

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



UNIVERSIDADE DE
COIMBRA



Organização
das Nações Unidas
para a Educação,
a Ciência e a Cultura



Universidade de
Coimbra - Alta e Sã
inscrita na Lista do Património
Mundial em 2013



PROGRAMA OPERACIONAL COMERCÍO E INOVAÇÃO



UNIÃO EUROPEIA

Fundo Europeu
de Desenvolvimento Regional



Fundação
para a Ciência
e a Tecnologia

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Editor

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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

SOVEREIGNTY

João Rodrigues

Article 1 of the Constitution declares that “Portugal is a sovereign Republic”, and Article 2 specifies that “the Portuguese Republic is a democratic State based on popular sovereignty”. It is no accident that sovereignty, people’s power and our democratic constitutional order are tightly imbricated.

Sovereignty entails a people within a territory delimited by borders. It is, furthermore, a bundle of powers allowing a State to be independent and have the authority to deliberate on and implement the necessary policies. Without sovereignty, there is neither collective choice nor freedom. It is a necessary condition for democracy, for the power of those from below, and therefore it was and still is a potentially subversive idea. Loss of sovereignty, on the contrary, is a reactionary gambit, which threatens democracy and the interests of the popular classes.

The power elites in Portugal have allowed popular sovereignty to be challenged by supranational integration processes, associated with globalisation in general and European integration in particular.

In fact, the country has given up the policy instruments that can give material density to national political authority, particularly in the economic field, transferring them to European entities devoid of democratic legitimacy and scrutiny and which can be more easily captured by capitalist powers. In this transfer process, many of the policy instruments have simply disappeared.

Without instruments of commercial, monetary, industrial or financial policy, sovereignty in the economic field is a fiction that under-

mines democracy. Portugal has come under the tutelage of foreign powers, reduced – in much of what matters most – to a semi-colonial status.

However, the loss of sovereignty is not inevitable. This pandemic crisis has shown that the truly important issues, those of life and death, are ultimately decided by States, and the collective capacities of States are still decisive for the effectiveness of the response. Still powerful enough in the field of healthcare – thanks to one of the great achievements of popular sovereignty, the National Health Service – the Portuguese State was able to respond to a crucial aspect of the crisis by protecting public health.

Ours has been described as a sovereignist moment, given that the bulk of the action has fallen on the States. However, if sovereignty is the capacity to declare the state of exception, the truth is that, in crucial areas, it is the European Union that, from budgets to State aid, has declared the temporary suspension of rules constraining national sovereignty.

In order to be effective, public action must seize this moment and recover instruments to the national scale, where the democratic Constitution is. This is the great challenge with which our community – which is where the highest authority still formally resides – is faced today. It is a democratic struggle, a struggle of those below against those above. Sovereignty is and will remain the centre of politics.