



Lionel Shriver

Award Winning Author and Journalist

Just Because We've Been Okay Doesn't Mean We'll Stay That Way

Just Because We've Been Okay Doesn't Mean We'll Stay That Way

Well. This has been a weird year—and having lived largely in the UK for over three decades, I'm demonstrating my acquired gift of British understatement.

* 2020 began with the withdrawal of the UK, with astonishingly little ceremony, from the European Union, which would have seemed unimaginable only ten years ago.

* In response to a novel pathogen, world leaders cupped suffocating tumblers over their own economies for months on end, like an interminable episode of “The Dome.” Bizarrely, Western politicians copied this heavy-handed and hitherto unheard-of protocol for the suppression of a fairly low-fatality infectious disease from, of all places, authoritarian China.

* In June, a single instance of abuse of power by a single policeman in Minneapolis, Minnesota, fired up a worldwide protest movement that was affecting at first, but that rapidly grew violent and fanatical. Supporters of Black Lives Matter have demanded the defunding or even dismantling of police departments. They've inflamed racial grievance and accelerated the campaign for socially divisive and impractical racial reparations. They've frightened institutions and corporations across the Western world into proclaiming fealty to, and even donating large sums to, an organization dedicated to the fall of capitalism.

* Now in the US, we have active anxiety that a sitting president will not necessarily hand over the keys to the Oval Office if he loses a national election.

Regarding the first and last of these juddering turns of the wheel, I'm relatively at ease. I freely confess to having supported Brexit. From the start, Brexit struck me as the scale of disruptive “revolution” that Europe and the world could afford. When the

referendum results came in, I was surprised that more than half the almost uniformly small-C conservative British people were willing to gamble on such radical change. Barely two months after the UK's exit from the EU, that change abruptly appeared insignificant. Very few Brits talk about Brexit anymore. As for the US, I'm very anxious about dysfunctional postal voting and any protracted period of post-election uncertainty about who won. By contrast—and maybe this makes me naïve, but if so I will cling to my naïveté for six more weeks—I still have faith in the structural workings of American government to overcome the ungraciousness of one sore loser.

The widespread Covid-19 lockdowns and the increasingly venomous Black Lives Matter movement strike me otherwise. Both destabilizing phenomena have been instigated by people suffering from a perilous complacency. A surfeit of Western security, with no major wars and nearly uninterrupted prosperity for 75 years, has created an ahistorical underappreciation for the fragility—and not only the white kind—of order.

Perhaps the hyper-racializing of the West in the second half of this year will prove a temporary mania, at the end of which we'll have fairer, more sensitive societies. But somehow I doubt it.

We don't commonly characterize folks who want to altogether overturn the way a country works "systemically" as *complacent*. But I would argue that most of this year's abundantly white, middle-class protestors embody the epitome of complacency. These are not people who expect to make any personal sacrifice to make the world a better place. To the contrary, by positioning themselves as "allies" on "the right side of history," they expect to reap rewards, and to jettison older, purportedly prejudiced generations even more rapidly than younger generations do as a matter of course. BLM bandwagoners assume that they can change everything while everything they fancy stays the same.

Weekend revolutionaries imagine that they can bring an end to capitalism and still keep all the fruits of capitalism that they take for granted. They think they can install a neo-Marxist equality of outcome, boot out all the wicked old white guys like Tim Cook, and keep their iPhones, replete with regular OS updates. They imagine that they can pack faculties and student bodies with minorities regardless of qualification and "decolonize" the curriculum to rid it of "white knowledge" and still have prospective employers regard their degrees from Harvard as meaningful commendations. They want to undermine the means by which their

parents earn a living, yet still expect to crash back home when they're low on cash, where they can always raid the refrigerator when feeling peckish. Woke white activists want to demonize "whiteness" as the sole source of all evil, while mysteriously believing that this does not entail demonizing themselves. Apparently the joyful embrace of one's own "fragility" grants the right to hector others while triggering a racial opt-out clause.

The same brand of white activist helped draft this last summer's ubiquitous 'open letters' to Princeton and Stanford, the Poetry Foundation, and a beleaguered liberal bookstore in Denver, to name a few. The signatories reliably demanded aggressive, instantaneous affirmative action, often well in excess of regional or national demographic proportions. Yet it never occurs to our worthy white young folk that if these institutions comply, they themselves won't be admitted to universities that are drastically privileging non-white applicants with lower scores. If employers across a range of industries are scrambling to cover their moral backsides by filling all available posts with non-white hires, it never occurs to our white "allies" that they themselves will be out of a job.

