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The care among the chaos: The Liminal ESEFID Shelter

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Working Paper

Introduction

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – Charles Dickens

It felt like the end of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, as we knew it. It was the beginning of May 2024 and in a few days, 615 thousand people lost, temporarily or permanently, their homes (Trindade, 2024). Climate emergency, climate collapse, or just flood, at the time, the name of the unprecedented phenomenon didn't really seem to matter. On the streets, one could see people crying, lost gazes, a state of permanent confusion.

To make things even worse, the remaining of the metropolitan area became almost an island. About 4 million flooded people, ironically, faced the absence of potable water, with dwindling food stocks, connected to the outside world by the sole small road that remained above the water level.

But then, among the chaos and the horror, something remarkable happened. People began to give away enormous amounts of food, potable water and clothes, since it was the beginning of the winter. All the individualistic propaganda of end-of-the-world movies we all saw, where people isolate themselves and fight individually or in small groups for survival, was the exact opposite of what happens when people struggle for basic needs. The streets were filled with cars, but interestingly enough, most of them were trying to help whoever they can – by giving supplies or by rescuing flooded people.

Among many of the good Samaritans, some groups began to organize shelters to receive the displaced people. In our university, this was no different. The university gymnasium ceased to host games and training students. Instead, the students themselves organized there a shelter which once housed 690 people. Then, some staff of the university followed to help.

It's hard to tell this history and keep a neutral tone. It's hard to not see these students as heroes, but in this paper we will try to describe and analyze what happened, how it happened and the implications for organization theory and practices. This is a first look at the events that took place during this period through the lens of an alternative form of organization – one that moves beyond the traditional organizational sphere toward the liminal and the immediate. Far from offering a definitive interpretation, our study serves as an invitation to explore this reality more deeply and to articulate new readings of the phenomenon, while seeking to give voice to the struggle for survival among individuals so often silenced and pushed to the margins of our society.

The Tragedy

Between April 27 and May 29, 2024, the state of Rio Grande do Sul in southern Brazil was hit by a major tragedy. The floods in May affected 471 municipalities, causing the deaths of more than 170 people and forcing 600,000 people to leave their homes (G1, 2024).

At the end of April, the state located in the extreme south of Brazil began to receive heavy rainfall on the whole basin of Guaíba River, raising the levels of rivers Taquari, Vacaraí, Antas, Caí, Pardo, Jacuí, Sinos, Gravataí. The Taquari river, alone, trespassed the 20m (60ft) level above the usual and its flow destroyed entire neighborhoods in small cities along its course. All these rivers flow to the Guaíba River, which is located in the west edge of the city of Porto Alegre, the state capital and most populated metropolitan area of southern Brazil (Figure 1). Thus, the fact that the Guaíba is the meeting point of several rivers that received heavy rainfall increased the impact of the tragedy.

Figure 1.

Map of river basins in the state of Rio Grande do Sul.

Note. Adapted from "Recursos Hídricos," by SEMA, 2024, available at http://www.sema.rs.gov.br.

Entire cities were flooded, roads were blocked, bridges were washed away by the current, as were houses in entire neighborhoods. After one or two months, depending where exactly, when the water level receded, the landscape became unrecognizable. The strong storms began in the Taquari Valley, in the central region of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. On May 2, the Guaíba River exceeded the flood level and on May 3, water broke into the city. The following day, the water covered important points in the center of the city of Porto Alegre. The airport and bus station were forced to cancel trips. Cities in the region were also

affected and in several places it was only possible to travel by boat. Many people were unable to leave in time and were isolated, waiting for rescue on the roofs of their houses. As the Guaíba River continued to flood, other neighborhoods were also affected and people were forced to abandon their homes.

The School of Management of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, the workspace of the authors of this text, was also hit by the floods and suffered significant losses to its assets. Half of the entire library was lost and all the classrooms on the ground level became a lake of mud. The waters of the Guaíba River reached 5.3 meters, with the flood level starting at 3.6 meters. It is worth noting that the city of Porto Alegre has a system for containing and draining the river's floods that can withstand water levels of over 6 meters, but that this system did not work due to a lack of maintenance by the Porto Alegre City Hall. Therefore, it is possible to state that this tragedy in the city of Porto Alegre could have been avoided, although not all cities that suffered from the disaster had any kind of flood protection system.

