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Outside the Limits of the Human Imagination

What the new documentary “Wild, Wild Country” doesn’t capture about the magnetism and evil of the Rajneesh cult

Win McCormack /
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In a 1978 issue of the German magazine *Stern*, a woman named Eva Renzi recounted her experiences in a Rajneesh encounter group. “In the room were eighteen people,” her account begins,

I only knew Jan, a fifty-year-old Dutchman. The leader sat down, after he had closed the thick sound-proofed door. Suddenly a woman hurled herself at another and screamed at her, “You make me sick. You are a vampire. I want to scratch your face, you filthy thing.” She beat her Meanwhile two women and a young man had got up. The young man threw himself on a girl of about eighteen, and boxed her on the ears with the words: “You are a caricature of a Madonna. You think you’re better than us, don’t you. You are the worst person here.” And then, pointing at me, he said, “Together with you, you bitch. You’ve got it coming to you, too.” The girl’s nose was running with blood. She tried desperately to protect herself against the blows. Then the leader took charge: “You probably think that you have control over things. You have not even got control over yourself. You are under total control here.”

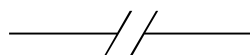
Renzi was assigned by the group leaders to spend the night with the Dutchman Jan. However, after eating dinner she went quickly to sleep. “Next day, I appeared for the group punctually,” she wrote.

I said a friendly “good morning,” and icy silence answered me. I sat down. The leader asked what had happened in the previous 24 hours. Then Jan sprang up, pulled me up, and began uninhibitedly beating me. “You whore,” he shouted, “you have humiliated me, you cursed woman, I’ll kill you.” I was horrified. My nose began to bleed. I shouted: “This is your problem, if your masculine pride is hurt.” He beat me further. He tore my blouse and threw me on the floor. Like someone possessed he sat on me, beat me with his fists on my head, choked my neck, and shouted: “Say the truth, you piece of filth.”

“What truth? Are you out of your mind, are you hypnotized?” I shouted. Suddenly he left me ... I got up trembling, trying to stop my bleeding nose. “Is this a center for developing a crazy masculinity?” I asked. I thought the craziness had passed, and would go. Then first of all a man dived on me. “Exactly that,” he said. “What did you think we’re doing here?” Then two women grabbed me, and then the whole group.

“What happened next was like an evil dream,” Renzi continues. “‘Fight with us, you coward. Will you play holy in here, you whore?’ someone said. I fled from one corner to another. They punched, scratched, and kicked me, and pulled my hair. They tore my blouse and pants off my body. I was stark naked, and they were so surrendered to their madness, that I was filled with death-anxiety. My one thought: to stay conscious. I screamed: ‘Let me go. I want to get out of here.’ At a signal from the leader they let me go.”

Renzi concluded her account for the German public of her experience of Rajneesh group therapy techniques by saying: “This craziness garnished with sadism, this fanaticism with world-beating claims, had I not already heard it somewhere before?”

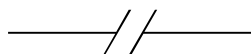


Wild, Wild Country, the documentary chronicling the activities of the cult of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh in Oregon during the first half of the 1980s currently streaming on Netflix, makes a significant step forward in filmic presentation of this

bizarre and unsettling story. There have been two previous attempts to accomplish that challenging task. The first attempt, thankfully lost in the mists of history, played like outright pro-Rajneesh propaganda. The second, underwritten by the Oregon Public Broadcasting system several years back, all but exonerated the cult of its multitudinous wrongdoings; technically inept to boot, it was a fiasco for which the station's financial supporters should have called the management of OPB to stern account.

The Duplass brothers' new series represents a huge advance over those previous, thoroughly tendentious treatments, in two major ways. First, the filmmakers have done yeoman's work in researching, finding, selecting, and editing into a coherent framework a vast amount of archival news footage, an accomplishment that makes the production a pleasure to watch. Second, through in-depth interviews with former and still-current adherents of the cult, and residents of the area still around to tell the tale, they have succeeded—insofar as it could ever be possible—in allowing representatives on both sides to have their say.

Where the filmmakers have fallen down on the job is in the area of interpretation. They have not addressed squarely some of the more important issues raised by their film, and have left others out completely. The latter category includes a few of the cult's most odious practices, as well as the true extent of the threat it posed not only to its immediate neighbors in Oregon, but to the entire world. It could be that film is not the appropriate medium in which to explore the deeper and more complex issues of a phenomenon such as this one, in which case what I write can serve as both a corrective and a supplement to their work, which appears to have piqued the interest of multitudes of people in a way no written account so far has done. Most of what I am going to write will paraphrase, or quote directly from, a series of columns I wrote for *Oregon Magazine*, under the rubric "Rajneesh Watch," between 1981 and 1986. Obviously, I can't document my positions as extensively as I did in those columns, but I hope what I can offer will be convincing enough. Many of the truths about this cult will seem outlandish at first glance, beginning with the opening one.



Several of the speakers in *Wild, Wild Country* use the word “evil” in connection with Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and his cult following. At the beginning of the second episode, former Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert Weaver asserts, “This was not motivated by greed, this was evil.” The rancher Bill Bowerman at least twice employs the word in connection with the actions of the group. Rosemary McGreer, a resident of the town of Antelope at the time, says, “That is why we are here [as opposed to fleeing the area], to see that evil doesn’t triumph.” The filmmakers, however, don’t seem inclined to confront the enormity of Rajneesh’s crimes, or ask why so many people who encountered the cult reached for this term to describe it.

There is such a thing as evil, and its foremost incarnation in world history is Adolf Hitler. It makes perfect sense, therefore, that leaders of what are called “destructive cults” are wont to identify with him. Charles Manson said, “Hitler had the answer to everything” and called him “a groovy guy who levelled the Karma of the Jews.” The leader of the Aum Shinrikyo cult in Japan, Shoko Asahara, was also a keen admirer of Hitler and believed that in 1999, the year he had chosen to unleash biological, chemical, and atomic weapons on the world, the German government’s postwar ban on the publication of *Mein Kampf* would also expire. Aum Shinrikyo’s 1995 sarin attack on the Tokyo subways killed eleven people and injured thousands, but if the cult’s medical doctors had managed to produce the gas in a purer form, as they tried to do, the death toll could have reached hundreds of thousands. As reported by Krishna Deva, the ex-mayor of Rajneeshpuram who turned state’s evidence, Rajneesh was comparing himself to Hitler toward the end, stating that Hitler had been similarly misunderstood when he sought to create a “new man” (something Rajneesh also claimed to be doing). Rajneesh, like Asahara, had a medical facility in which deadly substances of various kinds were stockpiled, and were in instances actually deployed.

