

America's Riots Are Just the Latest Version of Marxist "Syndicalism"

By Mark Thornton, Mises Institute, 30 August 2020

The year 2020 is one of the most disrupted times in at least the last half century, maybe longer. Global protests and riots, the covid-19 virus, lockdowns, and police killings of unarmed citizens. Add to that widespread rioting, looting, arson, homelessness, and destruction of property, including the tearing down of statues. This chaos in the streets is being facilitated by mayors, governors, and police chiefs who are unwilling to enforce the law.

The great Ludwig von Mises included a discussion of “syndicalism” in [chapter 33 of his *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*](#). Most people have never heard or read of this concept, but it is highly relevant to the situation we find ourselves in today. Mises’s analysis is even more important for understanding and fixing some of the most important problems we face today. In general, I define syndicalism as being able to do whatever you want at the expense of others.

In part, it represents the ideas of French philosopher, Georges Sorel, who thought relentless violence should be used against the institutions of capitalism. This would include the “general strike” so familiar in Europe to this day. This is in direct contrast to mutually beneficial exchange and the social cooperation of the division of labour. His ideas were influential with Marxists, fascists, Nazis, and advocates of unionism.

A Key Chapter in Mises's *Human Action*

When I first tried to read *Human Action*, I found it extremely difficult. I ended up skipping entire chapters and reading through others without understanding the material. Chapter 33 is a good example of that. Today, reading the book is much easier, because we now have things like [Jeff Deist’s *Human Action Podcast*](#), which now contains a series of interviews on the book, and [Robert Murphy’s *Study Guide to Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*](#).

In the 1990s I taught a course in Austrian economics at Auburn University, an advanced undergraduate course. It was listed in the catalogue next to the econometric and mathematical economics classes. I spent classes reviewing chapters, but the most difficult aspect was trying to relate Mises’s words and concepts to current events. Due to time constraints, I never covered chapter 33.

Fast-forward to more recent times. The Rothbard Graduate Seminar reviews *Human Action* every few years along with Rothbard’s *Man, Economy, and State* and other selections during other years. I have always been assigned to teach a section of chapters at the end of the book which includes chapter 33. Once again, due to time constraints and my perceived view of its relevancy, I have decided to skip the chapter. That is, until this year.

What Is Syndicalism?

So, what is syndicalism? Political syndicalism is direct violent revolutionary action against the institutions of capitalism, such as security forces, property, particularly business property, and the rule of law. This approach is often adopted by Marxists, socialists, and fascists as a means of gaining power. At the root of the chaos and upheaval on our streets is an attempt at disrupting society and taking more control of it by Marxists, socialists, and “anarchists.”

The fundamental error that syndicalism makes is to think that entrepreneurs and capitalists are “irresponsible autocrats” free to pursue their personal agenda. The reality is that business leaders must follow the interests of consumers in order to further their self-interest in making profits. They have to find correct prices, production levels, and correct means of production. These things are determined by entrepreneurs with various types of feedback from the marketplace.

The riots, looting, and violence against people and their property is mostly motivated to achieve Marxist ideals via syndicalist activity (i.e., violence). Those employing these means include Antifa, Black Lives Matter, and especially the “anarchist provocateurs” who adeptly turn peaceful protests into violent riots. Of course, there is also some violence on the right, some of which I witness on the campus of Auburn University. But in either case, with mayors, governors, and police chiefs restraining and even defunding the police, the violence often goes unchecked.

The Other Type of Syndicalism

This use of the word "syndicalism" should not be confused with the better-known *syndicalism as a social system*, which is an alternative to socialist central planning. This system in theory would give workers control over the industries in which they work. They would make the decisions on things entrepreneurs decide in the market, such as wage rates, benefits, hours, production, etc. The workers can do anything they want at the expense of others. But if everyone is raising their prices and reducing output, how can anyone gain from the arrangement? Both forms of syndicalism ultimately rest on the Marxist notions that entrepreneurs and capitalists exploit labour and have no real purpose worth rewarding. Obviously, each industry would want higher wages, higher prices, shorter working hours, and this would result in lower output. Raw material prices increase and get passed on to consumer goods industries, which must pass those increases on to the consumer along with their own increases. This happens across the entire economy. As a result, production plummets and prices become unhinged from market prices. The “economy” would collapse if syndicalism were attempted on an economywide basis.

Democracy Fails to Provide a Solution

With democracy and voting and the military not likely or viable options, an individualist option must be developed to solve the problem. People are arming themselves in various ways. They are using various security devices like cameras and stronger locks. Businesses are hiring security firms and protecting storefront windows. Others are simply moving from cities to the suburbs and beyond. Don't expect government to solve the problem, although more secessionism and decentralization would surely help.

Author:

[Contact Mark Thornton](#)

Mark Thornton is a Senior Fellow at the Mises Institute and the book review editor of the *Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics*. He has authored seven books and is a frequent guest on national radio shows.