Facing such a tragedy, several actors, private, public and mixed, began a heavy solidarity effort to bring the people from the cold water, shelter them and provide them with their basic needs. At the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, this was no different. The Olympic Campus (also called ESEFID) of the university became a shelter. In this article, we will highlight the humanitarian shelter at the School of Physical Education, Physiotherapy and Dance (ESEFID).

The ESEFID Shelter

The story of the ESEFID shelter began on Saturday, May 4th, when, at the request of the Mayor of Porto Alegre and through the mediation of the Dean of University, a request was made to open a humanitarian shelter to accommodate people who had been affected by the floods. The reason for the request was due to the fact that the Olympic campus has a large covered gymnasium, with the capacity to accommodate many people in an emergency situation. The request from the City Hall took the academic community of ESEFID and UFRGS by surprise: when the directors of the School were informed of the need to open the shelter, there were already two buses with families affected by the floods waiting to be welcomed in front of the entrance to the campus. The ESEFID management opened the doors of the gymnasium at 7am so that the families (children, adults and elderly) who had recently been rescued could find shelter. It is worth noting that the people arrived wet, cold, hungry, weak and badly shaken by having been forced to leave their homes. Some were unable to save more than the clothes they were using, while others managed to grab a few belongings and their pets. The initial plan was for ESEFID to house around 200 people, but over the 55 days the shelter lasted, it ended up housing 650 people and 80 pets (Paiva et al., 2024).

As the affected families entered the gymnasium, the lack of basic conditions for shelter became apparent: there was a lack of mattresses, clothes, and food. As soon as this was identified, donations were requested from the community through social media, which promptly responded to the call. The arrival of donations happened so quickly that there was a humanitarian traffic jam on the street leading to the Olympic campus. Regarding the organization of the work to assist the sheltered families, ESEFID had the support of more than 2,000 volunteers, including undergraduate and graduate students, administrative staff, and professors, along with volunteers from the community.

The large number of people (affected and volunteers), pets and donations made the organization realize that the gymnasium space would not be enough to handle the shelter's growing size. Thus, the need arose to divide the services into different areas of ESEFID, changing its purpose. Thus, the gymnasium was transformed into accommodation, the classrooms were transformed into a giant clothing giveaway, and the University Restaurant was transformed into the shelter's restaurant. There was also a need to establish a multidisciplinary health space that included volunteers from medicine, pharmacy, physiotherapy, nursing, physical education, psychology and social work. A space was also created dedicated to the health of the pets of the affected families.

With so many people involved, it became imperative to visually differentiate people who were responsible for the different areas of the shelter. To this end, sheltered people received a small plastic bracelet. The volunteers began to wear vests used in other University projects. The volunteers who helped prepare and serve meals for the sheltered people in the University Restaurant wore orange vests. The healthcare volunteers were white, as one could imagine, vests. The core volunteers who worked in most of the shelter wore blue vests. The "little blues," as they became known, were a team of thousands of volunteers, distributed in 4 daily turns, formed by the coordination of 12 UFRGS students and alumni. Raised and organized through social media, the ESEFID shelter eventually had a group of 1,300 volunteers divided into four work shifts (morning, afternoon, evening, and night). The shelter also had the presence of ADRA, a Civil Society Organization (CSO) that was hired and paid by the City of Porto Alegre. The workers hired by ADRA wore green vests.

The management of the shelter was shared, and this caused tension. Initially, the shelter was opened at the request of the City of Porto Alegre, which requested the space from the dean of UFRGS, who forwarded the request to the ESEFID Board. When the shelter was effectively opened, those who took the lead in welcoming people were undergraduate and graduate students from the University courses. In the interviews we conducted, this protagonism was explained by the fact that these students actively participated in the student movement and were accustomed to organizing events that required housing for a large number of participants, and therefore had a lot of knowledge about the campus structure. Furthermore, some of them occupied ESEFID in 2016 against the austerity package (known as "the End of the World package") of the Federal Government and described themselves as knowledgeable in the organization of the campus.

