

# 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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Organização  
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para a Educação,  
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Universidade de  
Coimbra - Alta e Sã  
inscrita na Lista do Património  
Mundial em 2013



PROGRAMA OPERACIONAL COMPLEXIDADE E INOVAÇÃO



UNIÃO EUROPEIA

Fundo Europeu  
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Fundação  
para a Ciência  
e a Tecnologia

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## Publisher

Centre for Social Studies  
University of Coimbra

## Scientific Review

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December, 2020

This work is funded by ERDF Funds through the Competitiveness Factors Operational Programme - COMPETE and by National Funds through the FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology within the UIDB/50012/2020 project.

The data and opinions included in this publication are the exclusive responsibility of its authors.

## ISBN

978-989-8847-28-7

# KNOWLEDGE, SCIENCE AND MARKET

Sofia Branco Sousa

In the context of universities and research centres, we can talk of a contemporary hegemony of a type of scientific knowledge that is convertible into market value, under keywords like “application”, “utility”, “relevance” and “impact”. It is all about valuing knowledge that is instrumentalised by the market. There is a tension characterised by two extremes, already identified by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development in 2008: knowledge for its own sake (“pure” or “applied” knowledge decided by those who make or manage science, regardless of its market value) and economic-driven knowledge (“pure” or “applied” knowledge for “consumption” by the society whose specific problems and needs it is meant to address). The problem then lies in the growing promotion of the latter and the progressive exclusion of the former, and it is especially evident in the social sciences and humanities and in the arts, but is in fact also present in all types of scientific knowledge. Academic productivity is therefore crushed by increasingly demanding bureaucratic procedures, the close monitoring of academic performance, and an enormous pressure to produce knowledge deemed relevant and visibly convertible into market value.

The current COVID-19 pandemic could ultimately prove that knowledge for its own sake – developed for reasons that might not necessarily be related to the market or to profit – actually responds, or can respond, to social

and human needs. This is particularly important at a time when we can anticipate funding cuts in higher education and research. In the context of the pandemic, we have seen society turn to the scientific community (and its various knowledges) in order to better understand the situation we are going through. This is therefore an opportunity to emphasise, on the one hand, the great potential of knowledge for its own sake in times of crisis and, on the other hand, the risks of excessively valuing knowledge production for economic reasons, especially foreseeable economic reasons. It becomes clear that keywords like “application”, “utility”, “relevance” and “impact” can be attributed to knowledge for its own sake and not necessarily only to knowledge that is convertible into market value. It is also evident that the European paradox – i.e., the European countries’ apparent inability to convert their numerous scientific publications into innovation, growth and jobs – should cease being as central to their agenda of knowledge production as it still is. If there is one thing that this pandemic has highlighted, it is that the market, and market value, cannot be the solution to everything.