; what is relevant is that those who rule the GAFSA companies, and who therefore increasingly rule us, would desperately want the coup, and any Left coup, to succeed in seizing power. (The same principle can be seen in the current massive censorship of conservative thought across all social media, while overt calls for violence from the Left are always totally ignored.) Thus, from the perspective of any Right coup, social media is a significant problem, and from the perspective of any Left coup, a way to start the race ahead of the starting line. The only possible answer is for us to totally break the power of the GAFSA companies, since it's not like Viktor Orbán can do it from his perch in Budapest, so we must do it for him, but that is a topic for another day.

It is tempting to try to map Luttwak's analysis onto the present day. On the Left, we hear that Trump is leading a coup against America,

though what that means is pretty unclear. On the Right, we hear that the Deep State is attempting to overthrow Trump. Leaving aside the truth of either claim, neither of these is much like the types of coups that Luttwak analyzes. I think it is true that the Deep State, basically consisting of pushers of global neoliberal hegemony combined with pushers of vicious left-wing social politics, wants Trump gone. But just because Trump let his opponents create, in the Mephistophelean person of Robert Mueller, a witch-hunting task force of unlimited power devoted to the single goal of destroying him, doesn't mean that, even if they succeed, there has been a coup. After all, Trump doesn't even control most of the levers of government now—his opponents do. They are just trying to keep it that way.

I suppose there could be a coup in America someday. Certainly power is not as diffused as it used to be, which makes America increasingly “backward” in Luttwak's definition. We have the possibility of well-armed militias. We have a politicized and hollowed-out military, where the best men are passed over for advancement in favor of women and homosexuals, doubtless causing the type of resentment Luttwak portrays as fertile ground for coup recruiting (as when recently the Marine Corps ended the career of the prominent and popular Lieutenant Colonel Marcus Mainz, for the sin of referring to administrative make-work as “faggot stuff”). And Luttwak himself identifies circumstances in which highly developed countries may become vulnerable to a coup, such as France in 1961: “severe and prolonged economic crisis . . . a long and unsuccessful war or a major defeat . . . or chronic instability under a multiparty system.” But Luttwak is generally right—the principles of his book aren't really relevant to America or modern Western Europe, whatever problems we may have. That doesn't make his book any less interesting, and who knows, maybe it will rise in relevance to our situation. That's certainly more likely than a zombie invasion!