In addition to the students linked to the University, the coordination articulated themselves with professors from ESEFID, the Dean's office and the City Hall of Porto Alegre, which was represented by the Department of Sports, Leisure and Youth (SMELJ) and by the CSO ADRA. Thus, the management of the humanitarian shelter was permeated by various interests and power relations that did not always converge, creating some conflicts among the articulation to make it work.

Ultimately, our interviews pointed out some very interesting factors. One of them is the fact that the sheltered people understood the ESEFID shelter as the best one in the city, among dozens of other ones. Another interesting factor, that can explain at least partially the success of the shelter, was the fact the students kept the coordination, making the City Hall and its hired CSO a supplementary part of the organization. Also, the whole University (or almost) could show its know-how and services, working in several different fronts, such as health care, veterinary, nutrition, social protection, and even promoting physical activities for the sheltered people.

Table 1

Reuse of ESEFID Locations to the Humanitarian Shelter

Location number	ESEFID common usage	Adapted usage at HS
Lodging	Gym used for sports practice	Welcomed the sheltered families
Wardrobe	Classrooms for theoretical subjects	Received donate clothes, organized and supplied them to the sheltered
Health	Location used was from a disused snack bar	Health care for sheltered people
Pharmacy	Location used was from a disused snack bar	Health care for sheltered people using medication
Veterinary	Location responsible for campus infrastructure	Health care for pets
Pediatry	Academic representation of physiotherapy students	Health care for sheltered childs

Note. Adapted from "O abrigo humanitário na ESEFID/UFRGS", by Paiva *et al.,* 2024, Revista de Extensão: Porto Alegre, RS.

The Liminal Immediatist Organization

Bureaucratic organizations, the ones mediated by a set of rules that create a structure, have a usual goal of seeking stability and durability. In a way, one could argue the whole idea behind the set of rules is to make the organization last longer than the commitment of its participants. But in order to do so, the individuality of the participants is replaced, in the structure, by the set of roles. At the end, people are subject to the roles they play and one's subjectivity should not only be secondary to its role, but also be changed to fully conform to its role.

In this way, structure acts as a force that avoids the creation of an idiosyncratic community. In other words, the structure of an organization acts a colonial tool of forms of life, replacing any community's logic by the structure logic, changing the subjectivities of people in favor of its role. The interaction among participants in a structure organization is mediated by the role; not by its subjective individuality.

Meira (2014) introduces the concept of liminarity as a basis for what can be understood as an alternative form of organization. Liminarity refers to a state of being on the

margins (or *limen*) of structured systems, where individuals occupy ambiguous social and organizational positions. In contemporary societies, liminarity often signifies the absence of a clearly defined structural position. Liminal subjects inhabit a space "in-between" institutional roles, legitimized customs, and social conventions. As a result, they become structurally invisible, slipping through the conventional frameworks of social categorization. In this context, liminarity blurs the distinction between process and structure, highlighting the inherently fluid and unstable character of modern social arrangements. According to Meira (2014), this condition is deeply entwined with the dynamics of exclusion and marginalization characteristic of contemporary capitalism. Through mechanisms of accumulation by dispossession, increasing numbers of individuals are deprived of rights, employment, and access to essential resources, ultimately relegated to the margins of the system. In this peripheral space, existence is marked by precarity and a persistent state of social and economic suspension.

Liminality allows communitas to blossom and opens space for the emergence of anti-structure. In this context, liminal individuals engage in unstructured, egalitarian relationships that cultivate a shared sense of belonging. Over time, this collective experience gives rise to *communitas*, a spontaneous and affective bond that exists outside formal organizational hierarchies (Turner, 1974; Meira, 2014). It embodies a collective sense of unity and mutual support that surpasses social hierarchies, including distinctions of age, status, kinship or gender. It represents a form of horizontal and egalitarian sociability that emerges during liminal experiences.

