

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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POLITICS OF MEMORY

Miguel Cardina

The crisis tends to create space for nationalist, racist and proto-fascist feelings and increases the danger of authoritarian solutions. If it is true that historical contexts do not repeat themselves, it is also true that crises bring with them this political threat, mobilising uncertainty, fear and resentment. This was the case in the past and is the case today in some countries. It is not written in the stars that it cannot be so in other places, including Portugal. The COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated previously existing systemic problems and dysfunctions. The health crisis will be followed by an economic and social crisis that has already set in, with extensive and unequally distributed impacts. In this context, there is a threat of proliferation of nationalist and racist proposals, anchored in certain persistent traits of Portuguese society, now combined with the shocks caused by the crisis.

The memory of the struggles for democracy, equality and justice is, thus, one of the obstacles to this threat. In fact, Portuguese democracy has been genetically determined by the legacies of the anti-fascist and anti-colonial struggles, the 25th of April Revolution, and the struggles for the democratisation of the country and the development and defence of the welfare state. Interpellating this heritage

– with its fulfilled promises, but also its limitations or shortcomings – is a civic duty and one of the antidotes needed to face authoritarian and anti-democratic threats. Memory is necessarily dynamic, plural and open to debate. Its erasure leaves communities unprotected and impoverishes the political imagination. It is imperative to counter the induced or involuntary erasure of the past by ensuring access and dissemination of historical knowledge and memory preservation. The State naturally has a prominent role in that valorisation. Its defence, however, should not come from the State and its institutions alone. The divide between the “political class” (clearly a misnomer) and a supposed “popular feeling” is precisely the divide that the authoritarian hypothesis seeks to exploit. To this extent, the activation of the memory of emancipatory struggles cannot be carried out without the involvement of various social actors: political parties, social movements, associations, academe, historians and other professionals who study the past, etc. Only as a living heritage – resisting depoliticisation and institutional ceremonialism – will memory be able to find its way into the future and function as an antidote against the organisation of forgetting, so useful to those bent on redesigning society based on inequality, exploitation and fear.