

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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EUROPEAN UNION

José Reis

The idea of European Union as a project of peace and solidarity, launched when the ashes of war were still warm, cannot be forgotten, however many rival interpretations there may be. The European Economic Community (EEC), formally established in Rome in 1957 to link six rich, central countries on a new basis, would take time to expand and reach the peripheries, until then represented only by the geography of southern Italy. For whatever reasons, special prominence was given to the idea of the convergence of levels of development, of structural policies (and here the term was well applied, still untarnished by the cynicism that would emerge later, when it came to mean, without revealing it honestly, wage devaluation and State constriction) and, therefore, of territorial cohesion between countries and regions.

Transforming the EEC into the European Union (EU) was a radical step. Although the single market still required the previous policies, everything now revolved around the acceleration of competition policy, the unequal exploitation of differences in wage costs and technological capacities, the limitation of the budgetary capacities of States, and the notion of so-called “economic governance”, which is in effect essentially the subtraction of public instruments of substantive intervention in the economy and society and the blind concentration on the management of formal balances, common to macroeconomics as a way of limiting public action and change. It is no wonder, therefore, that the EU has been one of

the most orthodox centres for imposing harmful austerity policies on some of its Member States. At the same time, Europe became one of the world’s most focused areas with regard to advancing financialisation and facilitating the mechanisms for the proliferation of capital markets. This consolidated a European fracture that allowed some countries to become creditors and extend that privilege while others became debtors and saw their submission intensified. From a political point of view, fragmentation and confrontation became more evident.

Europe can find itself once again, in a common project of relaunch and cohesion. It is not certain that this will happen. But this is a key issue for debate. It is a point of tension with a resolution that must be considered open. It is possible to formulate an alternative for a Europe that is capable of balancing the national and community spheres in a new way, of regaining the centrality of public initiative, provision and governance, of restricting financial powers, of taking on a heterogeneity that tends towards divergence instead of being seen as advantageous diversity, of overcoming fragmentation, of making employment systems essential mechanisms for social inclusion, of leading a solid environmental transformation and having open and cooperative relations with neighbouring countries. It is up to the democratic political struggle to make this choice, avoiding collapse in general and of the EU in particular.