Unlike the hierarchical nature of social structures, *communitas* operates according to principles of symbolic exchange, solidarity, and mutual acknowledgement. While temporary in nature, this dynamic reveals the potential for new social configurations and serves as a fertile ground for the creation of metaphors, symbols, and religious experiences. Communal groups don't organize themselves based on any kind of structured typical positions, but rather on an immediatist spontaneity. However, as the time goes by, norm-based relationships tend to take over (Turner, 2011; Meira, 2014).

In the case of the ESEFID Shelter, the formal organization played a background or secondary role. Both City Hall and the University worked as interested actors in the shelter, but never as the structural form the shelter should abide by. The central piece of the organization was, paradoxically, the liminal one: the volunteers. Its way of organizing became the way the whole shelter was organized and its prevailing structure wasn't any previously known structure, but a negation of the City Hall and the University structure.

As many interviews showed us, students who coordinated the shelter were, inside the shelter, not subjected to the typical university structure where professors say what to do, neither the Dean's office could act as one could expect the Dean to do. The same was said about the City Hall: the mayor's office, while legally being the hierarchical superior, acted no more than as a figurant during the 55 days. Moreover, while many 'gangs' leaders were housed in the shelter, the police weren't allowed to enter the shelter by the volunteers during the whole 55 days. The little blues, coordinated by students, became the main organization, based on what one of the interviewed little blues called the "ethics of care".

As such, the role one had was completely secondary to its commitment to the sheltered people, to its "ethics of care". The norm was its exception: the structure was only useful and accepted as long as it was serving the community, not the other way around.

Furthermore, the organization goal was to find ways of dealing with people's needs in the most immediate way possible.

That led us to understand that time is a central piece for liminarity and, thus, for the communal organization. If the shelter became a permanent organization, the structure eventually would probably over the *communitas*. The students would become probably incorporated to a set of roles and norms and rules would prevail over the ethics of care. But in the 55 days of the shelter, the immediatism was the main objective.

Immediatism could be understood in the terms of Bey (1994). It means two things: on one hand, the immediate goal; on the other, the avoidance of mediation. As the author says, all experience is mediated (by language, set of rules, organizational structure, money, hierarchies, etc), but mediation "takes place by degrees". As such, some experiences are less mediated than others and the lesser degree of mediation can create strong communities. Ultimately, Bey (1994) creates a typology of Immediatist Organizations, where structure plays a secondary role to the experiences people tend to have that shape the organization itself. Such alternative organizations are bounded not by rules, hierarchy, or money, but by the common goal of achieving relevant experience first hand.

In the current state of this working, we finished the interviews with volunteers of the ESEFID shelter and we are drawn to the analysis that the Shelter was, in fact, an Immediatist Organization that worked in the *limen* of the bureaucratic organizations such as the city hall and the University itself. In such, we hope to contribute to a theory of alternative organizations, hoping to show how *liminarity* could give space to the immediatism and, in so, form a kind of alternative organization based on the negation of mediation.

Methods

In this article, we analyze the nature and characteristics of the immediatist organization of the ESEFID Shelter. To achieve this objective, we conducted nine interviews focused on volunteers at the humanitarian shelter. We selected individuals who actively participated in assisting flood victims in various capacities within the daily operations of the shelter. The choice to conduct interviews acknowledges that the perspectives of those actively involved in establishing the ESEFID-UFRGS humanitarian shelter provide fundamental insights for achieving the proposed objectives. This approach rejects the separation between the purportedly objective viewpoint of the social scientist and the unreflective perspective of those understood as 'ordinary' agents (Celikates, 2012). Consequently, we treat the interviewees' statements as interpretations of reality, where their convergences and contradictions yield crucial insights into the organizational process being examined.

In-depth interviews were conducted by the researchers between August and November 2024 using a semi-structured script. To select interviewees meeting the described criteria, we applied the 'Snowball' sampling technique, whereby each interviewee suggests other individuals with similar characteristics and whom they trust. This method acts as an introduction, enabling the researcher to build a network of respondents (Vinuto, 2014).

