

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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VULNERABILITIES

José Reis

Vulnerability is a condition of individuals or collective systems when they are subject to processes resulting in a diminishment not only of their capacities and roles, but also of the possibility of recovering from the losses they have suffered and returning to previous circumstances. We assume here the vulnerabilities that are essentially generated or induced by institutional and political processes, that is, deliberations and forms of organisation that add new weaknesses to the necessarily uncertain and contingent condition of individual and collective life. The notion of vulnerabilities is multidimensional and multiscale and is sensitive to space and time. It is also a relational notion, which takes into consideration the structural aspects and the system of economic, social and political organisation. A policy of reversing vulnerabilities will be a social and political ethics of care, that is, of reconstituting the relationships that empower individuals and collective organisation.

Contemporary Portugal has been subject to relevant processes of vulnerability creation, and such vulnerabilities can be identified on different scales and dimensions. This occurred at the same time that the country, as a result of having embarked on ill-advised processes and contexts in which it holds a peripheral position, destroyed some of the mechanisms that gave it dominion over its collective organisation without creating new, more robust levels, thus accentuating its dependencies. The shock of austerity was an essential moment for the problems we face today. But the issue does not

end here. And even in regard to more recent weaknesses, some processes have reversed vulnerabilities while others have created, consolidated or accelerated new weaknesses. At the moment, we are faced with those that the pandemic has revealed and created.

The vulnerabilities are multiscale and can be identified at macro-economic, state, territorial, local and metropolitan levels, in the care given to people, in labour relations and at trade union level, in the gradual transformation of private costs into social costs, in intergenerational relations or in physical territories, in the form of risks.

Again, the vulnerabilities are multiscale, and so are the alternatives. At the macroeconomic level, a new balance must be found beyond the rules of so-called European “economic governance” and the limits it entails at the monetary, budgetary and public policy levels. It is a question of reconstituting forms of public action that strengthen society, overcoming imbalances and qualifying said society. Internally, in addition to dealing with risk areas, the country needs public policies that restore capacity to its territories, also ensuring that the capital and its metropolitan area become more cohesive and empowered from an economic and social point of view, replacing a model of growth that is poorly qualified and has led to the demographic depletion of the rest of the country. Social policies and the valuing of work and well-being also need to regain the centrality they have lost.