
H-France Review Vol. 21 (August 2021), No. 152

Patrick Lagoueyte, *Les coups d'État, une histoire française*. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2021. 230 pp. Notes and bibliography. €24.00. (pb). ISBN 9782271115256.

Review by Philip Nord, Princeton University.

The French Revolution ended up dethroning and guillotining a king. Yet, it was one thing to do away with a monarch and another to devise an alternate means of organizing executive authority. For that purpose, there were constitutions, written ones, which identified the various branches of government and distributed power among them. And so, the era of “*L'État, c'est moi*” drew to a close. The state was no longer a unitary entity but a ramified one, and the professionalization of military affairs over the course of the Revolution added one more layer of complexity. In the Ancien Regime, the army formed and unformed, as aristocrats, in answer to the king's summons, mustered into service and mustered out again. Now, it was a standing affair and soldiering no longer the apanage of the titled, but a career with an ethos all its own, distinct from that of civilian life.[1]

This new order proved a fraught and volatile one. The people, itself a new actor on the scene, might intervene to bend the state to its will. One organ of government might tread upon the authority of another, the executive maneuvering to subdue the legislative branch or vice versa. And, of course, the military might always step in to knock heads and take matters into its own hands. The era's generals had a potential and potent asset in short supply among their civilian confreres. The Revolution desacralized the monarchy, but the sacred did not disappear from public life. It manifested itself in providential men whose magnetic personalities captured the public imagination. In the war-torn era of the French Revolution, the prime exemplars of such charismatic leadership were generals, embodiments of the national will who stood above the squabbles of intriguing politicians, towering all the higher the more victories that they accumulated.[2]

This is the stuff of modern politics. In the best of times, the jostling for power resolves itself in compromise and the constitutional order goes on; in the worst, the order fractures and there is a rupture. One or more of the contending forces is overwhelmed. There may even be regime change. And liberty suffers. Patrick Lagoueyte's book is a study of one such form of regime breakdown, the *coup d'État*, a political technique born of the Revolution and, as such, a French invention at its origins, however much imitated by other actors in other places and times.

Lagoueyte does not bandy the term about lightly, but takes care to supply a minimum definition. The coup, he proposes, is a disturbance within the state itself, as one branch of government

usurps the constitutional authority of another, a usurpation backed by an exercise of violence or the credible threat of it. Plotting and concertation are part of the operation, and so too is an element of surprise. As for the violence, it may have a popular dimension, with the plotters exploiting spontaneous discontent or summoning it up to arm-twist political enemies into submission. In France, however, it was from the military, even more than from an exasperated public, that the threat and application of violence came. No sooner is the definition sketched than concrete examples start coming to mind, three in particular, and Lagoueyte examines them all.

The first is the Fructidor coup of the Year V (September 1797). Elections that year had proven favorable to Bourbon loyalists, who even managed to place one of their own, General Jean-Charles Pichegru, in the Presidency of the Council of Five Hundred. France was then ruled by the Directory, and directors loyal to the Republic, Paul Barras in the lead, conspired with the commander-in-chief of the Army of Italy, Napoléon Bonaparte, to undo the election results. Bonaparte dispatched troops to Paris under the command of Pierre Augereau, which were deployed against the royalists. Two directors were purged, as well as scores of elected representatives who suffered a similar fate, their parliamentary immunity notwithstanding. The Directory did not become a dictatorship at a stroke, but respect for the constitution and the electoral process were no longer givens, which left the regime vulnerable to future coups, and one was not long in coming.

The coup of 18 Brumaire (1799), the most celebrated and infamous in France's history, proved fatal to the Directory. On this occasion too, Bonaparte played a role, though he no longer acted at a distance but made a first-hand appearance to orchestrate events to his own advantage. It was the specter of a resurgent Jacobinism that triggered the 18 Brumaire. The roster of plotters bore a resemblance to the team that had pulled off the Fructidor coup. In on the scheme was a member of the Directory, the Abbé Sieyès, working hand in glove with Bonaparte. The operation almost unraveled when Bonaparte presented himself before the Council of Five Hundred and the Jacobin faction, rather than folding, pushed back. Bonaparte, for a moment, lost his nerve. Unlike in 1797, however, the Council of Five Hundred was presided over, not by a foe, but by an ally—one of Bonaparte's own siblings, Lucien. Lucien manifested a sang-froid that day lacking in his older brother. He dissolved the assembly and sent the Jacobins packing. Bonaparte maneuvered successfully to impose a new constitution and so the Directory met its demise, giving way to a new regime, the Consulate, which in turn gave way to the Empire, thus ending France's first experiment in republican government.

