

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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CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY: STATE OF EMERGENCY IN INTERMITTENT PANDEMIC TIMES

Boaventura de Sousa Santos

From the 1980s onwards, the global wave of privatisation of social assets – such as health, education, running water, electricity, postal and telecommunications services and social security – was only the most visible manifestation of the priority given to the commodification of collective life. The State itself, together with civil society, began to be managed and evaluated according to market logic and return on capital criteria. The growing promiscuity between economic and political power reconfigured the State's practices and policies, and hence citizens' perception of the State. Despite the marked differences among countries, it was possible to notice some transitions from one period to the next: from welfare State to ill-fare State, from protective State to repressive State, from regulation of the economy by the State to regulation of the State by the economy. These transitions occurred at the same time as liberal democracy was promoted as the only internationally legitimate political regime. The new coronavirus pandemic clearly highlighted two dissonant realities. On the one hand, States were called upon to protect citizens from the health, social and economic consequences of the pandemic. This was not the citizens' choice, it was the only recourse open to them. On the other hand, when the pandemic broke out, in early 2020, most States were completely unprepared to address it and protect their citizens.

The growing tension, and even incompatibility, between the needs of capital accumulation and a political regime that tends to be dominated by the opinion of the majority caused democracy to suffer successive distortions, leading to what I have called low-intensity democracies. The pandemic dramatically amplified two major imperatives. The first, and more pressing, imperative is to change the economic and political logic underlying public policies (health, education, pensions, workers' rights, infrastructure). These are not costs, but investments in the well-being of populations that will be increasingly hit by extreme events. The second, a medium-term imperative, is to reform the political system in order to complement representative democracy with participatory democracy. The increasing incompatibility between the needs of accumulation and majority governments is distorting and hijacking representative democracy. This can only be overcome through anti-capitalist, anti-racist and anti-sexist policies supported by citizens politically organised into forms of participatory democracy, in autonomous complementarity with political parties and representative democracy. In time, these should turn into movement-parties with citizen control over party oligarchies.