The humanistic psychologist Nathaniel Branden, however, made by far the most powerful statement on this subject, in a letter to a friend of his dated October 2, 1978. He reported to his friend that in a book called *The Mustard Seed*, Rajneesh “explains and justifies the murder of millions of Jews throughout history on the grounds that the Jews killed Jesus.” Branden went on to say, “Since I first began listening to Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and reading his books, I’ve been fascinated. At the same time, almost from the beginning, I have had the growing feeling that this is a man who is deeply, deeply, deeply evil—evil on a scale that is almost

outside the limits of the human imagination.”

How could a group of this nature have attracted so many intelligent, educated, and thoughtful followers? In a column I wrote in the 1980s, I noted that many central Oregonians had expressed surprise at the large number of highly educated and professional people who seemed to be present at Rancho Rajneesh. A survey conducted by the University of Oregon psychology department found that 64 percent of 700 followers queried at the ranch had college degrees, and 81 percent came from professional and white-collar families. You have to discount these results a bit because the cult members were undoubtedly instructed by their leaders in how to answer the questions, but experienced students of cults would in general not find such survey results surprising. Jean Merritt, a psychiatric social worker who had been counseling former cult members and their families since 1973, said that cults

typically go after single, white, young, middle-class and upper-middle-class people who have been taught to be open to innovative ideas and to try new experiences. They are often intelligent young men and women who are extremely idealistic and altruistic.

Margaret Singer, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, whom I frequently used as academic source during my investigations of the Rajneesh cult, told me that cults “don’t want Chicanos or blacks. They don’t want the streetwise who’ll cause trouble, who know there’s no free lunch. They want the upwardly mobile who come complete with dowries.” (This, of course, is an ironic comment in retrospect, considering how the Rajneeshees’ “Share-A-Home” program, which brought several thousand homeless people from all around America to Rajneeshpuram in order to register them as voters in a local election, turned out, when they staged a mass rebellion against their temporary masters).

Rajneesh’s intellectual appeal was based on his clever fusion of the ideas of humanistic psychology and the Human Potential Movement of the 1960s and 70s in America with Eastern mysticism. Humanistic psychology sought to find an alternative to Freudian psychology and behaviorism, and its intellectual leader was Abraham Maslow, who thought that traditional psychology had paid too much attention to pathological behavior and should concentrate on helping individuals

to “actualize themselves” and attain what he called “peak experiences.” The Esalen Institute, founded in Big Sur, California in 1962, was the center of the Human Potential Movement—the phrase “Human Potential” was coined by Aldous Huxley, an early ally of Esalen. Huxley and others at Esalen perceived parallels between the emotional opening-up process of Western cathartic therapies (such as primal therapy), the peak experiences described and advocated by Maslow, and the altered states of consciousness produced by Eastern methods of meditation.

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The union of Western psychology and Eastern mysticism became a central goal for the human potential movement, and this was precisely the area in which Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh excelled. At his (so-called) ashram in Pune, India, he juxtaposed experimental, avant-garde Western therapies such as primal, gestalt, and encounter, with classic Eastern meditations like kundalini yoga and zazen, just as they were doing at Esalen. In fact, Rajneesh’s ashram became known as Esalen East. When Dick Price, one of Esalen’s founders, visited, however, he found these techniques were being misused to manipulate and control members of the community. He was especially appalled by the amount of psychological and physical violence prevalent in Rajneesh encounter groups.

In one of my earliest pieces, “Bhagwan’s Hypnotic Spell,” I recounted that counselors and researchers in the field of mind control and cults believed that Rajneesh was a master of various techniques of inducing altered states of consciousness, techniques that they said he and his assistants used to bind followers to him and his organization. Josh Baran, who ran a support organization in Berkeley called Sorting It Out for people who had left spiritual groups, was my first source on this subject. Baran told me he had learned that Rajneesh and his assistants were extremely skilled in a wide range of techniques for manipulating and controlling people, many of which derived from Eastern religions:

He is quite fluent in various altered states of consciousness, much more than other cult leaders I know of. His techniques include chanting,

meditation, Sufi dancing, staring into lights for extended periods of time, and powerful music, all of which induce altered states of mind. What went on at his ashram in Pune was literally a smorgasbord of altered states of mind.

Hilly Zeitlin, a clinical social worker who was co-director of Options for Personal Transition in Berkeley, an organization dealing with cult involvement and related religious issues, said that Rajneesh had made a study of techniques of hypnotic induction used by cults, and told me that he believed Rajneesh to be a “one of the best hypnotists I have ever encountered. The way he uses language, his tone of voice, the way he sequences ideas ... all are essentially hypnotic.” He went on to say that “the art of hypnosis is the art of being vague, while pretending you are being profound,” an art that he thought Rajneesh practiced masterfully in his lectures to his disciples in Pune. “Rajneesh,” he added, “can be even vaguer now by not saying anything at all.” Rajneesh had taken a “vow of silence” when he left India for the United States. “Now you can project onto him whatever you want to believe.”

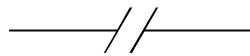
Kathleen McLaughlin, an associate professor of religious studies at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, was at the University of Pune from 1977 to 1978 and went to hear Rajneesh lecture at his ashram on several occasions. She told me: “His use of language is wonderful. He is a hypnotic and beautiful speaker who is profoundly psychically connected to his audience. We have an immature understanding of spirituality in the West,” she contended, “and since we don’t believe in psychic phenomena, we are very vulnerable to them. In India it is understood that anybody who meditates can develop psychic powers—the notion is commonly held that there are such powers and that you can develop them if you want to.” McLaughlin said that Western, academically-trained intellectuals are “especially vulnerable to this because they have been trained to use their heads, but not their emotions, and these techniques bypass rational thought.”

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Zeitlin asserted that the entire social system of the Rajneesh organization functioned to create hypnotic suggestibility in its members. “There is an intense

effort to break down normal ways by which people measure themselves, under the guise of going beyond or transcending the ego,” he said, “and all of this is done in hypnotically binding way. They overload the circuits of the conscious mind and then present you with the alternative of ‘inner consciousness.’ Meanwhile, dependence on the group has developed.” Zeitlin told me that he had found in his interviews with ex-Rajneeshes that they were “extremely psychologically regressed” and that their capacity to relate to others and articulate their feelings was “drastically reduced.”

“These techniques, by themselves, are not bad,” asserted Baran. “They are only bad when they are used to control and enfeeble people.” The problem was that Rajneesh and his assistants were using these techniques “to get people to become followers.”



When Rajneesh tried to incorporate a city in Oregon, Dave Frohnmayer, then the state attorney general, filed suit against the city of Rajneeshpuram on the grounds that it violated the First Amendment’s separation of church and state clause, and demanded that it be disbanded. Though I certainly favored that outcome, for me the basis for the argument was flawed: The so-called religion of “Rajneeshism” was bogus from the get-go.

