

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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VIOLENCE IN TIMES OF PANDEMICS

António Sousa Ribeiro

In everyday expressions such as “the violence of the pandemic” or “the violence of nature”, the concept of violence is, of course, being used in a loose sense. Violence is a social fact and a sociological datum – in the strict sense, violence only exists within relationships between individuals and groups rooted in specific social contexts. Now, if there is currently an element of general consensus in studies of violence, it is in the perception that only a broad understanding can encompass the multifaceted dimensions of the concept – any too narrow definition easily becomes blind by the failure to name the diversity of manifestations of violence, which are often microsociological, interstitial, and in no way limited to aggression or direct physical violence.

The context of the pandemic crisis is conducive to a resurgence of multiple forms of violence: in cases of domestic violence, for example, confinement can become a death trap for the victim by aggravating conditions of forced cohabitation with the aggressor; current forms of violent exclusion of groups defined as different, such as racism and xenophobia, find conditions conducive to radical aggravation, bringing back fantasies that turn “the other” into a threat that needs to be eliminated or at least taken hostage and controlled, if necessary by force; on the other hand, the “health emergency” serves as an argument for extending the powers of the State

and imposing forms of coercion and social discipline that tend to be indifferent to the logic of democratic decision-making.

There is, however, another sense in which the context of crisis highlights certain social dimensions of violence which are often silenced. Johan Galtung coined the concept of “structural violence” to define situations in which, for various reasons, but primarily for economic ones – unemployment, low wages, unequal income distribution – human beings are prevented from developing the potential inherent to their condition of humanity. It is clear that for those who have been forced to live in confinement in tiny, dilapidated dwellings, or in a situation of forced mobility, for example as refugees, “pandemic violence” is essentially social violence, rooted in unequal power relations.

The most obvious misconception of current perceptions of violence is to see it as an anthropological constant, according to which human beings are “structurally violent”. It is indispensable to counter this notion with the awareness that violence is always a social construct and, therefore, is not inevitable; on the contrary, it can be fought at its causes. In a time of crisis, which, like all crises, contains a moment of opportunity, to root this perception in the public consciousness is a fundamental act of resistance.