If governments, schools, and businesses embrace "anti-racism" as their sole prime directive, as opposed to producing a salable product or performing a valuable service, competency is bound to decay at what was once these entities' driving purpose: to provide for the common defense, to educate students for viable careers, to manufacture products that consumers actually want to buy. Demonstrably ineffective, even counterproductive "unconscious-bias training"—which leaves many resentful subjects of compulsory anti-white brainwashing more bigoted than they were to begin with—not only wastes resources, but pits employees destructively against one another. Should most western institutions and corporations devote their principal energies to "anti-racism," China will clean up. As a result, "equality" zealots will only level the playing field by making everybody poor. Forgive me for stating the self-evident, but advocates of wealth redistribution need wealth to redistribute.

Rioters are dependent on a functional society, or they have nothing to disrupt. Hoodlums still assume that if they get shot or thumped with a truncheon, an advanced, well funded, and skillfully staffed hospital will patch them up. Looters rely on a generous supply of operational businesses whose premises can be ransacked, and which are chockfull of the fruits of capitalism, like high-end trainers and headphones. Eager to acquire more free stuff, looters blithely expect these businesses to replace their windows and restock, the better to get

ransacked again. (In many cases, fat chance. If I were Satya Nadella, after June's free-for-all by baseball-bat-wielding bargain hunters in Manhattan, I'd close the ravaged Microsoft store on Fifth Avenue for keeps.) Hey, even criminals rely on the fruits of capitalism. Gang members place their trust in weapons produced by companies that manufacture to a high standard. Drug runners need airplanes and SUVs to deliver their product to customers. If nothing else, criminals need solvent, hard-working, tax-paying suckers who own something worth stealing.

As with cake, this summer's activists wanted to have their police and defund them, too. We can take it as a given that none of these often well-off white protesters have any desire to live in truly lawless cities—where their phones are snatched on the street and their homes are repeatedly burgled. Where women are raped with impunity and petty grudges are settled with violent assault. Where cars are routinely T-boned by tearaways running traffic lights—who will keep driving like hellions because they face no consequences. Where everyone lives in fear of arbitrary injury or even death, because this is a city without legal recourse. By the time this summer's failed utopian project nicknamed CHOP in Seattle had lived with no police presence for three weeks, four shootings had occurred within the zone's mere six blocks, one of them fatal. With chastened, demoralized police forces embracing passivity as a means of self-protection, murders in Chicago, Minneapolis, and New York have been soaring. Yet according to a core tenet of the BLM-inspired American medical students in "White Coats for Black Lives," "Policing is incompatible with health." You've got to be kidding me. Nothing is less "healthy" than being dead.

For all their demands for "systemic" transformation, 2020's protesters don't really want that much to change. They want to keep curating their playlists on Spotify and ordering oat milk from Amazon Fresh. They want Netflix to keep churning out new entertainment, through whatever nefarious corporate machinations, because they've already binged the fifth season of "Ozark." Thanks to horrible racist capitalism and centuries of oppression, their computers can communicate instantaneously with Minsk. They not only have enough to eat, but a range of dim sum in their local supermarket's freezer, from shrimp to pork to vegan pumpkin. This last spring, you can be sure that these same young people got as consternated as everyone else when those supermarkets ran short of paper towels (and I recently read a fascinating *Wall Street Journal* article on paper-towel manufacturing; the process is far more intricate and sophisticated than you'd think). Thanks to the police they detest, in many

smaller cities these protesters still enjoy *safe spaces*—in the sense that “safety” used to mean, protection from physical harm.

Up to a point, dedication to racial equality—in countries that have never been less prejudiced—is laudable. But in a society that provides shelter, clean water, and sustenance to the vast majority of its inhabitants, even in densely populated cities where otherwise we’d be slaughtering each other in packs, the opportunity to obsess fetishistically about “microaggressions” and “unconscious bias” is one more *luxury* borne of the system that they abhor. Even the right to demand curtailment of free speech requires the right to free speech.