In an April 1983 letter to Portland physician James G. Perkins, who was involved in litigation with the Rajneesh Foundation, the American Consulate in Bombay (now Mumbai), India, stated for the record: “According to our information, the Rajneesh Foundation in India at no time claimed itself as a religion, nor was its leader, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, ever known here as a founder of a religion.” McLaughlin, too, confirmed that Rajneesh was not accepted as a religious teacher in India. “In India, there is a long tradition of what gurus are,” she told me. “One of the things that’s clear is that if someone is an enlightened master, he doesn’t go around spreading dissent and hatred. The way Rajneesh and his followers antagonized people in India inevitably meant that he was not regarded as an enlightened person.” McLaughlin said that Rajneesh’s insistence on exalting himself above all

other living spiritual teachers was alien to any Indian religious practice.

McLaughlin described Rajneesh's unilateral adoption of the title "Bhagwan," which in Hindi means "Lord" or "God," as blasphemous. She explained: "It is not blasphemous to be called 'Bhagwan' if your followers decide to call you that. It *is* blasphemous to call yourself 'Bhagwan.' The claim he makes that he is 'the one' is completely atypical of Indian holy men." She also accused Rajneesh of distorting and perverting other major elements of the Hindu religious tradition. "His use of the term 'sannyasin' to designate his followers, for instance, is just a mockery as far as I am concerned—a deliberate mockery. In India," she explained, "'sannyasin' means 'renunciate,' one who has renounced worldly possessions and worldly desires in order to wander the land as a beggar, wearing the holy color of orange. When you become a sannyasin for Rajneesh you don't take any kind of vows of renunciation. All you do is pay the organization some money and promise to wear a mala (a locket with Rajneesh's picture in it) and red clothes. That is a deliberate affront to affront Hindu values."

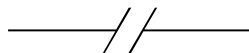
McLaughlin also found Rajneesh's promotion—under the guise of teaching Tantric spirituality—of unrestrained sexual indulgence and promiscuity and, and in the Pune period, of wild, violent sex orgies, especially offensive. "What he teaches has only the most superficial resemblance to the Hindu Tantra," she said. "The Tantra is a very disciplined path of spirituality, and, if there is anything Rajneesh does not teach, it's discipline. Tantric sexual practice is non-orgasmic. It's not just going out and sleeping around. You have a partner chosen by your teacher, and it can be years before you have any sexual contact with that partner at all. It's not a one-night stand." McLaughlin called Rajneesh's use, or misuse, of the Tantra, "cheap, inaccurate, and inflammatory."

McLaughlin argued to me that Rajneeshism was not a religion at all, but purely and simply a cult. She distinguished a cult from a religion by the former's lack of both a meaningful spiritual discipline and real spiritual tradition. "A real religion," she argued, "has a lineage. Other masters are seen as part of that tradition, and they provide some checks and balances, and some humility. A cult, on the other hand, is a group run by a single charismatic leader who egoistically sets himself up as the single source of authority, as having a new revelation, as the only 'enlightened one,' and, therefore, as superseding all other sources of authority. Buddha didn't set

himself up that way. Moses and Jesus didn't set themselves up that way.”
McLaughlin continued: “There is no ethical basis in the teachings of a cult, and that is another thing that distinguishes a cult from a religion.”

As a matter of record, the Rajneesh organization did not lay claim to the status of a religion until the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) began contemplating deportation proceedings against Bhagwan. In a December 5, 1981 circular to Rajneesh meditation centers around the world, Rajneesh's assistant Ma Anand Sheela announced, “A new religion has been born called Rajneeshism.” The next month, *Orange Juice*, the tabloid of the Rajneesh meditation center in Berkeley, recorded this dialogue between Rajneesh official Ma Sushila and a group of followers: “For years Bhagwan has said to us in India we are not a religion ... We are now officially a religion. (Lots of laughter. Somebody asks what the name is.) Guess! It's called 'Who Am I'? No. It's called Rajneeshism. (More laughter). And for those of us who happen to be sannyasins we are called Rajneeshees. You like that, huh?”

On September 30, 1985, after Sheela had fled Rancho Rajneesh and Bhagwan began speaking out against her, publicly blaming her for the multitude of crimes the Rajneeshees had perpetrated in Central Oregon, 5,000 copies of *The Book of Rajneeshism* were burned in the Rajneeshpuram crematorium, and Rajneesh declared the end of the religion of Rajneeshism.



The type of organization that the Rajneesh cult in fact most resembled was a vast criminal enterprise. In three separate columns, “The Will of Bhagwan: Drugs and Prostitution,” and “Bhagwan's Drug Runners I” and “Bhagwan's Drug Runners II,” I laid out the evidence that much of the cult's wealth had probably been derived from the involvement of Rajneesh followers in India in prostitution and the smuggling of drugs and currency. It cost a lot of money to remain at Rajneesh's ashram in Pune, and when a follower ran out of funds and pleaded to be allowed to stay on, he or she (though all the cases that came to light seemed to have involved women followers) would be offered an opportunity to gain money through illegal

means of one kind or another.

In *Wild, Wild Country*, Sheela is emphatic about the Rajneesh organization's need for money after the ashram was established in Pune. She explains that Rajneesh required "a steady flow of income," to "do the work he wanted to do," and that their task was to "create a capitalist working community." She says they quickly realized that 3,000 to 4,000 sannyasins living at the ashram could definitely create a "big cash flow." She argues that other communities died because they were "averse to creating wealth," and contends that the "only way for the commune to live was to get rich." And get rich it indisputably did.

In a 1980 article in a British psychology journal called *Energy and Character*, an ex-Rajneesh follower named David Boadella wrote as follows:

At a well-known religious community in the East ... sannyasins are selling their bodies on the open market to secure the money to gain a home for their souls in the spiritual community. This may take the form of earnings from masturbation shows, or prostitution, and is tacitly encouraged by the community in question, where the immoral earnings are discreetly referred to as "getting sweets." At the same community there is an official policy that actively discourages or prohibits drug taking. Unofficially, however, an active drug run organized by sannyasins flourishes with or alongside the community, and people in need of money to buy a place in the community are put in touch with it covertly by high-ranking officials there. Five or six kilos of cannabis are secreted in false-bottomed suitcases and are smuggled by plane via Amsterdam and Paris to Montreal, where they are sold for £9,000 (approximately \$20,000). The drug ring collects £6,000 (approximately \$13,000), and the person who smuggles the drugs collects £3,000 (approximately \$6,500) toward his tickets to heaven. Several sannyasins are currently serving jail sentences for participating in the drug run. Two of them used "brainwashing" as a defense at their trials, in order to get a reduced sentence.

Boadella also quoted the chief inspector of the Pune police as saying: "Prostitution by the cult's girl disciples reached disgraceful proportions. It became epidemic."

