

WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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Centro de Estudos Sociais
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LABELS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

Teresa Almeida Cravo

The complexity of the world around us calls for a language that renders it intelligible. By capturing a series of traits, values and behaviours in a single image, the use of labels enables us to classify and simplify this vast social reality. The representations invoked by labels trigger positive and negative feelings, generating a predisposition towards the subjects they refer to, which in turn conditions our actions. In both interpersonal and international relations, labelling is an emotionally charged process with clear political and social implications.

Labels are neither neutral nor innocuous; they are produced in a context of power relations and can serve to naturalise and legitimise certain representations and actions, constituting, rather than merely reflecting, our social reality. A full understanding of contemporary problems, such as COVID-19, therefore requires analysis of the specific words used to describe them.

Donald Trump's labelling of the pandemic as "the Chinese virus" in his political speeches is an example of an exercise of power – of selection and legitimation, as well as of omission and marginalisation. It localises what is global, holding China solely responsible for the contagion, while invoking pejorative stereotypes about Chinese cultural practices. It stigmatises entire communities – both in China and amongst Chinese immigrants in the global North –, legitimising discriminatory and violent practices. When the virus is described as an external phenomenon, the enemy becomes not the virus itself, but the society from which it allegedly originated, thus hindering local and international efforts to halt the pandemic.

Labels will not cease to exist: they are part of our language and the way in which we under-

stand and represent the world. It is essential, however, that we recognise their role – and our own – in (re)producing power relations.

Self-reflection makes us confront the impact of our own words and our responsibility as agents of power. This calls for looking critically not only at Trump's statements, but also at those we utter at the dinner or café table. Moreover, it means supporting institutional decisions, such as that of the World Health Organisation in 2015, to end the practice of naming diseases after their supposed places of origin.

In addition to self-awareness, we need a commitment to deconstruction – that is, to the unmasking of the interests served by labels and the questioning of their connotations and effects. In the case of COVID-19, an exercise in deconstruction might highlight the role of global Northern multinationals in deforestation and urbanisation, which increases the probability of zoonotic contagion; or it might reveal the US administration's real political intent, which is to link China to the virus, as a strategy aimed at evading responsibility for the failure to protect its own population.

Challenging the (re)production of labels and the hierarchies they legitimate also requires what David Spurr calls "guerrilla resistance": refuting the explicit and implicit assumptions of civilisational superiority from within. We do not escape our place of enunciation, however, simply by viewing it critically. Resistance requires, above all, an attitude of openness to new forms of knowledge and to an understanding of the Other, one which assumes society not only as a space of power relations, but also as a space of possibility.