

Top French philosopher warns of virus exploitation

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Prominent French intellectual, Bernard-Henri Levy, argues that the coronavirus epidemic is not an unprecedented health threat but that the way societies are responding is both new and dangerous.

In an AFP interview, the 71-year-old philosopher and writer said the so-called "Asian Flu" outbreak in 1957 to 1958 and the "Hong Kong Flu" pandemic of 1968 to 1969 were similar in scale to the current deadly

global situation.

But, whereas those epidemics had little political impact at the time and were quickly forgotten, today's crisis has touched humanity's collective conscience and been seized upon by some to push their own harmful agendas.

"There are two reasons for this. One is a good reason, the other is an unfortunate reason," said Levy, who will address Franco-British think-tank The Hexagon Society's "REPOST!" online forum on Thursday to raise virus funds.

"We've made progress in civilisation. We're in a world today when life comes first and life has become sacred, which it wasn't 50 or 60 years ago. And this is beautiful. This idea that life is sacred, it's extraordinary progress.

"On the other hand, what's less fortunate is that I believe the information system, as it works today, with its own virality, helps to bring hysteria to the perception of things and the debate."

Levy, who came to prominence as a philosopher in the 1970s, has lost friends of his own to the latest virus and stresses it is important that public health advice be shared.

He warns, however, that an approach that profiles the epidemic as an attack from the outside is ripe for exploitation.

Having studied the Parisian press and public archives from the time of the last similar epidemic, he said: "In '68 and '69 the idea was that the virus was something horrible, but it was part of the human condition.

"It wasn't an outside agent, manipulated by foreign powers and injected

into a healthy humanity ... What is the metaphor of 'fighting a war' if not that? It is saying that there's a foreign enemy which we must eradicate."

Several western leaders such as US president Donald Trump, who is battling an "invisible enemy", and—initially—France's Emmanuel Macron have compared the battle against the [coronavirus](#) to a war.

But for BHL this opens up space for leaders like Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban to exploit the crisis to pursue an authoritarian agenda—and for others to misuse [public concern](#) to pursue other causes.

Conspiracy 'cretins'

And he rejects attempts to set up a debate between proponents of authoritarian public health tactics such as enforced lockdowns and enhanced surveillance and supposedly less effective democratic methods.

"For me, on this point, there's not even a debate. For Viktor Orban, in Hungary, to seize upon the virus to impose a reduction in civic rights is quite simply disgusting," BHL declared.

"But there's one thing today that strikes me as very worrying on the behalf of all these people—from whatever political camp—instrumentalising this virus. Giving it a meaning. Taking it up to advance a cause."

In this "detestable" group are not only authoritarian leaders, but those who see the virus as nature's revenge for environmental harm or a rejection of open borders or the global free-trading system.

"But no! A virus is stupid. A virus is dumb. It is not sending a message. I think we should resist all of that," said Levy.

"On the one side you've got your standard conspiracy theorists, the cretins, who think it was built in a lab. But you also have the more sophisticated conspiracy mongers, who tell you the virus has a plan, brings a message.

"It's very important to say to these people: A [virus](#) is not a message. It has no intelligence. It is blind."

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