Two sannyasins who claimed in their defense that they had been brainwashed were an English woman named Margot Gordon and a Swedish woman named Maria Kristina Koppel. At Koppel's trial in England, her defense attorney, Mr. W. Taylor, introduced his case to the court as follows:

Taylor: My extensive inquiries show that the man out in Pune, called Bhagwan, is nothing short of an evil man, using a lot of young people ... and reducing their mentality to such a position it becomes no more and no less than putty in his hands. He does it for money, and he uses these girls as a front for smuggling drugs all over the world. Over a period of time these young women, or young men, have their personalities reduced to nothing, their past is forgotten, and suggestions are put to them and they would do anything that this man tells them to do.

Taylor then called to the stand an expert on Hinduism and Eastern religions who had done research on the Rajneesh group, Professor Johannes Aagard. He gave the following testimony:

Aagard: In Pune, Bhagwan and his people, not least his group of high-ranking officers, have established an alternative world He gives them a mala with his own picture on it, and they get a piece of his hair, connecting their reality with his From the beginning the aim is to do away with the mind, the personality, the memory You end up being nobody. You have to give up your ego. You have to empty yourself totally to surrender to Bhagwan. "Total surrender" are the key words. This is done by a series of humiliating acts where you are forced to do what you hate to do in the group. You lose the identity feeling which is connected with certain acts, certain reservations, certain sexual inhibitions. In a number of those workshops promiscuity takes place in the most rude and horrible ways. Male persons are allowed to do whatever they like with females, and vice versa, and it aims at bringing down the consciousness connected with the individual in order that a new consciousness connected with Bhagwan and his ideology take its place.

In a document that Kristina's mother submitted to the court in hopes of gaining leniency for her daughter, she reported that Kristina had told her the following

about her experiences in a Tantra group: “Kristina was commanded to have sexual intercourse with every man in the group in turn, in order to ‘kill her ego.’ The group leader, a woman, shouted at her: ‘If you are to surrender to Bhagwan, you must surrender to anybody here, to any man although the mere thought of it makes you sick—you are not to think—just let it happen!’”

Defense lawyer Taylor then asked Aagard the following question:

Taylor: And what is left at the end of the day?

Aagard: The will of Bhagwan.

Then an obviously sympathetic prosecutor, Mr. C. Hilliard, had the following exchange with Aagaard:

Hilliard: After a person has had this process administered to them, do they know what they are doing?

Aagard: I must say that they are observing as a witness, as a spectator, everything they are doing. What is acting is not them. They are only witnessing an action, and therefore you can murder, but you are not a murderer. You can steal, but you are not a thief.

Hilliard: Does Bhagwan say who is a thief, and who is a murderer?

Aagard: It is the mind, and the mind is an illusion. Therefore the act of stealing and murdering is an illusion.

Then Taylor called to the stand Doctor Joan Gomez, a psychiatrist from the University of London who had examined Koppel.

Taylor: Do you think this young woman knew, when she was asked to bring the cannabis into this country, the difference between right and wrong?

Gomez: I do not know about right and wrong, but I am quite sure she did not know it was against the law. I am sure if Bhagwan said it was all right, it was just like God saying it.

Taylor: And did she have an alternative?

Gomez: I do not think it would have been possible for her to opt out at all. Even intellectually she could not, because the alternative was very horrible. She had to get money to go back to him. One way was prostitution, the other was cannabis.

Taylor pleaded with the court not to send his client to jail, saying, “That will kill her mind, and all she will do when she comes out is to go back to this sick and sad community.” Judge J. Murchie gave Koppel a 15-month suspended sentence.

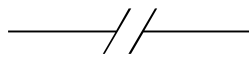
In the 1980 trial of Margot Gordon in Paris, her lawyer, Philippe le Boulanger, argued similarly that his client had been psychologically coerced into smuggling cannabis from India by the Rajneesh sect. Taylor told the court, among other things, that she had been subjected to three sessions of two hours apiece in a “serenity tank” (a darkened, soundless, sensory-deprivation tank filled with saltwater kept at body temperature), a treatment he described—relying on an analysis by the same Dr. Gomez—as a “Nazi-style torture designed to brainwash the victim.” Gordon was given an eight-month sentence and an additional 16-month suspended sentence and fined £10,000.

It is not clear to what extent Rajneesh officials transferred these types of criminal activities to the U.S., but in the summer of 1983, three Indian followers of Rajneesh were arrested by the Bombay police and charged with attempting to smuggle hundreds of thousands of U.S. dollars from the Rajneesh Foundation in Pune to Rajneeshpuram in Oregon. One of them admitted he had also smuggled sizable amounts of foreign exchange purchased on the Indian black market to Rajneesh contacts in America. Also, some observers and members of law enforcement agencies speculated at the time that Rolls-Royces supposedly “donated” to Rajneesh by enthusiastic adherents—there were close to 100 at Rajneeshpuram by the saga’s end—represented a convenient way of laundering illegally obtained funds.

For a long time, Rajneesh women predominated in the escort services in San Francisco and among strippers at the well-known Mitchell Brothers O’Farrell Street Theatre in San Francisco, but after operations got going at the ranch in Oregon, Rajneesh summoned all of them to Central Oregon. Bill Driver, the investigative

reporter with whom I worked on several *Oregon Magazine* features about the cult, received a tip from a law enforcement source that the man the FBI considered to be the major cocaine dealer in the United States was observed leaving the ranch on Rajneesh's last day there, but Bill was unable to confirm the information. On October 13, 1985, a week and half before Rajneesh attempted his escape from the United States, Robert Black, a Rajneeshee also known as Swami Hrydaya, was arrested in Vancouver, British Columbia, on charges of large-scale cocaine and currency smuggling, but as far as I know no direct connection between those crimes and Rajneesh or his top officials was proven.

However, the brand-new categories of crimes in which the Rajneeshees involved themselves in Oregon—poisonings, conspiracy to murder, illegal wire-tapping, immigration fraud—more than supported the summation a U.S. Customs official gave me after it was all over: “It was,” he said to me, “the biggest criminal conspiracy in the history of the state”—and, he added, “no one did a damn thing about it.”



In a January, 1983 cable to the INS office in Portland, the American consulate in Bombay offered two reasons why Rajneesh left India when he did. The first was the tax situation of the Rajneesh Foundation, the legal umbrella for Bhagwan's ashram in Pune. The consulate reported that authorities in India were initially stymied in their investigation of the foundation by Rajneesh followers who had worked their way into positions of power in the Indian tax system. But the government finally revoked the foundation's tax-exempt status and assessed its taxes dating back to the ashram's founding in 1974. Needless to say, Rajneesh and his cohort left the country with those taxes unpaid.

The second reason for the sudden departure of Rajneesh and his governing clique was the inability of the Rajneesh Foundation to obtain a large enough piece of land for his projected city, whose population he claimed might reach as many as 100,000 people—the Rajneesh Foundation had already taken money from disciples in exchange for promised homes in the future city. Ironically, the foundation's

inability to secure the land was due to India's stringent land-use laws. The failure of Ma Yoga Laxmi, Rajneesh's top assistant for many years, to secure the land, had caused him to replace her with the more aggressive Sheela Silverman, an Indian woman with close family ties to Rajneesh (her last name came from a first marriage that ended with her husband's death).



