

WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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Centro de Estudos Sociais
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Editor

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 CARE ECONOMIES

Teresa Cunha

By placing profit at the centre of economic activities, capitalism pursues the commodification of all things and all social relations. By turning labour into a commodity, it actively made a great number of human activities invisible and precarious. Although unpaid, these generate and secure life in many ways, are not designed for accumulation and are largely carried out by women of all ages in every corner of the planet. This is care-related work involving hygiene, feeding, shelter, clothing, i.e., creating the fundamental conditions for biological survival. Also included is work in agriculture, fishing and small-scale forestry; the circuits of reciprocal exchange in the community or neighbourhood; commercial proximity circuits; the pedagogies that serve to educate and to preserve one's identity and social memory, spirituality or language. They are, in general, the strategies of face-to-face interaction and all the emotional work of ensuring the immanent and transcendent conditions of a pleasurable life. I argue that, contrary to dominant common sense, care is the most productive of human activities.

OXFAM's 2020 report estimates that care work carried out by women around the world represents an economy larger than that of the technology sector. Translated into numbers, these activities correspond to 10,8 trillion US dol-

lars in wealth per year. This means that a great part of the accumulated wealth of the tiny elite made up of 1 percent of the people on the planet would not be possible without the unpaid work of women of all ages. An alternative to this can include the following measures: (1) recognising that care is productive work, as it incessantly creates and nurtures a life worth living; (2) placing life, in all its forms, at the centre of all social interactions and all economies; (3) acknowledging that care is everybody's responsibility, not second nature to women; (4) valuing the knowledge generated by care in order to develop substantive sustainability of life in the world; (5) recognising as critical all the work involved in care, with due pecuniary compensation; (6) claiming that, in times of crisis or pandemic, it is wrong to maintain that the economy is at a standstill. On the contrary, the economies of care, those that produce life incessantly, are operating at maximum capacity to protect, feed, shelter, heal, care, provide food, clean, support and love. The economies of care are not large in numerical terms alone. They are a powerful force to counter the colonisation of our sociabilities by non-convivial technologies and they are the original source of life, without which it will be impossible to be, to exist, to resist and to live on.