In the US, I’m loath to histrionically predict a second civil war. Nevertheless, in Minneapolis, Portland, Seattle, DC, San Francisco, New York, and Kinosh, arsonists are both literally and figuratively playing with fire. This summer has seen the most tumultuous civil unrest since the 1960s. Opposing sides in the culture war no longer seem to feel like citizens of the same country. Few in the white majority feel any responsibility for slavery, and many white Americans are themselves struggling to pay bills or unemployed; should the reparations movement be victorious, white resentment could be incendiary. And if a deadly confluence of logistical disarray and mutual distrust means there’s no clear winner after November’s presidential election, I foresee mayhem. (For that matter, if Trump wins clearly fair and square, I also foresee mayhem.) Leftwing rioters, looters, and vandals already have form. Self-nominated defenders of the Republic already have guns.

Centuries in the making, contemporary Western civilization is so complex that it shouldn’t really work at all—but somehow, after a fashion, it does. In fact, on the whole we’ve never lived more comfortably, more peaceably, or more justly. Yet shrill voices on the hard left preach that countries like the US, the UK, and Australia are a disgrace and should inspire only shame. Subjecting the fruits of one’s forebears’ toil to contempt signals not only complacency, but ingratitude.

Nevertheless, I reserve my own contempt not primarily for callow protesters, with no appreciation for how utterly dependent they are on social order to afford to dabble in disorder. Young people have always erred on the side of poorly thought through idealism and sanctimonious hot-headedness. In my own teens and twenties, I wasn’t any different. Far more do I deplore the grownups: global leaders in 2020 who should know better.

With rare sane exceptions like Sweden's, Western governments have installed unprecedented nationwide lockdowns of their whole societies for month upon month, and continue to threaten the re-imposition of economically catastrophic, near police-state conditions on their ostensibly "free" populations. These governments are also guilty of an obscene complacency. Having done no cost-benefit analysis before pressing a giant pillow over the territories entrusted to their guidance, politicians have credulously assumed that civil liberties can always be magically restored (and that's assuming these officials don't come to rather fancy wielding unlimited power). There will always be more taxpayers. Treasuries can always "borrow"—meaning print—more money, and the currency will still retain its value. Is that so? Politicians' oblivious, tunnel-vision focus on a single pathogen barely more lethal than flu is not only wreaking short-term fiscal havoc, but pumping up the Ponzi scheme of escalating sovereign debt, which no one really imagines will ever be paid back.

The authorities' wholesale capitulation to Covid hysteria—which set the emotional table for racial hysteria—has inflicted a scale of destruction that might, had anyone looked before they leapt, have been anticipated. Indeed, a 2006 paper by Dr. Thomas Inglesby, the director of Johns Hopkins' Bloomberg School of Public Health, predicted nearly every disastrous consequence of a theoretical lockdown that we can now verify in practice. This expert on epidemics wrote, "The negative consequences of large-scale quarantine are so extreme...that this mitigation measure should be eliminated from serious consideration." Yet even poor countries have aped this clumsy protocol, which may kill millions from starvation.

Once lockdowns are finally eased, successfully terrified workforces refuse to venture out their front doors—especially in the UK, where two-thirds of employees are still working, or neglecting to work, from home. For some processes are far easier to set in train than to reverse. It's not that difficult to frighten people. Un-frightening them is a bastard.

Small business has been ravaged by bankruptcy. Public transportation with minimal ridership is running unsustainable deficits, and many systems will enter a death spiral of reduced services followed by even smaller riderships. The financial and commercial centers of great cities like New York and London are hollowed out. Midtown Manhattan, Wall Street, the City of London, and Canary Wharf are all ghost towns, as if commandeered by film crews for movies about the end of the world. The West's collective GDP look like an apple that a Saint Bernard took a bite of. The performing arts, precious in and of themselves but also vital engines of tourist revenue, have been incinerated. Airlines are on their knees.

Unemployment is headed to a scale not even seen in the Great Depression, and job losses are often as irreversible as fear. Swaths of restaurants, bars, hotels, and nightclubs have closed for good. Tax bases have effectively been plunged into vats of acid—at the same time as demand on the public purse has skyrocketed.