Rajneesh had acquired nearly 100 Rolls-Royces by the time he fled the United States.
Courtesy of Netflix

The *Los Angeles Times*, in an August 30, 1981 investigative story, suggested a third possible reason for Rajneesh's unexpected decision to vacate his ashram. The relationship between the ashram and the townspeople of Pune—exactly like the relationship between the Rajneeshees and the townspeople of Antelope—was full of hostility. Just prior to Rajneesh's departure, friction between the two sides erupted in two acts of arson against the ashram.

The attacks might have been connected to a dispute between the ashram and one of its landlords. The ashram had filed charges against the landlord, accusing him of assaulting a female disciple. The landlord claimed Rajneesh's followers had framed him because he had refused to cede disputed water rights on his property to them. The American consulate in Bombay investigated this story and concluded that "sexual entrapment" was one of the ashram's "favorite techniques" for getting its way in India. "An individual, usually a man," the report stated, "would be lured into a situation where he found himself alone with an ashram female. After a short time, the female claimed she had been molested. Amazingly enough, there were often cameras and recorders present. Then, an ashram official would appear and offer to trade silence on a sexual charge for something the ashram wanted."

The ashram's sexual entrapment of its landlord—who was also a popular newspaper editor in the city—was not the first such incident in Pune, and there was speculation that some townspeople may have finally been sufficiently angered by the latest one to resort to arson. Police and insurance investigators suspected, however, that the Rajneeshees may have set the fires themselves, just as they were later suspected of having engineered the bombing of a Rajneeshee-owned hotel in Oregon themselves.



The Rajneesh cult used sex not just to manipulate outsiders who opposed them, but also to attract followers to their fold and to keep members inside under control. "All cults control sex, in one way or another," Professor Singer explained to me. "Either they prohibit it completely, or they enforce participation in it. Either way, what the cult leader is attempting to do is to prevent pair bonding and stop couples from leaving because they love each other more than they love the group. The leader who enforces participation achieves a much greater degree of subjugation of his followers' wills, because he takes actual control of this most intimate area of a person's life."

Data and testimonials from the Rajneesh cult tended to bear out her view. An ex-disciple named Roselyn, who went through six months of therapy groups at

Rajneesh's ashram in India, told me that coercive psychological pressure was applied at the ashram—particularly on women—to enforce participation in sexually promiscuous behavior and in the ashram's notorious group sex orgies. "The lingo at the ashram was 'say yes' and 'say yes to life,'" she said. "One guy made an approach to me and I wasn't the least bit interested, but I felt guilty because I was not 'saying yes to life.'" She told me that women who refused to participate in ashram orgies were castigated by group leaders for being "selfish," "frigid," and "rejecting."

Attempts to enforce sexual participation at the Pune ashram did not always stop at psychological pressure, but sometimes extended to the use of violence. A German ex-disciple named Eckart reported witnessing the rape of a female sannyasin by two men during an encounter group called "samarpan" ("surrender"). When he tried to intervene, he said, the group leader stopped him, explaining afterwards: "She needed to be raped." Another ex-follower named David reported an incident in which a woman fled an ashram encounter group after being raped and had to undergo months of counseling outside the ashram in order to overcome the resulting psychological trauma. The infamous film *Ashram* (which residents of Antelope are seen trucking to Portland to watch in *Wild, Wild Country*) made by German ex-disciple Wolfgang Dobrowolny, shows an attempted gang rape during an ashram encounter group.

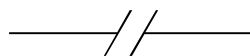
Venereal diseases, particularly gonorrhea and herpes, were widespread at the Pune ashram. Roselyn told me there were "tremendous gonorrhea epidemics" while she was there, and told of one man who infected some ten female disciples with the disease in the course of a week-long Tantra group. As a result, medical authorities at Rajneeshpuram would screen new arrivals very carefully for sexual diseases. Susan Harfouche—an ex-disciple whose manuscript "Death of a Dream: Memoirs of an ex-Sannyasin" *Oregon Magazine* published—related how the names of new arrivals who had been medically approved for sex were posted on a bulletin board outside the commune dining hall, where followers gathered after dinner and chose their partners for the night. Later, new arrivals had to wear a single orange bead on their mala until they had passed the commune's stringent venereal disease tests.

If a man and woman showed signs of forming an ongoing relationship, commune authorities would give them assignments in different parts of the ranch.

Both Susan Harfouche and Roselyn told us that they did not witness any orgies while they were at Rajneeshpuram. “They are much more careful at the ranch,” said Roselyn. “They told us they had to be careful about journalists penetrating the groups and that we couldn’t do some of the things we did in Pune.” But Harfouche and Roselyn both noted that the commune’s grueling work schedule of twelve hours a day, seven days a week did not leave much time or energy for hours-long orgies.

They also both confirmed that an unspoken policy of discouraging committed relationships was in effect at Rajneeshpuram while they were there. Smith argued that the ranch’s extremely crowded living conditions themselves worked to discourage intimacy. “How can you be intimate with someone when there are two other couples in the bedroom?” she asked. “It’s much easier to have depersonalized sex and then never see the person again.” Harfouche said that if a man and woman showed signs of forming an ongoing relationship, commune authorities would give them assignments in different parts of the ranch or at different time of the day in order to keep them apart.

“This depersonalization of sex and frustration of intimate relationships is simply designed to heighten the feeling of a personal relationship with Bhagwan,” Adrian Greek, a cult counselor in Portland, told me, modifying Singer. The best description of the emotional end-result of Rajneesh-style sexuality I found appeared in a 1981 book by Rajneesh disciple Ma Satya Bharti, *Drunk on the Divine*. Bharti described the aftereffects of an ashram orgy on a female participant as follows: “She felt herself losing control of her body, losing control of her mind. She was disappearing, vanishing into thin air. Then there was nothingness, emptiness.”



Of all the reprehensible aspects of the Rajneesh cult, the treatment of children at the ranch has been the most ignored or suppressed, probably because it is the most horrible and painful to contemplate. As far as I know, no one else has written about the subject but me. It plays no role in *Wild, Wild Country*.

Let's begin with the fact that Rajneesh did not want his followers to have children, a subject I wrote about in "Bhagwan's Strange Eugenics." Rajneesh made the following statement to the INS in an interview in Portland on October 14, 1982: "Just as murder is considered by the society, so the birth of a child should be considered by the commune." He wasn't kidding. Rajneesh required that all his top women officials have themselves sterilized, and he encouraged his other disciples to do the same. If a woman got pregnant at the Pune ashram in India or Rajneeshpuram in Oregon, she was given a stark choice: Agree to have an abortion, or leave the property forthwith. There were zero children born in Oregon to Rajneesh cult members during the time the commune was extant.