For ethical reasons, the identity of the respondents has been kept anonymous. From the total number of participants, three are male and six are female. All of them were affiliated with the university as undergraduate students, graduate students, or university professors. The description of the interviewees provided in Table X adheres to this criterion.

Table 2

Participant Characteristics

Participant ID	**Relation with UFRGS**	**Time-length (hour:min)**
Participant 01	Graduate Student	2:07
Participant 02	Undergrad Student	1:40
Participant 03	Professor	1:09
Participant 04	Undergrad Student	2:14
Participant 05	Professor	1:56
Participant 06	Professor	1:35
Participant 07	Professor	1:11
Participant 08	Professor	1:13
Participant 09	Undergrad Student	1:39

The collected data were analyzed using Content Analysis (Bardin, 1994). This textual material analysis technique is widely used in qualitative research, especially in the field of Administration (Mozzato & Grzybovski, 2011). Content analysis is a set of communication analysis techniques focused on describing the content of messages and their conditions of production and reception, using qualitative or quantitative indicators (Bardin, 1994). The method can infer meanings that are not limited to the concrete textual message, especially when applied in Organizational Studies research, where understanding values, attitudes, and ideologies requires contextualization (Dellagnelo & Silva, 2005).

Analysis

Resignifying the University

The way the shelter was opened on the Olympic campus was disorganized, given the rapid escalation of the climate emergency. Early on the morning of May 4, 2024, some professors from ESEFID (School of Physical Education, Physiotherapy, and Dance) woke up to the news that several buses full of families who were victims of the floods were waiting for

the gates to be opened to be housed in the gymnasium, which was to be used as a shelter at the request of the Porto Alegre Municipal Government and Civil Defense.

> [...] on Saturday, if I'm not mistaken, May 4th, at 6 in the morning, I receive two messages on WhatsApp [...] asking me to contact the unit's director to open [the campus], because there were already buses waiting here with people who were being rescued from the flood. On Saturday, I think it's May 4th. Then, I think half an hour later they manage to reach the director. [...] I think that before seven o'clock the director and the vice-director were already here opening ESEFID. Seven in the morning! Without any preparation, there was no prior warning, so the gymnasium was empty, as it usually is, with its goalposts and such. And one bus started to arrive, then two, then the third bus, and people arriving with their clothes, their pets, wet clothes, the clothes on their bodies wet, people feeling cold, without any support, and we also had no structure for it (Participant 3).

Indeed, all interviewees seem to agree that the initial scenario was chaotic. As Participant 9 comments, "buses and buses and buses started arriving with people soaked, [bringing] dogs, rabbits, there were puppies, there were children, there was everything you can possibly imagine. It was a war scene…". Here, the interviewees who witnessed the initial scene seem to agree that there was a coordinated collective effort that had little to do with formal organizations. According to Participant 3, faced with the chaotic start of the shelter, the director activated her support network, and they, in turn, activated their own networks. The effort did not come from the institution itself, but from the people who were called upon and who, faced with the scene described by several interviewees as a 'war scene', understood it as an ethical or moral duty to care for the sheltered. Participant 7 commented, "my office is no longer my office, it has become a clothing storage room" and "I am no longer worried about classes, nor about anyone's thesis or dissertation. It just stopped, you know? It just stopped. The focus is different now, right? The emergency is different now."

The mediation was not provided by the institutional framework, whether from the city government or the University, but was related to the mutual support networks of the people initially involved. The work, even if done by University employees, was not formally designated as their job, but was understood by professors and students as the concern that should be had, regardless of what the bureaucratic structure denoted. It is noted that, above the issue of formal and structured organization, what prevailed was a process of immediatism in its double sense: of immediate response, on the one hand, but of the negation of institutional mediation.

As interviewee 3 describes, the space lacked any preparation to receive the people who were affected by the floods, as well as to attend to the various volunteers who, upon discovering that there was a university shelter, offered to donate goods and help the homeless. Thus, a very large flow of people and donations was formed, which made it difficult to control the entry and exit of people at the shelter.

