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Seriously, What Is Mark Thornton Talking About?

Eric Fleischmann

September 17th, 2020

Someone dear to me (who I'll leave unnamed) has a rule that before you say anything, you should consider these three questions: Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind? And if two of the three criteria are met then you can go ahead and speak your mind. I'm afraid what I have to say about Mises Institute Senior Fellow Mark Thornton's recent piece published on Mises Wire "America's Riots Are Just the Latest Version of Marxist 'Syndicalism'" is not kind (though I hope it is at least moderately polite), but it is, at least to my mind, both true and necessary.

There are so many misleading, poorly researched, and often downright nonsensical claims throughout the whole thing that I genuinely find it difficult to find a place to begin. For one, Thornton—starting out by outlining the turmoil that 2020 has consisted of—claims that “[t]his chaos in the streets is being facilitated by mayors, governors, and police chiefs who are unwilling to enforce the law.” This must firstly be countered with the obvious observation that the whole situation was sparked by the absolute brutality of law enforcement against Black people

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like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Justin Howell, Tony McDade, Jacob Blake, Sean Monterrossa, David McAtee, and numerous more. Furthermore, it is observably ridiculous to say that “mayors, governors, and police chiefs . . . are unwilling to enforce the law” when, throughout the United States, cities are taking paramilitary style action with their police forces against any kind of perceived dissent, resulting in countless injuries and several deaths. I am not sure which United States Dr. Thornton is living in where the local and state governments and law enforcement are sitting idly by, enjoying the view like Emperor Nero fiddling while Rome burns, but it is certainly not the same one I am in.

And Thornton makes an offhand remark—lazily placed after specifically condemning “Antifa, Black Lives Matter, and especially the ‘anarchist provocateurs’”—that “[o]f course, there is also some violence on the right, some of which I witness on the campus of Auburn University.” This underhandedly contradicts the conclusions of the study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies that shows right-wing violence is far more prevalent than almost any other kind, which can be perfectly demonstrated by the horrific shooting of protesters by Kyle Rittenhouse in Kenosha, Wisconsin (which occurred only a short time before Thornton’s article was published.) It also contradicts draft documents by the Department of Homeland Security concluding that white supremacists are likely to remain the most “persistent and lethal threat” to the country into 2021. This is not even to mention—if one is going to talk about chaos perpetuated by local and state governments and law enforcement—the explicit protective relationships between the police and violent right-wing gangs like Patriot Prayer and the Proud Boys in Portland, Oregon and Rittenhouse receiving both praise and water from Kenosha police officers before his vicious shooting.

But the most *academically* egregious aspect of Thornton’s article is his complete historical, political, and economic misunderstanding of syndicalism. He first carelessly states that “[i]n general,

at least attempt to understand their pain. I also hope he genuinely and thoroughly reads about both Marxism and syndicalism, not just by means of the strawmen presented by right-wing thinkers like Ludwig von Mises, but by those who actually profess those ideologies. Lastly, in refusal to create more divisions in such a divided world, I extend my hand in the name of care and mutuality to Dr. Thornton and would love to hear maybe a public response to this piece or perhaps to even have a civil dialogue privately.

I define syndicalism as being able to do whatever you want at the expense of others.” Where he got this definition or understanding is completely beyond me. Never once in any publication I have ever read on the subject—from Rudolf Rocker’s *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice* to Emma Goldman’s “Syndicalism: the Modern Menace to Capitalism”—have I ever seen a syndicalist identify or indicate that their ideology means “being able to do whatever you want at the expense of others.” He later more specifically defines “political syndicalism” as “direct violent revolutionary action against the institutions of capitalism, such as security forces, property, particularly business property, and the rule of law” but his claim on this front revolves in many ways upon his reference to 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”—as a major (if partial) originator of syndicalism. This is not the worst summary I have ever heard of Sorel’s work (though to say the labor strikes in modern Europe are what Sorel envisioned is a stretch at the very least), but David Graeber (rest in power) gives a more precise outline in his *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*:

Sorel argued that since the masses were not fundamentally good or rational, it was foolish to make one’s primary appeal to them through reasoned arguments. Politics is the art of inspiring others with great myths. For revolutionaries, he proposed the myth of an apocalyptic General Strike, a moment of total transformation. To maintain it, he added, one would need a revolutionary elite capable of keeping the myth alive by their willingness to engage in symbolic acts of violence.

But even accepting Thornton’s understanding of Sorel as essentially accurate, Kevin Carson, in a C4SS email exchange, comments that “pointing to Sorel — a Machiavellian political theorist focused

on the general strike as a motivational myth rather than on syndicalism as a serious organizational model — as the primary inspiration for syndicalism is questionable at best. There were many more appropriate figures to reference, De Leon and Rocker not least among them.”

And what does this all even have to do with Marxism fundamentally? Sorel may have taken inspiration from Marx (and has influenced a few later Marxists), but, as historian Zeev Sternell argues, of the three most prominent socialist thinkers in France at the turn of the century—Paul Lafargue, Jean Jaurès, and Sorel—it was only the last who “broke with Marxism and, after delving into [Karl] Marx and [Pierre-Joseph] Proudhon, [Friedrich] Nietzsche and [Henri] Bergson, moved toward various forms of national socialism”—essentially proto-fascism. But Thornton makes no real effort to connect the term “Marxist” to his flawed understanding of “political syndicalism” beyond saying that Marxists (and anarchists and fascists) all apparently utilize it. As Carson further comments, “There is a syndicalist branch of Marxism, but Marx himself never really got that specific about the organizational model of industry, aside from references to the ‘associated producers’ and such.” And I *strongly* suspect that Thornton’s use of the term “Marxist” is not in reference to this strain of thought but more so as the almost meaningless buzzword tossed around by right-wingers in an attempt to villainize genuinely liberatory movements—Marxist or otherwise.

Admittedly, Thornton does refer to “The Other Type of Syndicalism” as “the better-known syndicalism as a social system, which is an alternative to socialist central planning.” And he follows the traditional Misesian analysis of syndicalism which concludes that with its implementation “production plummets and prices become unhinged from market prices. The ‘economy’ would collapse if syndicalism were attempted on an economywide basis.” Carson responds to this by pointing out that “[a]s for Mises’ commentary on what he called ‘Syndicalism,’ he actually conflates a market

in producer goods with a market in firm equity — something he did more than once in his career — so his opinion on the subject is basically worthless.” But this is not even fundamentally a discussion about the economics of capitalism versus syndicalism, but much more about the tossing around of terms like “Marxist” and “syndicalist” with little to no regard to their predominant meaning, tying them to a violent and fairly niche historical thinker like Sorel, and using those two strategies to villainize protests against police brutality occurring now in the United States. It is lazy and disingenuous.

And what is Thornton’s solution to this “Marxist ‘syndicalism’” you ask? Well, he describes what he calls an “individualist option” whereby...

[p]eople 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.

Though he mentions a few things that are appealing—pretty much just an armed population and decentralization—what this sounds like is simply class war by owners against non-owners. It is the drawing of even more arbitrary lines and barriers, the protection of the interests of the elite over-and-above all others, and the creation of a society more and more ingrained with mistrust instead of care and mutuality.

But here’s a dash of kindness for the sake of my anonymous friend’s rule. I hope Dr. Thornton is doing well in these strange and unhinged times. I genuinely do. But I also hope he takes this time to actually look at the plight of those who are protesting and