"Bhagwan told his followers that a woman could not become enlightened if she had a child," a former disciple informed me, "because it would take away from her vital energy. It took so much energy to become enlightened that if you had a child, you wouldn't have the energy to pursue that path." Actually, the reason Bhagwan did not want his followers to have children was the same reason he did not care for them to have stable, committed, loving relationships: Having a child might motivate its parents to forsake the commune for a more normal, adult lifestyle.

As I recounted in "Bhagwan's Childrearing," the 50 or so children at the ranch were all born before their parents came there. Rajneesh had enunciated the principle that, "The children will not belong to the parents but to the commune," and in fact children over five years old lived apart from their parents. There was evidence of neglect of the very youngest ones. Two adults who lived there reported that they saw young children running around outdoors during the winter months without adequate clothing. One said she saw a completely naked four-year-old girl playing outside in the month of December. The other described the fate of a boy about two years old at the ranch:

The first accident he had was when he fell down a stairway and really banged himself up badly. The next I can remember he was run over by a pickup. The poor little thing, one side of his face was nothing but blood and pus and swollen and bruised. It was terrible. The only thing that saved him was the mud was so deep. He was out there amid the machinery all the time. It's a wonder he didn't get killed.

In her “Memoirs of an Ex-Sannyasin,” Harfouche described a “little two-year-old baby I used to see wondering around the ranch by itself: bewildered big eyes, fingers in mouth, dirty, neglected.” Roselyn, a child-protective social worker by profession, confirmed for us that, “The children are discouraged from living with their parents. They have one of the lowest priorities of any concern. They’re given very little attention.” But she also gave us disturbing information about the sexual involvement of young children at the ranch. She told us: “most of the twelve-, thirteen-, and fourteen-year-old girls at the ranch were having sexual relationships. It was a common thing.”

According to a 1983 report by the Concerned Christian Growth Ministries of Australia, an Australian visitor to the Rancho Rajneesh in 1982 reported: “The ranch house has been converted to the children’s house and school room. Children do not have to live with their parents; they belong to the community, and pride is exuded in the ‘modern’ approach used in their upbringing. Some children were running around naked in the schoolhouse, and it is not unusual for boys and girls to sleep together. Children are encouraged to experiment sexually with one another, and one sannyasin said children often watch their parents’ sexual involvement—‘in private, of course.’” A girl who lived at Rajneeshpuram from the ages of eleven to 13 said in an interview that female contemporaries frequently had sexual relations with older men. She claimed she knew girls as young as ten who had sexual relationships with adult men.

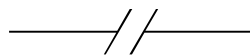
Allegations made to *Oregon Magazine* by homeless people who lived at Rajneeshpuram during the share-a-home program were consistent with the statements of these former commune residents. One said he saw Rajneesh children “feeling on each other, hugging on each other,” and fondling each other’s genital areas. He said, “They roam free, they can do what they want There was one 13-year-old girl that was going with a 45-year-old guy. He said he did (sexual) things with her with her parents right there. They call it ‘open love.’”

Another homeless person interviewed after he left Rajneeshpuram by Bill Driver for *Oregon Magazine* said he witnessed a boy and girl, three and four years old, with their genitals exposed, simulating sexual intercourse. He said the girl’s mother was present while this was happening, and that she said: “It’s OK, that’s how you have fun.” Still another street person claimed that he saw a man “sexually molesting” a

ten-year-old girl on a crowded bus at Rajneeshpuram. “I didn’t like what I seen,” he said, “and the woman I was with (a Rajneeshee) didn’t like it either. She finally went over there and told the girl to sit with us. Nobody else said a word.”

Jim Phillips, a father who filed suit in San Mateo County, California, in 1983 to prevent his ex-wife from taking their nine-year-old son to live at Rancho Rajneesh, told us the following tale. The judge in the case initially ruled that the Rajneeshee mother could take the boy to the ranch for a four-week trial period. At the end of the four weeks, the judge seemed inclined to extend the limit of the boy’s stay. After a private conference with the boy in his chambers, however, the judge suddenly changed his mind and ruled that the child could not visit “any Rajneesh ashram or ranch or any place under the control of the Rajneesh Foundation” for longer than 48 hours at a time. The judge said in his ruling: “The lifestyle of the mother at the ranch is totally controlled by the Rajneesh group and is totally alien to the lifestyle of the minor when he is with his father.”

Said Phillips: “I looked at the judge’s face when he came out (from talking to his son) and I knew that he finally understood what’s really going on up there at that ranch—that it’s a kiddie-land for adults, and the children are getting screwed over.”

