

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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POST-CATASTROPHE LANDSCAPE

Rui Bebiano

In *La dernière catastrophe* Henry Rousso suggested a flow of history guided by times that incorporate modules of political and social organisation with a degree of harmony, each determined by the effects of a great inaugural disaster. The word is not used by Rousso in its ordinary sense, which equates it with public calamity, but rather in association with the root that identifies *καταστροφή*, the *katastrophe* – a term taken from Greek drama to describe the moment when the plot turns against the protagonist – as an expression of the sudden end, the turning point, the abrupt change that disrupts the order of things. At the same time, out of the nebulous memory of a way of life that has collapsed, it imposes a necessarily new cosmivision. To this extent, such events as the Final Solution leading to the Shoah, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union, or the attacks of September 11, 2001, established significant changes in the way their contemporaries inhabit the world, marking the end of one time and announcing the beginning of another.

When the shared features of life in society are, as now, faced everywhere with the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden and irrevocable character of the transfiguration it brought about, it becomes possible to acknowledge that we are living through a critical stage, the threshold of a new time. In it, the present forms of collective existence travel to another reality, under new conditions and new demands, facing dangers, dilemmas and hypotheses of an equally diverse nature. As in a post-apocalyptic fiction scenario, we come across – in the same places we inhab-

ited until now, populated by the same people – the projection of social practices and political realities of an unexpected nature. For a moment, we believe we have ended up in a dream, where much of what we had previously done and hoped is now faced with practices and hopes made of an altogether different substance.

It is clear that our universe will resurface from this trance in a very different shape. Certain practices will be unavoidable: a more restrained physical contact, more attention to health care and hygiene, and, after the shock, a more acute perception of the importance of a shared life on a global scale, determining changes that will be far from negative. A greater capacity for cooperation between States and regions in the definition – albeit slow and contradictory – of common health and economic policies could also bring about something positive. However, dark scenarios also unfold: the dematerialisation of societies thanks to the spread of the digital empire, intensification of distances between nations and continents, greater ethnic or religious prejudice, the strengthening of regimes based on hygienic authoritarianism, heavily monitored circulation and relationships, overvaluation of productivity and work pace, increase in precariousness and unemployment. The worst will be that the restrictive measures will be justified by a notion of the common good based on an imperative of survival. This catastrophe therefore makes it crucial to imagine alternatives and forms of resistance to ward off the shadows.