At this moment, the protagonism of the students stood out. Due to their previous experience in organizing student events and the 2016 university occupation, they had knowledge of the campus infrastructure and knew how to organize a large number of people in this space, considering the use of bathrooms, sleeping areas, division of tasks, etc. Unlike what usually happens in the decision-making spaces at the university, the students became a fundamental piece for the functioning of the shelter. According to participant 02, the first measure that was taken was to organize the large number of people who arrived to volunteer

but did not know what to do or whom to ask. Thus, the students got a room that was designated for volunteers and created groups in messaging apps to organize the volunteers' schedules. "We got this room to, in that first moment, create the WhatsApp group and add those people to the group, because, like, it was three in the afternoon and we didn't know how it was going to be, like, how many people would be there, how these people would eat, what they would wear, where people were needed to provide assistance." (Participant 02).

Participant 9 stated that the students' protagonism was due to "the fact of knowing the space that they [the city government] did not know." In fact, the interviewee stated that she had already organized "several student events at ESEFID, [already knowing] this logic of which bathroom could handle it, which bathroom couldn't, how many people could sleep, more or less what that dynamic was like." Among the events, the interviewee stated that she had occupied ESEFID for 45 days during the protests against the 2016 fiscal austerity packages, which gave tranquility and security to operate the shelter, as the participant considered ESEFID her "second home."

During the interviews, it became clear that it was the students who centrally organized the shelter. This is corroborated even by the professors, as, for example, by Participant 07:

> They organized themselves, right, at first, through the students, right... which created a very unique condition, you know, at the university, of students having a leading role even over the university's property, even in these responsibilities, right, of the university. The university usually, right, has a view that students are not responsible, right. But in this chaotic moment, at least at the beginning, right, it was basically them who structured the shelter. That's it. They structured the shelter, obviously, together with, right, with the direction and with other sectors. Uhm. But they structured it, they had a fundamental role in this.

This re-signification of the University was even stronger at the end of the two months of the shelter, with a portion of the academic community understanding that the emergency had passed. As several interviewees pointed out, there was a clear tension between the traditional role of the university (teaching and research) and its new function as a shelter, generating questions about the legitimacy of this action. Professors and colleagues expressed the view that the university was not a shelter, creating pressure for a return to normality, even at the expense of the sheltered:

> It's not that we didn't want to go back, but there were people living here, right? The city government wasn't going to take care of them, wasn't taking care of them, right? So we had to kind of negotiate two tensions, like, the city government not wanting to and UFRGS, a little, I'll call it UFRGS, like, some colleagues, some pressure, [...] some colleagues wanting to go back, people who didn't come to help at the shelter, didn't have a sense of what it was, right? (Participant 03)

Here, the creation of an organizational structure on the margins of the formal structure was clear, a liminal space, created immediately, centered on the care of the sheltered and with a great protagonism of those who are typically at the bottom of the University's hierarchical pyramid: the students. In the end, the shelter operated thanks to this liminality, thanks to the formation of a community formed, above all, by the students.

The Care

The anti-structure of the shelter was also demonstrated in the consensual concern among all interviewees. Without ever being asked about it, everyone's statements coincided on a central concern: above all, to care for the people who were without their homes. At no point during the interviews did the central issue seem to be the care for the University's property, the order of the organization, the rules, or any formal matter. Instead, the well-being of the sheltered always emerged as the central concern, even if it meant subverting some regulations.

The most critical moment of this, which emerged from several interviews, was the end of the shelter:

> We also didn't want to remove the people from there, because we knew that if we did, they would go to a worse place. And that's what in fact happened; the people who were left went to the Vida center. We have no idea what happened. We have no idea if there are still people there to this day (Participant 9)

The interviewee also expresses concern for the well-being of the volunteers themselves, who were exhausted: "It wasn't working out because the night shift staff wasn't sleeping. [The Volunteer] went at least four days without sleep, he was already hallucinating. [...] I was afraid he was going to have a breakdown. [...] I told the others, 'I think we have to get [the Volunteer] out of here. We have to force him to leave so he can sleep, so he can rest'" (Participant 09).

