

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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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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ACADEMIA AND THE ETHICS OF CARE

Adriana Bebiano

The university is still imagined as a place of privilege, chosen for love and devotion to knowledge. Contrary to this representation, it actually obeys a business logic, with clients, financing agencies, sponsors, production goals and funding. Since the 1990s, this neoliberal model of university has taken root at a global level, breeding a culture of performance rigorously monitored by mechanisms that have become autonomous, apparently without subjects or agency, and from which the consideration for the human, materialised in the singular body of each academic, was erased, as Andrew Sparkes has been discussing. Expressed in outputs – a sacred word of academic newspeak – the narrative of success reigns, functioning as an instrument for disciplining the body. This has high costs both for the health and the emotional balance of each one of us. Furthermore, leisure is no longer a right. A moral discourse which values performance as quantified by meaningless metrics prevails, engendering a culture of blame if time is not spent in a “useful” and “productive” manner.

The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to create an opportunity to rethink this paradigm. Confined, in the company of the people close to them, freed from commitments in the workplace, academics now seem to have “time”: time for care and affection; and also time to read, listen, think, reflect, write, create, indeed fulfil the social function of universities at their origin. This is a unique opportunity to

choose the slow science model, first proposed in 2010 by the Slow Science Academy collective: solid, in-depth knowledge, built on a slow time scale and in the long term. However, the first weeks of confinement tell us this paradigm shift is very unlikely to happen. Time at home cannot be “wasted time”: there is great pressure to produce more – to publish articles, conduct surveys, or participate in webinars that unequivocally prove that academics are still useful and go on producing. The webcam has become the undisputed proof that academia is productive, that it deserves its salary. The moralistic narrative of success has been transferred to the digital environment, presented as a liberation when, in fact, by its omnipresence, it tends to function as another instrument of oppression that produces “docile bodies” – a concept that shows how relevant Foucault still is.

The alternative is the permanent combat for slow science; for the right to leisure, indispensable for creativity; the right to have time to care for ourselves and those we hold dear. The alternative is an ethics of care – first proposed by Carol Gilligan in the 1980s – in the workplace, in the collective and solidary development of knowledge; in human solidarity, in the return to time where there’s time for “useless” conversations, for laughter and for crying – as advocated by Daphna Hacker –, human manifestations expressed in the materiality of bodies. Only the option for slow knowledge can restore the human in academia.