

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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REPRESENTATIONS AND PRACTICES

Raquel Ribeiro

Like any new object, COVID-19 enables the creation of new social representations. By social representations we mean a set of concepts, propositions and explanations originated in daily life in the course of interpersonal communications, which allow us to transform strange concepts into familiar ones and create a common knowledge that enables communication. Social representations are unconsciously formed, in conversations between people and the information disseminated in the media, anchoring themselves in pre-existing systems of knowledge and values. They constitute lay theories for interpreting the world and guiding practices.

Social representations can be relatively shared – when anchored in common values and experiences – or, on the contrary, they can present significant (and even antagonistic) variations, when anchored in unequal or conflicting social dynamics. Whereas in a first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic the representations aimed, above all, to respond to a need for information and communication, as the consequences of the spread of the virus and the measures adopted to stop it intensified and made social inequalities visible – opposing those who have the resources to adopt prevention and protection practices to those who do not – they aimed to respond to the need to give meaning to events, maintain a positive personal and social identity and justify practices (both one’s own and those of others).

The importance of the values and norms that stand out in a given context is well known: while competition and self-interest are associated with practices of group rejection and unethical economic actions, the salience of interconnectedness and interdependence creates a social and political consciousness conducive to defending the common good. The constant highlighting of death, competition for scarce resources, crime, the lack of responsiveness on the part of social protection systems, etc., nurtures a social climate that helps create representations which justify antisocial practices, creating conditions for the health and economic crisis to be compounded by a societal crisis.

The pandemic response highlighted the “lack of alternatives” fallacy. Just as it was possible “to stop”, it is possible to replace the focus given to individual or sectoral survival, self-interest, economic growth and profitability with a focus on cooperation and interdependence, the ethics of shared social responsibility, attention to and care for one another and the planet, the importance of the fair distribution of resources, respect for the voice and dignity of each and every one. Such a normative context will guide the creation of representations that will stimulate collaborative practices capable of eliminating avoidable suffering and using the experiences of inevitable suffering to build a better world. For this to be possible, it is crucial that we do not add to the practice of “washing our hands well” the practice of “washing our hands of it”!