Here it should be noted that both Participant 09 and the volunteer in question were going for days without the proper amount of sleep. Above all, they put the needs of the people who lost their houses above themselves. The care was more important than their wellbeing. “In those first two weeks, I slept 14 hours [adding up the 14 days]. So I have a blackout regarding some information that I don't remember.” (Participant 04). What Participant 01 calls “mindset of care” was, crucially, what appears to be the central aspect of this organization:

> We were very concerned with this relationship of caring for people and offering, well, the most we possibly could in terms of welcome, safety, comfort, and... Anyway, so that people could feel minimally at ease in a place with 600 others. So, I think that this relationship, this mindset of care, was something that united everyone. (Participant 02).

The shelter, more than merely a space of refuge, embodies the essence of *communitas*, giving rise to spontaneous social bonds beyond formal structures. It fosters a sense of belonging that transcends normative obligation of traditional structures and manifests as a form of horizontal and egalitarian sociability that flourishes during the liminal experience. For this, care preceded safety for the volunteers:

> Many people feel unsafe with the police around. And that was one of the issues here, because the presence of the police gives the impression that those people are criminals, and that was the last thing we wanted. (Participant 02)

At the same time, it is important to note that it was thanks to the structure of UFRGS that the sheltered individuals received comprehensive care: professionals such as doctors of various specialties, nurses, veterinarians, physical educators, and psychologists provided care to the sheltered in a way that made the shelter a benchmark for quality in the city. But if, on the one hand, the university's structure provided the professional conditions, on the other hand, the professionals listed there were mostly present on a voluntary basis.

> We started to realize that they saw this place as a benchmark shelter. Both because of the security issue, the guarantee that the food was made on the spot—because many shelters used pre-packed meals, so the meal would arrive at a certain time, and it would arrive cold, right? And here, the fact that the food was made on the spot was a very good guarantee for them—and also because of our activities with the children. (Participant 03)

A point that stood out during all the interviews was the concern for care, for the well-being of the people, which permeated every word of the volunteers in the interviews. Breaking with any organizational structure, the role of each one of them was defined, by themselves, as nothing more, nothing less, than to care.

And while the lived experience within the shelter reveals the features of an liminal immediatist organization, it also compels us to question the role played by institutionalized structural forms – and their limitation in responding to the needs of those pushed to the margins of society, or even in effectively fulfilling the functions they claim to serve, particularly that of a central actor: the State.

State: Ready to repress, slow to care

If, on the one hand, the organizational liminality allowed for an immediatist organization that managed to deal with the needs of the sheltered, on the other, the State acted as a liberal State is expected to act: providing coercive force, oblivious to the needs. This issue appeared during several interviews, where the police apparatus appeared as the only possibility of help, whether from the Federation, from other States, or from the State of Rio Grande do Sul itself. “There was UFRGS security, the Brigada [State Military Police], the Federal Police, there was a bit of everything. In fact, later on, that could started to create a jurisdiction problem there, right?" (Participant 09).

> We were very careful, for example, not to make this shelter a place where people had to... had to account for some external life process, you know? For example, there was a moment when the police wanted to conduct searches, right? To inspect people's belongings because they thought there were armed people here, there were people with electronic ankle monitors, and they had to charge their ankle monitors, which made the monitors visible. This bothered some other people, right? 'How can my [family] be here, my child be here?' And we tried to smooth things over, saying, 'Look, the person is serving their sentence this way, it's okay, right? (Participant 03)

It is important to highlight that when a tragedy of this magnitude occurs, in which a large number of people lose access to their homes and must confine themselves to a small space, the various problems that are dispersed throughout society also become present. Thus, among the sheltered were people on parole, people linked to criminal factions, or users of illicit drugs. The organizers of the ESEFID shelter understood that the best way to deal with

the situation was to make the place the people's residence and, therefore, to respect their privacy as much as possible.