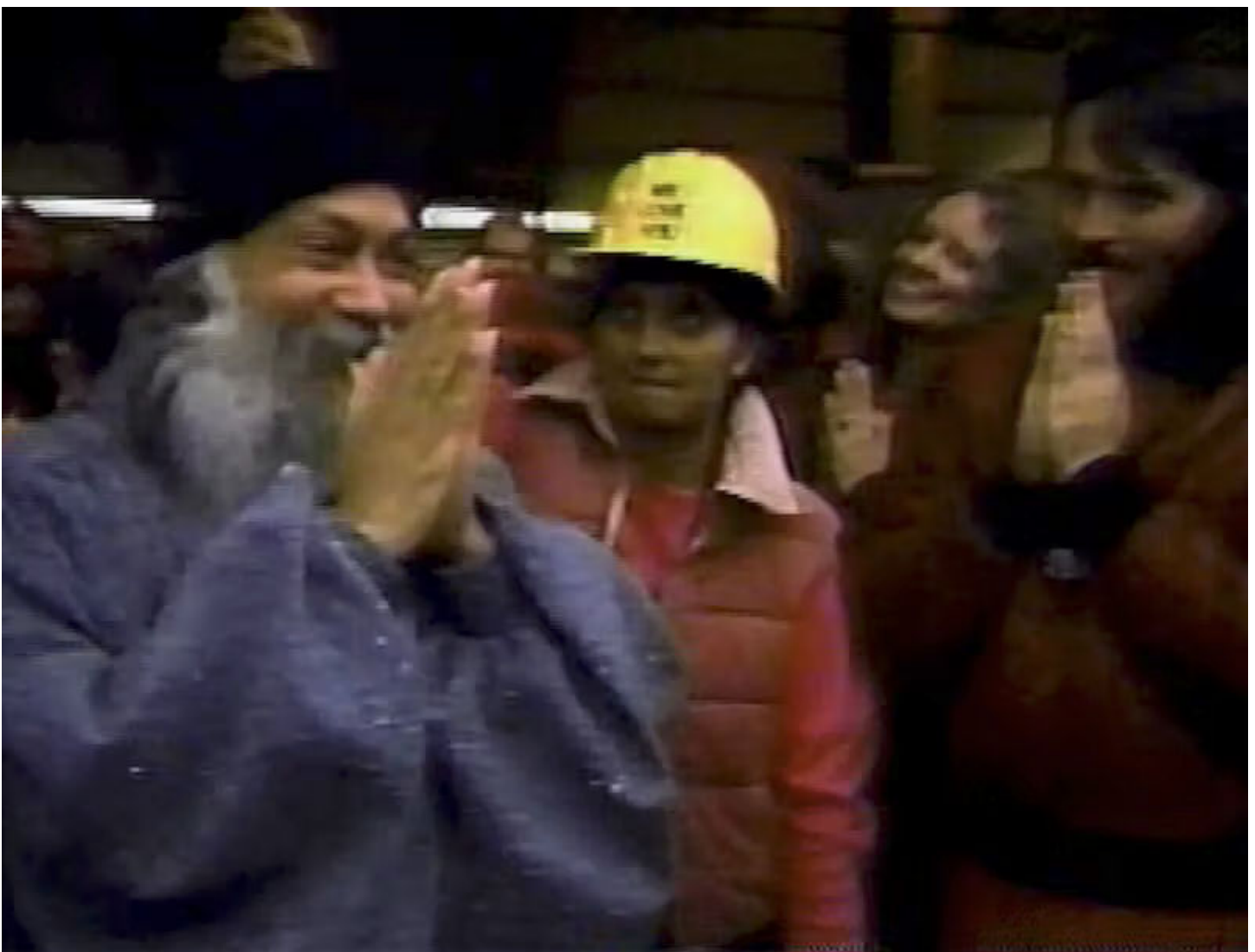


Wild, Wild Country is too murky with respect to the basis of the conflict between the Rajneeshees and residents of Central Oregon. Were their opponents a group of prejudiced, white, Christian, country yokels, or were they motivated by genuine concerns regarding the impact of new city on the fragile ecology of a farming community in the high desert? Was the conflict in fact basically a land-use dispute, in which the Rajneeshees from the outset furtively and systemically violated both the spirit and letter of Oregon’s land-use laws?

When the Rajneeshees first arrived at the Big Muddy Ranch (soon to be renamed Rancho Rajneesh) in July 1981, they declared their intention to operate a “simple farm” and “religious commune” with a mere 50 agricultural workers. Within a month, however, they had applied to Wasco County for permits to locate 34 trailers on the Wasco County portion of the property. The permits granted allowed five

inhabitants per trailer, which would bring the population of the ranch to 170 people. Oregon law requires a minimum of 150 people to incorporate a city. Three months later, in October 1981, Rajneesh representatives applied to the Wasco County Commission for permission to hold an incorporation election on grounds of the renamed Rancho Rajneesh.

The Oregon Land and Conservation Development Commission (LCDC) had three principal planning goals relevant to the idea of incorporating a new city at Rancho Rajneesh. Goal 3, the Agricultural Lands Goal, called for the preservation of agricultural lands in the state. Goal 14, the Urbanization Goal, mandated that urban development in the state take place in an orderly and efficient manner within an approved urban-growth boundary. However, to complicate matters, Goal 2 allowed exceptions to Goal 3 and Goal 14 in cases where it could be shown that an exception would advance the overall cause of sound land development.



Rajneesh moved to Central Oregon to build “the first Sannyasin City,” which he aimed to grow to a population of 100,000.

Courtesy of Netflix

In meetings with Rajneesh representatives in the fall of 1981, staff attorneys for 1,000 Friends of Oregon, a citizens’ land-use advocacy group, warned them that they would have to seek an exception under Goal 2. The 1,000 Friends’ representatives predicted the likelihood was that an exception would not be granted, because Oregon land-use laws already permitted the kind of simple farming and religious activities the Rajneeshees said they wanted to pursue. They could obtain permits for farm-related structures on a case-by-case basis from Wasco and Jefferson Counties. The Rajneesh representatives responded that the process of obtaining permits on a case-by-case basis was too burdensome, and the expenses required for travel between the ranch and the county courthouses too great, for this to be a practicable plan for them.

Instead, the Rajneeshees went ahead and campaigned for permission from the Wasco County Court to start building their city. “Findings of Fact” submitted to the commission asserted that “the uses to be established within the proposed city are of a rural nature ... to meet the needs of the predominately agricultural work force residing within the area. Limited commercial and industrial uses will be of a similar nature.” It was on the basis of these finding that Commissioner Rick Cantrell, also the county executive, and Commissioner Virgil Ellett overrode the opposition of the third commissioner and voted to allow the official incorporation of Rajneeshpuram. Whatever his real views on the incorporation matter, Cantrell possessed an added incentive to vote the Rajneeshees’ way: They bought his entire herd of horses from him for more than they were worth on the open market at time when he was having severe difficulty meeting his payments on a loan from the U.S. National Bank of Oregon. They didn’t pay him the money, however, until after the vote endorsing their plans for a city had taken place.

After receiving permission from the Wasco County Commission to begin building their supposedly agriculturally-oriented city, the Rajneeshees proceeded to construct the following kinds of structures: several hundred houses, several multiplex apartment complexes, a two-story shopping mall, a 21,900-square-foot “counseling complex,” a series of office buildings and restaurants, a large

warehouse, a four-story hotel, a factory, and an airport landing strip capable of accommodating private jet airplanes. Granted permission to build a “simple greenhouse,” they erected a 2.2-acre, 80,000-square-foot public meeting hall called a Mandir. All of these structures were outside the limits of an urban growth boundary, because there wasn’t one in that area.

So much Sturm und Drang surrounds the Rajneesh story that people telling it, either in written form or in film, can forget to make clear how straightforward a story it really is, and readers and viewers can miss it. Rajneesh had repeatedly said when he and his followers were still in India that he wanted to build “the first Sannyasin City,” indicating it might start out with 10,000 residents and eventually reach 100,000, and he came to Oregon with that purpose in mind. 1,000 Friends of Oregon, with the support of local ranchers and farmers, pursued a legal strategy to stymie his project, to the point where eventually it seemed that the original Wasco County Commission vote giving the Rajneeshees permission to incorporate their city might be overturned, and the city literally deconstructed. It was at that point that the Rajneeshees hatched an imaginative but not very realistic scheme to gain control of the Wasco County Commission, which was going to get a redo vote on the issue.

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Their scheme had three parts: debilitating two of the county commissioners by poisoning them, and running two of their own candidates for their seats; poisoning potential voters in the county so they couldn’t get to the polls on election day; and bringing in a few thousand homeless people from around the country to register them to vote, because they did not have enough Rajneeshee voters on the ranch to carry the day. This scheme fell apart in dramatic fashion, for reasons that the Duplass brothers’ film tracks very well. An elaborate voter-registration process set up by Oregon Secretary of State Norma Paulus and the Wasco County clerk deterred the homeless residents from trying to register. Most of them hadn’t been the least bit interested in registering to vote in the first place.