A Bonaparte, the emperor's nephew Louis-Napoléon, also did in France's second republican experiment and by similar means. France's Second Republic was born of the revolution of February 1848. The new regime's constitution invested executive authority in the office of the Presidency to be filled by direct, popular election, an innovation that conferred a special aura of legitimacy on the office's occupant. Lest that person develop monarchical ambitions, the constitution limited the president's mandate to a single, four-year term. In the event, France's electorate awarded a resounding victory to Prince Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte in the Republic's first and only presidential elections in December. Note, "only" because Louis-Napoléon coveted more than one term and was ready to destroy the Republic to get his way. Parliament would not change the rules as he wanted, to allow him to run for a second term, so he schemed to overturn the regime. As in all such schemes, he had allies: the Minister of War, General Jacques Leroy de Saint Arnaud; the Duc de Morny, an illegitimate half-brother who ran the Ministry of the Interior; and the Paris prefect of police, Charlemagne de Maupas. The repressive line-up was

imposing, and it turned out to be necessary. The plotters struck on December 2, 1851. Arresting uncooperative parliamentarians proved no problem, nor subduing popular Paris, which raised a few barricades but no more. The real trouble came in the Midi, which rose in insurrection, requiring the determined application of armed force to quell. Louis-Napoléon, now on top, made himself emperor, a change of title and of regime later confirmed by a plebiscite conducted under repressive duress. Given the Second Empire's origins in a blood-soaked *coup d'État*, it is little wonder that the regime never feted the *Deux-décembre* as a day of national rejoicing.

These three *cas de référence*, as Lagoueyte calls them, are illustrative of the *coup d'État*, French style. The recipe for success inevitably entails collusion of some kind, civilians and soldiers plotting together. Lagoueyte acknowledges that the coup comes in other variants. It is just that, in France's history, none of these have worked. Civilian leaders who go it alone, even with back-up from an insurrectionary crowd, haven't met with success, nor have senior members of the army in the face of an executive branch determined to hold the line.

Look, for example, at what happened on February 6, 1934. That day, an unruly Parisian mob, goaded by right-wing members of parliament and municipal councillors in the crowd, attempted to storm the National Assembly. They were lathered up about a corruption scandal that implicated senior officials of the Republic. Such thieving in the midst of a depression was unconscionable. But the forces of order, the police and the military, did not cede to the pressure, and the mob was beaten back at the cost of more than a dozen dead.

Or look at what happened in 1961, when France's military elite in Algiers rose in revolt. A war was under way against the independence fighters of the Front de Libération Nationale, and France's front-line generals did not mean to lose it. They bridled when President de Gaulle, casting about for an exit strategy, entered into peace negotiations with the FLN, no better than terrorists so far as the generals were concerned. De Gaulle, however, did not flinch. He made a dramatic television appearance, urging the plotters to return to their barracks. The message was all the more powerful because de Gaulle delivered it, dressed in the uniform of the general he had been in Second World War days. The speech was broadcast over the radio, reaching rank-and-file troops in Algeria itself, who tuned in on their transistors. In the end, the plot fizzled, leaving only a single casualty. It was such a dismal failure that commentators at the time and since have hesitated to dignify the generals' plot with the name of *coup d'État*, resorting to foreign terms instead like *putsch* or *pronunciamiento*.

All of this is plain enough, but there is one "coup" in French history that defies easy categorization, hence the quotation marks. I am speaking, of course, of de Gaulle's return to power in 1958, a subject to which Lagoueyte devotes an entire chapter. All the elements of a coup appear to be in play. There was a crisis, the suppurating wound of the Algerian War. There was a *colon*-led popular uprising in Algeria. Soldiers on the scene took charge and then applied spiraling pressure on civilian leadership in the hexagon. Algeria-based units mounted a successful parachute assault on Corsica, and plans were laid for an operation against the French mainland itself with the ominous code name, Operation Resurrection. De Gaulle, ensconced at Colombey-les-Deux-Églises, presented himself as above the fray, ready to help out should he be needed, but that stance was more show than reality. Behind the scenes, the former general's minions were on the spot amidst the plotters, keeping de Gaulle apprised of what was happening, such that, for all practical purposes, de Gaulle was more co-conspirator than disinterested bystander. [3]

