

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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PANDEMIC-WAR ANALOGY

Ana Cristina Pereira, Gaia Giuliani, Rita Santos, Sílvia Roque

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, expressions making an analogy between the pandemic and war have been used repeatedly. In this simplified narrative, the virus is the “invisible enemy”, hospitals are the “front line” and health professionals “our’ heroes”. While it is true that, in some contexts, the virus’s lethality or its socio-economic impacts may be greater than those of a war, it should be noted that the systematic use of this rhetoric, in particular by the media and political decision-makers, generates a series of issues that need further reflection.

The idea of war is used, on the one hand, to convey *urgency*, with the aim of intensifying the mobilisation of means and resources, and on the other to connote *gravity* and the inherent call for order, discipline and obedience on the part of the population. Those who are confined are left following orders and being passively protected, and those who are called upon to intervene are classified as “heroes” and applauded for their super-human qualities for acting on the “front line”. Given the state of exceptionality and unpredictability, the constant calls for attention to the risks of a pandemic on the part of academics and/or activists and the negligence of governments with regard to preparing and organising pre-pandemic health and social support services – which all but left it to citizens to sacrifice themselves for the common good – are rendered invisible. The rhetoric of conflict and of an enemy can be translated into a language that tends to replace the “invisible enemy” with “visible enemies”, thus designated by their potential for “contamination”, i.e., virus transmission, and by the need to have them

contained, driven away or protected against their will. War language authorises “fight or flight” behaviour in defence of one’s self-interest (such as the amassing of firearms or virus protection equipment) and is associated with fundamentally white and male figures of authority and protection.

As an alternative to bellicose, militaristic discourse, one must:

- Emphasise the policies of “normal times” and their consequences in terms of managing the policies of exceptional times (employment, social support, health services);
- Highlight practices and discourses of care, interdependence and the need to strengthen links between people and collective, horizontal, open and democratic social structures, based on co-responsibility for care and the common good;
- Combat representations of identity reinforcement and nationalism (such as protecting “our own” from viruses and “external behaviour”) or authoritarian, patriarchal and punitive representations (protecting through the use of force);
- Reinforce democratic mechanisms to monitor public discourse and practices in terms of representation, participation and contestation of measures, as well as discourses with a militaristic, nationalist, heteropatriarchal and punitive content;
- Think critically and actively in order to deconstruct bellicose discourse.