

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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POPULISM AND EXTREME RIGHT

Elísio Estanque

The notion of populism encompasses a wide range of phenomena on the international political scene, whose origins date back to the late 19th century in the United States of America and Russia. A distinction can be made between “left-wing” and “right-wing” populism: in John B. Judis’s formulation, the former is “dyadic”, vertical and binary, and mobilises the people (the low and middle strata of society) against the establishment and the elite, while the latter is “triadic”, looks up but also down, and confronts the elite, accusing them of defending a particular group, an ethnic minority, immigrants, etc.

Populism focuses mainly on the figure of the charismatic leader; however, given the recent relevance of digital social networks in the public sphere, this notion has taken on new shapes. In the age of fake news, the massive use of these media – run by armies of professionals and hackers – has helped promote policies that elevated Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro into icons of right-wing populism, but the issue is more complex than that. Cas Mudde explains populism as based on the assumption that society is divided into two camps, with those from “below” standing in opposition to those from “above”, the people against the elite, while Chantal Mouffe relies on the conception of “agonistic pluralism” and the tendency towards extreme-right radicalism. However, populism is not an ideology with a specific programmatic content. It is a way of doing politics, which can take different forms but centres around three essen-

tial issues: corruption, security, and minority threat. In Europe, terrorism and anti-Islamic sentiment, refugees, emigration and the economic crisis have fomented its growth; in Portugal, the crisis, the spectre of corruption and the segregation of the Roma community are some of the reasons for the growth of the Chega («Enough!») party, which pursues similar tenets.

It is a fact that populism represents a danger to democracy, but democracy itself will have to correct some perversions and update ideological references in its various political currents. The different ideological fields gave in to “pragmatism”, giving priority to immediate election results. In Europe, the alternative to populism will require a reinvention of the European Union project and its ability to recreate a new political economy. To this end, we must recover well-known proposals, such as the complementarity between representative and participatory democracy. Future emancipatory projects, in the post-pandemic scenario, require coordinated political action between institutions and civil society, promoting sustainable socioeconomic projects – with the involvement of communities and local forces – and lending greater transparency and credibility to the exercise of grassroots democracy. On the other hand, a greater investment in civic pedagogy, conveyed through the education system and based on the republican principles of the exercise of democracy, can strengthen human values, solidarity and equality as antidotes to the populist rhetoric.