

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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DISABLED PEOPLE

Bruno Sena Martins

The everyday reality of disabled people is deeply marked by social exclusion, which makes itself felt through greater exposure to conditions of economic insecurity, unemployment, social isolation, as well as poorer access to public goods and spheres of political participation. This picture has been challenged by the growing denunciation of disablism, defined as a form of social oppression based on the inferiority – an inferiority naturalised in bodies – of persons who are socially defined by the frame of disability. The response to the new coronavirus forced the general population to live for the first time an experience of social confinement that has long characterised the existence of disabled people.

In addition to disparaging values and attitudes, disabled people are faced with architectural and communication barriers, obstacles in access to transport, the inexistence, insufficiency or inadequacy of support within the regular education system, and exclusionary criteria as regards access to employment. A vicious circle is therefore created between the social invisibility of disabled people and their disparagement by the oppressive structures under which they live. This prejudice is so

deeply embedded that the concept of disability is actually part of Eurocentric modernity, in a hegemony of normality that uses biomedicine to distinguish valuable bodies from those considered deviating, inferior or incurable. The fact that the differences defining disabled people are naturalised as indicators of a social marginality that is viewed as fatal has implications for the blatant absence of disability in many agendas for social emancipation.

It is important to recognise the experiences and aspirations of disabled people not only when designing social policies that concern them directly, but also when designing a new society that will necessarily have to free itself from a capitalist, patriarchal, heterosexist, racist and disablist normality. In fact, the vast majority of disabled people are perfectly apt to have a profession, access higher education, enjoy public spaces and have an active democratic participation. In order to achieve this, it would be important to heed the overwhelming functional and aesthetic diversity that characterises human existence, in contrast to any ideals of normality hierarchically based on the systematic confinement of struggles, bodies and subjectivities.