

# French Philosopher Decries Corona 'Madness'

Earlier this year the coronavirus pandemic caught Bernard-Henri Lévy, France's rock-star public intellectual, overseas. He had been reporting on the plight of Lesbos, the Aegean island crowded with refugees from Syria, and then of Bangladesh, which was attempting to cope not only with COVID-19 but also Islamic extremism, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees, climate calamities and extreme poverty.

Much to his surprise, Lévy did not receive a pat on the back and a cheery "*bien joué, BHL!*" for highlighting these crises. (He expected them – BHL is not renowned for his modesty.) Instead he felt, at first, "icy indifference" and then the hot breath of social media critics who savaged him for not sheltering in place in solidarity.

There is something mad about this pandemic, Lévy thought, if "solidarity" fails to include Bangladeshis. This callous attitude suggests, he writes in his provocative little book, [\*The Virus in the Age of Madness\*](#), that jabber about global solidarity is just "emissions of goodness gases purporting to crown the planet with a halo of sacrifice and abnegation".

Even in an English translation, Lévy comes across as a bit of a blowhard, a frothing geyser of name-dropping, run-on sentences, news clips and rhetorical excess. But he is an intelligent blowhard and he asks the question that we should all ask: is the coronavirus changing our culture for the worse?

He believes that it is.

First of all, it is hardening us to the woes of others. Lévy tried a simple experiment. He surveyed the media from a single week in April. It was the absence of news which startled him.

Migrants had disappeared; global warming had disappeared; deforestation in the Amazon had disappeared; the war in Yemen had disappeared; ISIS suicide bombings were ignored; the persecution of Uyghurs was ignored. Nothing mattered except the virus.

“The coronavirus had this virtue: that of sparing us from uninteresting, unimportant information,” writes Lévy, “and relieving us of the burdens of following the vicissitudes of history, which had mercifully gone into hibernation.”

World leaders have entered a state of “psychotic delirium”, he says, terrified of being summoned to a “Corona Nuremburg” for failure to eliminate the disease.

(This includes, by the way, the leaders of ISIS, who declared that Europe was a risk zone for its foot soldiers and directed them to wage jihad in “safer” areas like Egypt, the Sahel and Indonesia. Macron, Johnson, Trudeau, Merkel & Co are in good company.)

Second, it is making us more selfish. What disturbs Lévy the most is not the inconvenience of lockdowns and the restrictions on individual freedoms that *les Américains* complain about. It is isolation.

*The New York Times* is full of lifestyle articles promoting the idea, as Lévy observes, “that confinement is the now-or-never opportunity to do one’s internal housekeeping and rediscover the self-to-self relationship that is supposedly the richest of all human relationships.” This is absurdly narcissistic. On the contrary, isolation drains life of all that is worthwhile. As Aristotle observed, man is a political animal; he is not meant to stay cooped up in a flat for weeks on end.

Lévy is a follower of the French existentialist Emmanuel Levinas (1906-95) who emphasized the fundamental importance of face-to-face dialogue for being fully human, “an ethic not of interiority but of faces”. If we are all wearing masks and

isolating in place, hasn't our humanity been somehow diminished? What kind of life is this for a human being?

Lévy describes it in a characteristically bombastic but perceptive paragraph:

*"The life that we are being urged to save by staying home and resisting the temptation of reopening. That life is a bare one. A life drained and depleted, as in the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. A life terrified of itself, gone to ground in its Kafkaesque burrow, which has become a penal colony. A life that, in return for an assurance of survival, was ready to give up all the rest—prayer, honoring the dead, freedoms, balconies and windows from which our neighbors, once they had finished applauding the caregivers, could spy on us. A life in which one accepts, with enthusiasm or resignation, the transformation of the welfare state into the surveillance state, with health replacing security, a life in which one consents to this slippery slope: no longer the old social contract (where you cede a bit of your individual will to gain the general will) but a new life contract (where you abdicate a little, or a lot, of your core freedoms, in return for an antivirus guarantee, an 'immunity passport,' a 'risk-free certificate,' or a new kind of get-out-of-jail-free card, one that lets you transfer to another cell)."*

He recalls a touching incident in the career of Charles de Gaulle – a figure known more for icy hauteur than for tenderness. In the mid-50s he was visiting Tahiti and his limousine was blocked by a crowd of lepers. Instead of shunning them, de Gaulle emerged, shook their hands, cradled a child in his arms, hugged the organizer and went on his way. He said nothing. It was a spontaneous demonstration of genuine solidarity, not a photo op.

Have we seen anything remotely similar by a single world leader? A PPE-clad Boris Johnson or Donald Trump hugging a

coronavirus-stricken 80-year-old? No way.

Third, it is making us surrender our sovereignty to an iatrocracy, a state run by doctors. Reaching back into his philosophical armory, Lévy recalls that Plato considered this in his dialogue *The Statesman* and discarded it:

*“Politics, [Socrates] says, is an art that, since the retreat of the gods, deals with a chaotic, changing world, swept by storms and rudderless. But, in a storm, what is the point of a Hippocratic nosology of ‘cases’? Do not the difficult times call instead for citizen-guardians possessing the audacity and strength to think through, carve into stone, and proclaim legal ‘codes’?”*

In other words, it is not epidemiologists who should stand at the helm, but statesmen. If our politicians are not statesman, so much the worse for us. But the doctors could sink the ship.

*“[L]istening to the ones who know, if we are indeed talking about scientists, is tantamount to listening to a nonstop quarrel and, if the listener is a government, to inviting Fireworks and Chaos to sit at the king’s table. In any case, ‘those who know’ should be regarded with the same caution that we would exercise in the case of any other professional—that is, not blindly.”*

Lévy offers no policy prescriptions for combatting the virus. But he makes an eloquent plea for a humane approach to policy – one which privileges solidarity and government by men, not by algorithms. *The Virus in the Age of Madness* is well worth reading (and mercifully short).

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