Look, a short, sharp shock, such as a fortnight’s cessation of business-as-usual in March, however also extraordinary, might have been safe or even prudent: life briefly on hold, as health care systems prepared for the unknown. But instead some lockdowns have lasted six months. They’ve been only timorously lifted, always with the threat of reintroduction with no warning. The grotesque consequences were entirely foreseeable. What were politicians thinking? They weren’t thinking. They were reacting. They were “doing something” to disguise the fact that they had no idea what to do. In preference to making measured, informed tradeoffs, Western leaders mindlessly copied both the worst possible model for governance, communist China, and each other. They implicitly relied on the excuse many a parent has found wanting: “Well, everyone else is doing it!” To whatever degree our leaders have exercised any independent judgment whatsoever, they’ve trusted naively that an effective vaccine is right around the corner, after which everything will go back to the way it was.

The same complacency extends to us, the citizens of once-liberal democracies. At least in comparative terms, we assure ourselves, we’re rich. We’re used to being rich, just as in terms of worldwide military havoc we’re used to relative peace. So of course we’re going to *stay* relatively rich and *stay* relatively peaceful. No matter the scale of the upheaval, in the long run we’ll be fine, because we’ve been pretty much fine for 75 years. As peoples, we have ludicrous faith in the state to take care of us—under-aware that at least financially we *are* the state. We watch disaster movies all the time, yet no longer believe in the possibility of proper disaster on the near side of the screen. We’re lazy. We have flabby imaginations.

But as a novelist, I’m paid to have an athletic imagination.

Set in a near-future America, my 2016 novel THE MANDIBLES describes a dystopia of an expressly economic sort. The book begins on the centenary of last century’s stock market crash, October of 2029. Because China and Russia are mistrustful about America’s towering national debt, the “almighty dollar” is replaced by a new international currency that’s actually worth something, and backed by real assets. Thus the dollar loses its status as the world’s reserve currency. In retaliation, the president renounces the national debt—some

of which is held by foreign parties, but the bulk of which is owned by domestic investors and pensioners, whose bonds convert overnight to poorly absorbent toilet roll. As a faithless debtor unable to borrow on world markets, the US government frenetically prints its way out of fiscal hole. Surprise: inflation soars. First food is scarce; then food is available, but insanely expensive. Social order unravels. My middle- and upper-middle class characters go from impatiently awaiting the trickle-down of a sizeable inheritance to growing their own vegetables (which are all stolen), mugging school children for groceries, and panic-buying paper clips, in the wan hope that at least stationery, unlike their currency, will retain some value. At length—spoiler alert—the Mandibles are forced from the family house at gunpoint.

It was supposed to be fiction. I would like it to stay fiction. Writing that novel gave me an appreciation for the frailty of civilization—more appreciation, honestly, than I want. As we only half-learned in 2008, when we came closer to worldwide fiscal collapse than anyone cares to recall, the financial systems on which we now rely are impenetrably complicated and precariously interrelated. Complexity theory foretells that complex systems collapse catastrophically. Even violent anti-capitalists, much less presidents and prime ministers, take for granted that there will always be affordable food in supermarkets. That when you flip a switch, the lights will come on. That the taps will always flow with potable water. That in the main, come what may, citizens can walk down the street without being murdered for a pound of hamburger.

Widespread, simultaneous, long-lasting and often repeated international lockdowns may be unprecedented, but Covid-19 is not. 1957's Asian flu killed between one and two million worldwide. 1968's Hong Kong flu killed between one and four million. During both pandemics, world leaders didn't close so much as a newsagent. Covid deaths worldwide have yet to kill even one million—and owing to peculiar data collection, whereby anyone *with* Covid necessarily died *from* Covid—Western coronavirus death counts may be inflated. The disproportionate response to one more disagreeable, albeit occasionally lethal virus boggles the mind. There's growing acknowledgement that lockdowns will cost many more lives than they saved—and that's assuming they saved *any* lives, rather than simply dragging out inevitable fatalities over a longer period of time.

But my biggest worry isn't the immediately devastating economic losses and personal suffering that this copycat, knee-jerk overreaction has wrought on the ground. I'm worried

about implosion on a more historic scale. Covid lockdowns have massively sped up the rate at which national debts are burgeoning. How tall can a house of cards rise before it topples?

According to “Magic money tree” thinking, aka Modern Monetary Theory, a government that controls its own currency can print money to cover its expenses *without limit*. We can see why this theory is so popular: everything for nothing. For a sneak peak at my latest novel, *Should We Stay or Should We Go*, here’s a passage from a chapter set in a fairy-tale near future:

“After the scare of what, in historical retrospect, proved a relatively brief economic downturn following the global lockdowns to suppress Covid-19, an obliging monetary theory was demonstrated to be faultless. Lo, it was more than possible for the government to print an infinite amount of money and then give the money to its citizenry to buy things. If the citizenry ever wanted to buy more things, then the government could print still more money so that the citizenry could buy more things. Everyone marveled at why retrograde economists had ever installed the unnecessarily convoluted business of employment and taxation. The technique caught on all over Europe, and effectively established an indefinite lockdown, except in this one you could leave the house.”