Because of this, several interviewees reported preventing the police from entering the shelter. A clarification is in order here: given that the shelter was within the UFRGS Olympic Campus, it was a federal area and, therefore, not subject to the discretion of the Brigada Militar (State Military Police) or the Guarda Municipal (Municipal Guard), being accessible only by federal forces. The understanding of whether such respect for federal jurisdiction still applied during that period is somewhat of a gray area, but the fact is that this privilege allowed the volunteers to be legally protected when denying entry to the state military police, other military police forces, and the Municipal Guard. In any case, during the interviews, several interviewees spoke of how the logic of care clashed with the logic of policing and that, under the logic of the shelter, care should prevail.

Another relevant contextual point is that several states of the federation offered policing assistance to Rio Grande do Sul. As Participant 04 highlighted, “So we had, as I said, 32 public security agencies or, in fact, police departments from various states and with different specialties”. Therefore, during the catastrophe, there were military police from various states, which created a curious situation described by the interviewees where there was a kind of "menu of police forces" that they could call upon and who showed goodwill. However, despite the offer of various state, municipal, federal police, and the national force, the volunteers refused to let the police search the sheltered individuals, citing care as the central concern.

> Anyone who looked, anyone who passed by on the street would think this was a prison from how many, many, many police there were in the first few days. From all over, the national force, from every state you can imagine. [...] Basically, the state came in with the police. (Participant 02)

On the other hand, the State offered little help:

> I think the relationship with the City Hall was difficult, at least for those of us who weren't on the front lines dealing directly with them. Maybe for the school's administration, which had a more open door to the City Hall, it wasn't as difficult. In my role there, where there was no direct contact with the City Hall, it was quite difficult. You could see the city's lack of preparation. I remember one day saying, "Look, we need this." "Oh, ask for it as a donation!" I said, "No, I'm not going to ask for this as a donation. I need the City Hall to give me this. I need this, at the very least." So there were some very bad issues with the City Hall. We'd make an agreement today, and tomorrow the agreement wouldn't be honored. The company they hired had several weaknesses. They were never able to provide the number of workers that was needed. So we were always running with a reduced number of workers from this company. Also, this company had very high employee turnover, so they didn't understand the workflows. So it was difficult; the relationship with the City Hall, for me who was there in that management role, was quite difficult. I imagine they have their justifications, but my understanding is that it was quite difficult (Participant 03).

In fact, although the shelter was officially managed by the City Hall, the volunteers were unanimous in complaining about the complete absence of management, the lack of

resources, and even a lack of goodwill in caring for the sheltered. This contrasted brutally with the willingness to send policing to the shelter.

Final words (for now)

It is difficult to put into words, but we would like to make it clear that the authors of this article have nothing less than admiration for the volunteers of the ESEFID shelter, whether interviewed or not. Despite the tragedy, these volunteers demonstrated an immense capacity for care, altruism, solidarity, and mutual aid.

It is this sentiment that also creates the theoretical categories of analysis: in the midst of the climate chaos, the beauty of the shelter existed **despite** the structures of the State and not because of them. The care occurred on the margins of the bureaucratic structure, with volunteers throwing the functional roles of the organizational structure aside. Students became shelter managers and workers; professors became managers and manual laborers. Specializations became secondary to emergency concerns. The shelter's organization flourished in the liminality between the University and the City Hall.

In this sense, the University was ressignified. Or, perhaps, we could say: the University was given meaning once more. Perhaps its most plural and substantive spirit was reclaimed, setting aside the pettiness of bureaucratic life, the metrics, and the "academic delinquency" that Tragtenberg (2002) lamented.

This article is far from exhaustive, covering the diverse themes that can be addressed based on the experience of the humanitarian shelter at ESEFID UFRGS, even when the analysis is restricted to the field of Organizational Studies. Based on the interviewees' accounts, we preliminarily identify three categories that encompass various organizational challenges: the redefinition of the university, caring for people as a factor in mobilization, and difficulties in the relationship with government agencies.

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