

**B.A. thesis opponent's reference:** Mgr. Barbora Benešová

**Author:** Erin Picardy

**Thesis title:** "We are Committed to Our Success": NXIVM from an Anthropological Perspective

**Proposed grade:** 2-3

The submitted thesis examines the inner workings of NXIVM, a US-based self-help organisation that by the time of its fall in 2018 made it to the newspaper headlines as a criminal enterprise and a personality cult, in which forced labor, sexual abuse, coercive control, and grooming of girls and women were a commonplace.

The author chooses to look at autobiographies of three former members - Toni Natalie, Catherine Oxenberg and Sarah Edmondson - with the intention to carry out an ethnographic content analysis and to interpret these actors' involvement in NXIVM from an anthropological point of view. Among else, the author is informed by documentary series and podcasts exploring NXIVM, public appearances and interviews with former members, and the litigation process against the leader of the cult, Keith Raniere.

The social reality of NXIVM has many layers and offers a variety of intriguing avenues for exploration. It is clear that the author is immersed in the topic, however, her fascination with NXIVM proves to be a double-edged sword. We find bits of information, articles on NXIVM and theories on cults/rituals/reinventive institutions that for the big part do not relate to a clearly stated research question, and thus some of the information seems interesting, but is not analytically relevant. In the course of the thesis, we may pick from various statements as to what the research problem may be. The author's intention to explore "the individual journeys of former nxians and how they described their experience within the institution" seems to be too broad, and the subchapter titled "Research problem" only describes, not justifies, *three* focus points of the thesis - initiation ritual into NXIVM informed by Victor Turner's ritual theories, identifying experiences of the members as liminal or liminoid, and theorizing NXIVM as a total or reinventive institution based on Goffman's theories and later readings of Goffman by scholars of sociology. This is surely a big chunk to swallow for a bachelor thesis.

Thus, the chapter titled 'Theoretical Framework' does not provide a framework that would explain author's theoretical and epistemological standpoint and create the basis for later analysis; rather, it is a review of the (scarce) sociological literature published on NXIVM and an introduction to various theories that may explain its inner workings from different perspectives. At times, we encounter concepts that do not appear later in the thesis, or do so only in passing. We read about spiritual capital, bricolage, self-perfection, total institutions, reinventive institutions, ritual theory, liminal, liminoid, communitas, performativity etc. Given the scope of the bachelor thesis, the interpretation of these concepts and theories cannot be but reductive and often misinterpretative. The distinction between 'liminal' and 'liminoid', for example, is given some space and is explained by readings of various authors and their definitions, however, at the end of the thesis it makes it to the analysis only as a distinction in the "*intensity of participation within the organization*", with the analytical potential and the role of agency and liminal/liminoid experiences in (re)shaping social structure lost in the process.

The analytical part thus glides over the surface of all these theories, often failing to make analytical use of them, or taking contradictory theoretical standpoints altogether. For example, at the beginning, the author explains the theory of performativity and performative regulation as

a form of social control in the reinvention institution. However, later in the analysis the author works with the assumption of an authentic/inherent self, as in the case of India, who the author claims to become less and less like herself upon joining NXIVM - thus going against the notion that identity is not inherent but constantly performed.

As for the method, it is somewhat problematic that the author does not interpret the position of the selected autobiographies, especially in the case of Catherine Oxenberg. As the author states, Catherine Oxenberg did not stay with NXIVM for long and for years, she “battled to extract her daughter (ed. India) from what she believed to be a malicious ‘cult’” (p. 16) In the analysis, the writings of Catherine Oxenberg and her statements about NXIVM are taken to be indicative of India’s experience, and when describing Catherine’s accounts of NXIVM, the author does not reflect on the position of Catherine Oxenberg towards NXIVM.

Another, more of a technical problem, is the method of referencing. At times it is not clear whether certain statements should be attributed to the author of the thesis, or whether the reference has been omitted, as in:

“It is through this deep participation and increased familiarity, one becomes an insider to a particular group. With deep participation, disagreements are bound to happen, and conflict can arise. How a specific culture discusses it and negotiates the changes in their practices creates the very fabric of the social reality in which they exist.” (pp. 10-11)

Sometimes, the author also forgets to add a reference, or does not properly present indirect citations.

Despite all these remarks, one has to appreciate the work that has been put into the thesis and the vigour with which the author has set about to synthesize various theories to better understand the actors’ involvement in NXIVM. At times, the author playfully engages in the topic, comes up with fitting neologisms, and parts of her chapter on Five Day (one of the NXIVM success classes) as an initiation ritual provides interesting insight and interpretation of Goffman and Turner’s theories. Unfortunately, it is the scope of the topic and the too broadly defined research question, which cuts across various and very complex theories, that many an experienced academic would have trouble synthesizing.

Based on all my remarks, I suggest grade 2-3 based on the performance during the defense.

**Possible points for discussion:**

- If I understand correctly, the author sees the reinventive institution as based on liminoid experience and the total institution on liminal experience. If this interpretation is correct, can the author further elaborate on how she arrived at this conclusion?
- Is NXIVM a specific organization in terms of initiation rituals? What are the similarities and differences between NXIVM and 1) other cults, 2) other self-help organizations?
- Could the author explain the case of Catherine Oxenberg, how would the author interpret Oxenberg’s relatively brief involvement with NXIVM in relation to the analysis of rituals and liminal experience?