

WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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Centro de Estudos Sociais
Universidade de Coimbra



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BLAME AND SOCIAL VIOLENCE

Tiago Pires Marques

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, cases of verbal and physical violence against individuals of Asian phenotype have been reported. Even though the World Health Organisation eliminated references to places, people, animals and occupations from the names of new diseases, the new coronavirus is associated with China – an association politically capitalised by leaders such as Donald Trump. The creation of false information, amplified by the social media, globalised this stigmatisation phenomenon and the need to find scapegoats. In a speech that went relatively unnoticed, the United Nations Secretary-General spoke of a “tsunami of hatred” directed, among others, at Asians. Every major epidemic has led to scapegoating, so this one is no exception. In addition to the example presented above, processes of stigmatisation and violence – verbal, physical and/or in the form of abandonment – against the elderly, refugees, residents of peripheral neighbourhoods and slums, the LGBTQ population and ethnic and religious minorities also occur. The most serious example seems to be that of India, with the violent harassment of Muslims, to whom the spread of the epidemic is attributed.

In responding to scapegoating phenomena, two lines of action can be considered, prevention and protection, and, within each, different levels, since this type of blaming is a reflection of social structures and political-cultural configurations and circumstances.

Prevention has mostly to do with the structural dimension, since the most unequal societies in terms of the distribution of power, wealth

and symbolic capital are the most susceptible to scapegoating. Reducing inequalities is therefore a necessary condition to eliminate these phenomena. Prevention also requires action at the political and cultural level: expanding human rights to all people, regardless of their social position or their differences in relation to the dominant groups, is equally fundamental. The affirmation of universal rights is not enough, there must be an active fight against all forms of exclusion of individuals and groups from the scope of human rights. Perhaps one must even rethink the notions of rights – because they are part of a logic of access conditions – and of humanity – since humanity implies the possibility of non-humanity, attributable to an-other. Finally, we need to be vigilant of the early signs of scapegoating, with educational interventions and the promotion of cultural and health literacy among the population and target groups. Public authorities, media and teachers have a particularly important role to play here.

Victim protection requires a broad recognition of the problem and the promotion of institutions and attitudes of hospitality and solidarity. This is the responsibility of the States and intergovernmental organisations. It is fundamental to elevate the status of refugees by promoting hospitality and solidarity as values, and even as duties, of fully developed societies and by creating political-legal and material conditions to ensure the dignity of refugees. Social services, health institutions, the police, schools and universities, churches, cultural institutions and economic actors should all be called upon to strengthen the political culture of solidarity.