

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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José Reis

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Ana Cordeiro Santos, António Sousa Ribeiro, Carlos Fortuna, João Rodrigues,
José Castro Caldas, José Reis, Pedro Hespanha, Vítor Neves

Linguistic Revision

João Paulo Moreira

Editorial Assistant

Rita Kacia Oliveira

Design and Pagination

André Queda

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INDIVIDUAL DISTANCING OR SOCIAL CLOSENESS?

Carlos Fortuna

All over the world, while the technical/bio-medical solution for COVID-19 is still being sought, people have been asked to fight the new coronavirus by practicing social distancing. This was supposed to help reach the plateau and “flatten the curve” of viral transmission, reducing the number of infections and relieving hospital emergencies. Staying at home, from where one could leave only virtually, was the most radical solution to manage distance between people. The streets became empty as cities became devoid of soul(s) given the sudden scarcity of urbanity. When people dared to go out, whether with or without mask, they did so like zombies, suspicious, almost always alone, left to clumsy wariness in their subjective gauging of the two-meter distance from each other. For the unwitting, safe distance markers on the floor ensured compliance with the precepts.

I myself, in my very brief forays from domestic lockdown, felt I had become a *distanced* citizen. Remembering the psychotic American experience of personal space preservation a long time back, I witnessed local replicas of such disputes: when someone inadvertently shortened distances, they were immediately faced with intolerant reprimands and disapproving looks that re-established said distance. This commonplace precept was like a revisiting of political dispute – *homo homini lupus* –, unappeased except by a powerful authority that spread more and more *social distancing*.

In light of the pandemic, sociology – that narrative of social interactions, which was always concerned with the evils of individualistic iso-

lation (in order to condemn them) and which, since its early stages, understood the political virtue of social gatherings, urban crowds and collective movements –, suddenly emerged as a rhetorical device in defence of the exact *opposite*. Instead of virtuous gregariousness, it appears to point to *social distancing* as the solution to the current attack on public health.

“*Stadtluft macht frei!*”, the German aphorism that raised so many hopes of individual progress, is still true. To keep the promise of emancipatory liberation, today’s city air must be beyond any individualistic solutions. *Social distancing* is not, in this sense, an adequate sociological recommendation. *Distancing is always individual(istic)* and has nothing of social sharing.

The air one wishes to breathe in the city is that of urban democracy, made up of a renewed, proactive “coming together” and multicultural consensus. The diversity of workers’ movements, of feminisms and neo-feminisms, of religious syncretism, of anti-racist and neo-ethnic movements, queer activisms and other urban social manifestations, which grow apart and come together all at once, is where the antidote to the level of social intrusion brought about by COVID-19 is to be found. A concerted going back to closeness is where the solution for the threatened city lies. Thus recast in the role of counsellor, sociology recommends that individuals and groups stay socially close. What the pandemic requires, sociologically speaking, is therefore the *social coming together* that *physical distancing* prevents and the coronavirus blocks.