

WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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Universidade de Coimbra



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METROPOLISES AND NETWORKS OF CITIES

José António Bandeirinha

Since the dawn of hygienism two centuries ago, cities have been blamed for the health disasters that plagued their populations. Among other reasons, the gradual increase of that blaming led to the anti-urban utopias of the last century. With the development of the metropolis, caused by the influx of labour into the large cities and industrial centres of the 19th century, these utopias were given new strength. Now the city has existed since at least the Neolithic. Until the Industrial Revolution, it was characterised by clear territorial antinomies: the countryside vs non-humanised natural space. The city always polarised the surrounding territory. As to the metropolis, it was the result of the excessive growth of a small city, a city that grew over the others nearby and absorbed them. It grew so much that it generated another entity, the suburb. This in turn is divided into two types of spaces: that which aspires to be a city – the poor suburbs; and that which aspires to be natural space – the rich suburbs. Its intensified spread, especially after the Second World War, generated a territory that is culturally poor, indistinguishable and often unnamed. An example of this is what happens in Portugal, when metropolitan elites speak of “the interior” to refer to everything within proximity, ignoring the country’s territorial diversity.

It is very important to discuss the urban future. How can we prepare the more densely populated spaces for that future? In many ways, for sure, although some are more emergent than others, under the circumstances. We can try to focus on one of them: the potentialities loosely known as medium-sized cities. First of all,

there is a lot to be done to improve their attractiveness. Qualifying these densities, from the point of view of comfort and sustainability, is feasible, and actually more so than is the case with the metropolis.

The competitive qualification of our medium-sized cities can and should be an alternative to the exclusive nature of the metropolitan capital. In order to achieve this, they need to be identified, both by their intrinsic features and by the way they have historically polarised their territories. They need public and private interventions aimed at qualifying their spaces and enabling them to maintain their heritage. Their economic, cultural and, above all, political decline needs to be reversed. Nowadays, the decline of the city cannot be explained by the absorption power of the metropolis alone; it is an economic decline, but it is, above all, a decline of its political significance, its political representativeness.

In order to assume a significance commensurate with its social, cultural and economic value, the national territory must be polarised by the sense of belonging to a territorial cell that feels not only closer and more significant than that of the capital-city, but also stronger and more polarising than that of the municipality. The cultural re-signification of the territory entails a sense of being part of the (territorially and financially) capitalised space of city A, B, or C. The expansion of this polarisation will make it possible to identify an urban network that is denser than that of the metropolises and which ought to be established through a national purpose – a policy of cities.