

# WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis  
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Centro de Estudos Sociais  
Universidade de Coimbra



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# COMPLEXITY

Ana Teixeira de Melo

The current crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic emerges, like many others, as a natural expression of the complexity of the world. A microscopic virus dismantles a much greater “whole”. It disturbs us and opens the way for transformation, not because it is able to embrace the entire world or because it tussles with, reduces, fragments or controls it, but because it naturally pairs with its complexity, acting accordingly. Hence, it introduces significant perturbations in the relational matrix that sustains the world and its complexity, operating as an integral part of it: it affects the internal relationships that sustain our biological integrity, the relationships that sustain us as a society, the relationships that make us part of the physical and biological world.

As an emergent product of complexity, the virus is not complex in itself, but rather becomes complex in how it couples with the world – following the same organising principles, understanding the cooperative, synergetic, constructive nature of the relationships that generate it. This virus is not a stranger, because it understands and penetrates this relational matrix, its great impact resulting from this congruence. Arising from complexity, it introduces a marked perturbation in the various levels of organisation of our living, creating opportunities for transformation. But a greater risk lies in the perpetuation of the old modes of thinking that brought us to this point of bifurcation: vulnerability or opportunity? Destruction or (re)creation?

It is possible to find new ways to deal with the complexity of the world through the complexity of our thinking. Strategies and resources are available that can support (more) complex thinking, but they need to be coordinated within an ontological and epistemological relational framework. New strategies must be developed to enable a mode of coupling that

is congruent with the complexity of the world: one that both recognises and performs complexity, for the emergence of a better world for all.

The practice of our thinking, which informs action and is sustained by it, must perform a greater complexity, in the following dimensions:

1. Structural (multidimensionality/variety; relationality, recursiveness);
2. Dynamic (integration of time scales; processes and dynamics, ambiguity-uncertainty);
3. Causal (multiple forms of description and purposes; path-dependency; circular complexity and part-whole relationships; emergent causality and abductive thinking);
4. Dialectics and complementarities (dualities and complementarities; levels and processes);
5. Observer-dependent (multipositioning and multiple perspectives; reflexivity; intentionality);
6. Adaptive and evolutionary (adaptive value; evolutionary potential);
7. Pragmatic (pragmatic value; sustainability);
8. Ethical and aesthetic (values);
9. Narrative (differentiation and coherence; coordination and identities of multiple critical observers; flexibility/openness).

The solution? To match complexity with complexity.