

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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José Reis

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Ana Cordeiro Santos, António Sousa Ribeiro, Carlos Fortuna, João Rodrigues,
José Castro Caldas, José Reis, Pedro Hespanha, Vítor Neves

Linguistic Revision

João Paulo Moreira

Editorial Assistant

Rita Kacia Oliveira

Design and Pagination

André Queda

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THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE HUMANITIES

Graça Capinha

I remember a seminar at CES, some years ago, with a legal expert, a Law professor at a Spanish university, who had been appointed as a member of a European Ethics Commission. She came to CES to speak of the horrific practices of some pharmaceutical laboratories then under investigation. Because the existing laws still said nothing about the many questions raised by the new advances in science, these laboratories could not be considered accountable, even though, from an ethical point of view, their crimes were clear. The Spanish professor considered the Humanities to be the last redoubt of resistance to inhumanity.

In a kind of phantasmagoria, that inhumanity seems to be rising from an abyssal thinking which sees “the real” as the only possibility and the ultimate limit to what is. That phantasmagoria, imposing on ourselves as if it were an amputated limb, is language itself. Language being nothing but a construction of the mind, an artifice which results from the process of construction which then becomes a phantom objectivity. Language, so naturalised, that we tend to forget it is nothing but an artifice that rises from power and in power is embodied.

When we read and listen to the daily news on the current pandemic, the inhumanity of that artifice becomes obvious. Amidst the numbers on the infected and the dead, the money numbers are presented as an equally serious, if not worse, calamity. Amidst the numbers on the aligned coffins and the healthcare workers (some of them now dead or infected) begging for ventilators or masks, the numbers on firms and bankruptcies are presented as an equally serious, if not worse, calamity. Amidst the numbers on the refugees and the hands begging for food, the speeches of politicians concerned with a static economy, unemployment

and the oil crisis are presented as an equally serious, if not worse, calamity. That both sides are inextricably intertwined is clear enough, but wouldn't it be more accurate – more humane, as it were – to use a language that made it clear that the two sides do not mean the same thing and, what is more, that they are far from being equivalent?

What can the Humanities do – the Humanities being probably the only space where the pain of the amputated limb can still be felt – to end the omission of our laws, in language and elsewhere, about these crimes, and/or to change the terrible evidence of our inhumanity? And, amidst all that, to make us understand that what we call “the real”, that construction in language, accounts for a mere 4,5 percent of the visible matter our science is capable of glimpsing in the immensity of the universe?

Maybe the greatest responsibility of the Humanities should be, as expressed by many poets in relation to Poetry (etymologically, the making that primal language is), to keep the capacity to go on questioning. Questioning, perhaps in an anti-humanistic way, whether our words should not be adequate to a more truthful Humanism, a Humanism truly capable of locating us at a far end of a remote galaxy that we are able to glance at? Whether our current way of organising ourselves globally (or should I say globalisedly) to live our little, fragile lives is fit for the insignificant, and yet so extraordinary, existence of our humanity? Questioning whether it is not legitimate to imagine and/or to construct, in language and beyond, other forms of organisation?

Yes, that cognitive dissidence must be the responsibility of the Humanities. Maybe it will still be possible, with it, to create another form of dignity for human life. And for death.