

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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BIOPOLITICS

Susana Costa, Filipe Santos

COVID-19 appears as the “invisible enemy” which, among other restrictions, has justified a long period of confinement for the population. If little is new regarding the need to control and discipline citizens through surveillance, technological development and the willingness to use and wear artefacts (increasingly embedded in one’s own body) not only makes it easier for citizens but also compel them to keep themselves and their neighbour under surveillance.

In the wake of Foucault, old and new surveillance apparatuses are (re)invented, which gain more and more prominence in the face of pervasive fear and make bodies more docile. The virus cannot be domesticated, but bodies can. And everybody is (a) suspect. At the end of the confinement period, the mandatory wearing of masks reinforces the call for social (or physical?) distancing in public spaces, making it difficult to recognise “the other” while making it easier to identify the non-compliant.

Tests are done to identify those infected and to check their immunity. Masks are worn. Hands are disinfected. Temperatures are taken. Spaces are divided into clean and contaminated areas. At the same time, governments and technology giants join forces to collect and store citizen data – from personal and cellular location data, such as CDC (contact digital tracing) mobile phone applications, to wearables or massive biological sampling. Not only to make each of us feel safer, but to make “the other” feel safe too. In order to be a “good

citizen” as well as a compliant one in pandemic times, or simply to be able to return to life after the virus, one must be subjected to the control imposed by each State, accepting to be monitored and scrutinised in the most basic activities of daily life.

If restrictive biopolitical surveillance measures can be justified in a state of exception generated by a pandemic, a return to what was once thought to be a state of normality seems unlikely. What will become of this surveillance apparatus in the post-COVID-19 era? Will it serve to provide resources and infrastructure to combat future pandemics, or will it be used to divide and classify citizens according to a biopolitical risk model?

If a state of exception is extended long enough, it becomes the “new normality”. In the current context, even if a vaccine or effective treatment is found, it is unlikely that social and physical restrictions will be relaxed or lifted. Quarantine, fear, suspicion, empty streets, economic and social depression will remain in our collective memory, and thereby justify any measure that restricts citizenship rights and individual and collective freedom.

The alternative to surveillance and the datafication of public life, be it realistic or utopian, is to raise awareness of individual and civic responsibility. The temptation to maintain and expand the apparatus of surveillance will be enormous. We must stay alert.