

# WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

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Centro de Estudos Sociais  
Universidade de Coimbra



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# INTRODUCTION

José Reis

The crises, the convulsive times, the moments of amazement, the situations of collective perplexity, the will to act, have a thousand sides... This collective work from Centro de Estudos Sociais (CES) has but one hundred. Researchers from different areas and perspectives of the social sciences and humanities accepted the invitation to react to the personal, civic, political and intellectual clash of the pandemic, choosing themes that constitute problems and challenges of the times we live in and justify the development of alternatives. They did so in view of their research work, their working contexts, their most immediate impulse or, finally, their deeply felt concerns.

The many reasons why the pandemic has placed us before the unexpected and feelings we had never experienced in such a way before have been repeated over and over again. The shock, the restlessness, the profound feeling of the magnitude of the vulnerabilities, all this took on a density that crushed us. This is clear. However, it is also true that the critical social sciences, capable of challenging and interpreting the world, did not ignore the tensions on which collective life has been based, the inequalities generated by the profound imbalances of our societies, the spread of increasingly asymmetrical powers, the predation on the environment, sociabilities, resources and processes which should be sustainable. Beyond the voyeuristic shallowness of the “predictions” and prophecies or the anxiety of easy explanations, there was already, and always has been, a deep, restless knowledge, characteristic of those who study the multiple dimensions of life and recognise problems, well aware that most of them are the result of institutional constructions, political deliberations and undesirably unbalanced relations.

And there was, of course, a clear notion of the central points of building a good society, a society where access to well-being, knowledge and culture would be based on an idea of justice and permanent principles of action geared towards care and the vitality of inclusion mechanisms which could not be expected to arise spontaneously, but rather must rest not only on forms of government resulting from democracy and the legitimacy it confers, but also on solid institutions.

What is presented here is perhaps the sum of what we were already concerned about and what has come to disturb us. The pandemic did not invent us, but it did mobilise us and perhaps recreated our work processes and our position in science, the university, and society. The themes gathered here are the result of what I have described above and do not need to be rationalised, which would certainly distort them. But they admit varying interpretations. Much of our material, institutional and political life is present here: the economy, financialisation, work and professions, the various manifestations of inequality, the environment, the different spaces of power, in short, capitalism, socialism and democracy. But here too is that which is part of the sociabilities, the public space, the multiplicity of relationships that are created in each society and in the world, that which is part of politics, rights, meanings and representations, intimacies, as well as the personal and its contexts. Similarly, we find in these themes issues of ethics, knowledge, poetry, humanities, arts and culture, in a call to complexity and our capacity to feel complete and whole. The contributions gathered here do not seek to be representative of what is done at CES nor of all that needs to be inventoried for a debate which would encompass

everything that needs to be discussed for us to reorganise. They are examples of multiple ways of feeling and understanding. And suggestions for action. Not messianic, but democratic actions.

Beyond what is expressed in each theme, one can sense the radicality of the pandemic in the face of what has imprudently become intrinsic to our societies and which has now been questioned like never before: capitalism's cumulative and predatory frenzy and its incessant tendency to accentuate mobilities and break all sense of belonging, to uproot the material life of communities – whether national, regional or local –, which should be their basis and purpose; the narrowing of institutions and life contexts; the segmentation of knowledge and practices; the emergence of violent forms of subjection of sociabilities; the power of discourses; the need to challenge institutions and reconfigure one's access to what is essential. In sum, all that is incompatible with what the pandemic suggests to us when there is a need to safeguard life, rebuild relationships, strengthen society through its most elementary mechanisms, reorganise the economy as the capacity to respond to essential needs, benefit from the State and public

action carried out in the general interest, or remake the world in its complexity and with respect for all that constitutes it – rather than out of some globalist illusion that ignores life and only seeks to promote interactions devoid of substance. Instability has been created, vulnerabilities have been produced, that which gives solidity to the economy, society and life has been exploited to exhaustion, and we have received back a pandemic. This strong notion must accompany us as we do not wish a return to a “normal” which no one has ever defined for the benefit of all and which is the word that best describes the opacity hanging over the world that collapsed with the pandemic and cannot continue, so that we can think of a future still to be built.

These texts have authors and are signed by them, as is obvious in academia, and they represent the thoughts and proposals of those who wrote them. There is an implicit structure in each of them: they identify a problem and suggest an alternative. But they do not close the argument. On the contrary; as is natural in short texts, they leave matters open, inviting a continuation of the diagnosis and the search for alternatives.