Now, had the Republic's parliamentary leadership refused to bend and the plotters executed Operation Resurrection as planned, installing de Gaulle in power at gunpoint, then, on Lagoueyte's definition, the events of 1958 would surely qualify as a *coup d'État*. Yet, this is not how events in fact unfolded. President of the Republic René Coty cajoled parliament into yielding to de Gaulle, thereby maintaining constitutional appearances, and with that the military stood down. Bonapartes destroy Republics, but that's not what de Gaulle did, instead founding a new one, France's Fifth, a regime change sanctioned in due course by an unrigged, popular plebiscite. To be sure, de Gaulle concentrated power in the executive's hands, and he would not hesitate to apply the state's mailed fist, as protesters, whether Algerian immigrants or student activists, would soon learn. The new regime was sufficiently democratic, however, that even its critics—François Mitterrand the most notorious among them—came around to playing by its rules. So, was 1958 a *coup d'État*? In the end, the always judicious Lagoueyte renders what amounts to a Scotch verdict: not proven.

Such debates about labeling may have the look of a political science parlor game. But as Lagoueyte points out, such a dismissal misses something important, because the label of *coup d'État* comes with a pejorative punch. Make it stick, and the regime born under its sign is marked for life with an almost indelible stain of illegitimacy. The stakes involved in this particular labeling exercise are not altogether insignificant.

As thought-provoking as this book is, there are pertinent issues it does not take up. Lagoueyte groups coups by type, whether civilian or military-led, as well as examining examples of near coups and coup look-alikes. Within each category, he summarizes the individual cases, one after the next, detailing what happened and then evaluating the opinions of contemporaries and historians as to the meaning of each. His mastery of the relevant historiography is impressive and illuminating, but the actual history of the phenomenon itself, the *coup d'État* and how its mechanics changed over time, never quite comes into sharp focus. The coups of the revolutionary era were Paris-centered, but not so Louis-Napoléon's, which was fought out in the provinces, not to mention the crisis of 1958 (coup or not), which got its start outside the hexagon. Soldiers always figure in the story, but prefects, gendarmes and the police, not key players at the beginning, become much more so over time. Then there is the changing media environment. In the nineteenth century, it was enough to muzzle the press. Twentieth-century plotters have to deal with television and radio and fail to do so at their peril, as de Gaulle's mastery of the airwaves in 1961 demonstrated.

Lagoueyte covers a wide range of cases but does not pretend that his list is exhaustive. Other historians will have other examples to propose, and, as it happens, I have one. On July 10, 1940, France's parliament voted by a wide margin to place the nation's destiny in the sole hands of the then sitting prime minister, Maréchal Philippe Pétain. In so doing, the Third Republic committed suicide, and out of the democratic rubble, a new, authoritarian regime arose. The circumstances were extraordinary, of course. France lay in defeat. The Republic's last vote took place in Vichy, where the nation's government had taken up residence in the wake of the armistice signed the preceding June with Hitler's military high command, and the vote was taken under pressure. The pressure came from the Pétain administration with the Maréchal's vice premier, Pierre Laval, leading the charge. Laval browbeat the National Assembly with threats. Fail to grant *pleins pouvoirs* to Pétain, he menaced, and the Germans would intervene, or the generalissimo of France's own armies, Maxime Weygand, might take matters in hand and impose a military dictatorship. Nor were such threats of force majeure idle ones. German units were not far away

in Moulins. Weygand, a known enemy of the Republic, had schemed with Pétain to oust Pétain's predecessor as prime minister, Paul Reynaud, and he was also close at hand in Clermont-Ferrand. All the while, right-wing thugs circulated in the streets of Vichy. Many of the National Assembly's staunchest democrats were not present for the July vote. They were in uniform serving with units stationed elsewhere or in North Africa where a number had relocated, intending to carry on the fight from there. Depleted by key absences and in the face of an intimidation campaign orchestrated by the executive branch, France's representatives abandoned their constitutional responsibilities. Was Vichy then born of a *coup d'État*? It looks like it.

Lagoueyte's book is thought-provoking, and it provokes thoughts not just about France. It was not so long ago that right-wing thugs in Washington, D.C., egged on by a reckless, authority-hungry executive, assaulted Congress in an effort to bully the nation's representatives into abdicating their constitutional duty. A majority refused to do so such that the maneuver failed in its purpose. Is "insurrection" the best word to describe this sequence of events? A reader of Lagoueyte's book might be inclined to propose an alternative. It was not an insurrection at all, but a *coup d'État manqué*.

NOTES

[1] David A. Bell, *The First Total War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).

[2] Bell, *Men on Horseback* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

[3] Julian Jackson, *De Gaulle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), ch.18.

Philip Nord
Princeton University
pgnord@princeton.edu

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172