

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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INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Rita Campos

“On the shoulders of giants” is a metaphor that recognises the way in which we develop knowledge on top of knowledge developed by other people. But it can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the references on which each of the different scientific disciplines is based. As such, Biology will have different references from Medicine or Sociology or Literature. Just as we identify our different “giants”, the academy has grown into colleges, departments, research centres. Dialogue amongst scientific disciplines has become more difficult and sometimes almost non-existent. However, just like in a massive house of cards, our world is a set of living organisms, non-living elements and material and immaterial heritage, in more or less deep, delicate, intricate balances and interactions. A piecemeal look at this house will fail to cover all those dimensions or their connections. We live in a complex world, with problems often manifested on a global scale, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. These therefore require integrated approaches. We will not be able to understand, based on a single scientific discipline, the local and global complexities created by the myriad of contacts and relationships between the parts that make up reality. We will not be able to identify the weaknesses of that dynamic balance. And, without a holistic approach, we will hardly understand the problem(s) and find ways to manage or eliminate them.

Interdisciplinarity works through the dialogue established between disciplines, linking different languages, methods and practices, integrating them to better reflect the complexities of the world. Because knowledge is not contained within disciplinary limits. The process of knowledge construction is fluid and active, it feeds on multiple ways of looking at and interpreting reality, and it can change according to the sensitivity, vocabulary, experience or technique of those involved. It is by crossing disciplinary boundaries that we broaden our look on complex scenarios and/or those capable of threatening human sustainability. The realities created by the COVID-19 pandemic clearly show the need for interdisciplinary approaches. We need a broad debate, bringing together voices from different disciplinary backgrounds and relevant social actors – social workers, health professionals, community leaders, social and/or environmental movement activists – to capture the complexity of the situation. We must be able to create undisciplined spaces from the porosities between the scientific disciplines and between these and the institutions linked to the various social sectors. Spaces for democratic and horizontal debate, where all knowledges can come together, helping to not only understand the current realities, but also find sustainable solutions to deal with the problems of the present and prevent those of the future.