What’s wrong with this picture? It’s deeply counterintuitive, and never underestimate common sense. I can’t cite a single product that can be manufactured in *infinite quantity* and still retain its value. Flood the market with corn, and the price of corn plunges to below the cost of production. Our gut intelligence dictates that the logic of oversupply also pertains to money: the more you conjure from thin air, the less it will buy. As an ominous early warning, the US Federal Reserve announced last month that it will *not* be raising interest rates, even if inflation rises to above the Fed’s target. Stay tuned for more such cheerful news from the Bank of England and the ECB.

The international monetary system is held together with rubber bands, bits of string, and appeals to divinity. Because it’s in everyone’s interest to have confidence in this fragile kludgeocracy, we all determinedly have confidence in it. But frankly, ever since all money became fiat money—backed by nothing, and therefore generated ad infinitum at no apparent cost—countries have competed with each other over whose currency could be more worthless. The race to the bottom is well underway. Me, I’m astonished that any currency in the world right now is worth anything at all. I’m positively impressed that the pound and the dollar continue to be accepted in exchange for genuinely valuable tangibles like wheat and

oil. But we have succumbed to complacency. The insouciant assumption runs that because we've been getting away with murder for all this time, and so much rides on our continuing to get away with murder, we will therefore be able to get away with murder forever more. We can thus pile up national debts of over 100% of GDP, even over 200%, so why not three or four hundred percent? A thousand? Isn't the sky the limit? Yet *all* Ponzi schemes collapse. The only uncertainty is when.

I yearn to be wrong. I would love for Modern Monetary Theory to prove astonishingly sound, so that the two governments under which I live in the UK and the US can continue to provide services like health care and national parks, and fund the military, and pave the roads I bike on, while my taxes never rise, all the people I care about thrive, and peace and goodwill toward men descend upon all the Earth.

I'm not being entirely facetious. I feel an enormous personal investment in the economic stability of the next couple of decades. I'm already 63. That puts me on the cusp of both physical decline and an inevitable drift toward the professional sidelines. I only earned a little money in latter middle age. Ever since, I've squirreled away every penny I could spare in a private pension. I've no desire to burden my family or become a ward of the state. But I'm seriously nervous that no matter how much I save for my retirement, runaway inflation could wipe me out, and thus leave me destitute in my old age, when I'm at my most dependent and most disposable. As a character observes in my new novel, "The only thing worse than being old is being old and broke."

I also dread ever having to watch the civilization that has nurtured me, and that has provided me such an exhilarating cultural inheritance, fall apart. I could not bear a real-life dystopia in which the Statue of Liberty is toppled and Parliament burns to the ground. In which libraries and online search results are strictly policed in order to serve a single, narrow, fanatical dogma (a process that Facebook and YouTube have already begun). Today's hard leftists are eager to bulldoze their "systemically racist" societies into landfill, but have no constructive replacement for what they would gleefully destroy. Their blind rampages go hand-in-hand with our idiotic Covid lockdowns. Both the Marxist Trojan horse of BLM zealotry and these suicidal, short-sighted "public health" policies eat away at everything in Western life that I treasure, from reading artful, ideologically unorthodox books to being able

to buy a chicken. Yet in protestors and politicians alike, I detect that deadly complacency, as if you can rock a boat as wildly as you want—all because it's stayed afloat so far.

Sure, I may be an alarmist crank. In a few years' time, this address may seem hilarious. I hope so. Bring on the ridicule. I'd welcome being laughed at, so long as I'm spared any real-life manifestations of the visions that haunt me.

The relatively safe, prosperous, tranquil existence I've unthinkingly inhabited my whole life was many centuries in the making, the fruit of endless trial and error by my forebears. It could be destroyed in a weekend. Trying to exorcise anxieties about my own life as I enter its last tranche, I set *THE MANDIBLES*, you'll recall, in 2029. I'm not known for being an optimist. But as of 2020, I now worry that my fictional choice of year-zero was on the late side.