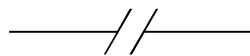
Homeless people, stranded by the Rajneeshee in various bus stations around the state, without the return tickets to their cities of origin they had been promised, had plenty to say about the prevailing atmosphere on the ranch. “It’s a peace and love thing, right? Wrong!” Duane Hartman told the Vancouver *Columbian* newspaper. “Everywhere you look, there’s someone checking up on you.” Another homeless man from New York named Steve Maranville told the same newspaper, “I hated it. It was like a terrorist camp.” John Irwin told the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, “There’s rampant sex and they’re trying to twist people’s minds in these all-day brainwashing sessions.” Irwin reported that he was kicked and beaten in his tent after refusing to register to vote. Reporter Roddy Ray wrote in the *Detroit Free Press*, “Periodically, during dinner, a voice came over the loudspeaker: “Attention, friends. If you are an American citizen and over eighteen, you are eligible to register to vote.” Some of the homeless people claimed that food, clothing, and bedding were withheld from them if they refused to register.

“It’s a constructed environment that invokes most of the senses,” Warren Barnes, from Berkeley, California, explained to the *Seattle Times*. “Color predominates. Image dominates—you see Bhagwan’s picture all the time. Words predominate—Rajneesh, Rajneesh, Rajneesh.” Barnes said personal decisions such as where to work, where to eat, and where to live were taken away at Rajneeshpuram. “It’s a continuing process where you can be a baby again,” he said. “And these subliminal things weaken your will to resist.”

“They say peace there, but there’s guns everywhere you look,” Donnie Harman, a homeless man from Tyler, Texas, told the *Seattle Times*. “They say no lies, but I was lied to until I left.” Reporter Jay Maeder of the *Miami Herald* described Rajneeshpuram as “a dark-souled, us-against-them kingdom, full of beaming, soft-singing spiritual storm troopers whose high priests daily drum into the acolytes that the world outside is a savage forest full of predators who mean to destroy them.” Maranville described to The Dalles *Weekly Reminder* a meeting at which the homeless people, particularly Vietnam veterans, were asked to “defend the community.” “They said they’d arm people if they had to,” Maranville claimed.

“These people are dedicated and dangerous,” Michael Sprouse of Jacksonville, Florida, told the *Weekly Reminder*. “They are dedicated fanatics and they’re armed ... psyched up to the point of firing on American citizens or U.S. military personnel,

if the Bhagwan asks them to. I know Oregon people are concerned. But I don't think they're taking them as seriously as they should." Toward the end of the story recounted in *Wild, Wild Country*, ex-Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert Weaver—who throughout the film seems bent on convincing viewers that the authorities were on top of the Rajneesh problem from the outset, when in fact they didn't even lift a finger to ameliorate the situation in Central Oregon or aid the troubled local residents in any way—outlines the military-style invasion of Rancho Rajneesh, with several hundred national guardsmen and an FBI SWAT team, he had in the works. If this operation had actually been undertaken, there might have been a bloodbath at Rajneeshpuram that would have made the FBI's later fiasco at Waco look like the mission of mercy it purported to be. Fortunately for Weaver and everyone else concerned, Bhagwan forestalled this possibility with his attempted escape from America in one of his Lear Jets, which when his jet stopped in Charlotte, North Carolina, to refuel he was arrested and brought back to Portland for trial.



Virtually everything that happened in the story of the Rajneeshees in Oregon (including the takeover of Antelope, which was their backup city) pertained to the land-use issue, and the question of whether their city would survive its legal challenges. The poisoning of nearly 1,000 restaurant patrons at Sunday brunch in The Dalles was a dry-run to determine how effective it might be if used to keep voters from the polls. In the end, this diabolical plot didn't come to fruition either. But it provides a convenient point for returning to the subject of evil, and measuring the exact degree of danger posed by this cult.

I happened to be in Washington, D.C. not long after the poisonings in The Dalles, and dropped by Congressman Jim Weaver's office in the late afternoon to say hello. He called me into his personal office, mixed up a couple of cold gin martinis, sat down, and began to explain why the only possible source of the salmonella poisoning in The Dalles was Rajneeshpuram. Jim came from an agricultural background in Iowa (his grandfather, James O. Weaver, was the candidate of the Populist Party for president in 1892), and he had a detailed knowledge of salmonella

(which is found on eggs and raw poultry). He insisted that there was absolutely no other explanation for salmonella being present in the salad bars of a dozen different restaurants on the same morning. And, of course, he turned out to be right. The Centers for Disease Control had blamed it on the food handlers in the restaurants.

Jim went on the floor of the U.S. Congress and gave a speech called “The Town that Was Poisoned,” taking dead aim (after running down the scientific basis of his interpretation) at the Rajneeshees, though not mentioning them by name. For this act of public service, he was pilloried by the editorial page of the *Oregonian*, which supported the Rajneeshees and their leader to the bitter end. Jim and I had both been the subject of strong criticism from Portland liberals, who viewed Rajneesh as a victim of racial prejudice and religious bigotry from the country bumpkins in Central Oregon.

Since we were two of the leading liberals in the state ourselves, the criticism of us was especially personal. At the Democratic Convention in San Francisco in 1984, the chairman of the Oregon delegation walked out the room when he overheard me talking about Rajneesh (he should have listened in more carefully: I was gathering details from a man I met who lived in San Francisco and claimed he had participated in a bachelor party orgy with Rajneesh escort girls). When the ACLU came out in support of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh on First Amendment grounds, I offered to address their board and outline for them what I thought was really going on up in Central Oregon. They rejected my offer out of hand—they simply didn’t want to hear another other side of the story. Conservatives often criticize liberals for refusing to recognize evil when it clearly presents itself, and they are not completely wrong in this assessment.

One time I heard that the head of the Rajneesh Medical Corporation, Ma Anand Puja, was coming to Portland to give a talk about the commune’s medical program, and I went to hear her lecture. She projected, for want of a better way to put it, a very dark and menacing aura. After Sheela left the ranch and the authorities gained a warrant to search the Rancho Rajneesh thoroughly, it turned out that the Rajneesh Medical Corporation actually housed a biological warfare laboratory, which Puja oversaw. She had of course supplied the salmonella the Rajneeshees had put in the salad bars in the Dalles, but she had ordered and stockpiled many

other pathogens as well: *Salmonella typhi*, which causes often-fatal typhoid fever; *Salmonella paratyphi*, which causes a similar, less severe illness; *Francisella tularensis*, which causes a debilitating and sometimes fatal disease (it was weaponized by U.S. Army scientists in the 1950s and is on the Pentagon's list of agents that might be used in a biological warfare attack on the nation); and *Shigella dysenteriae*, a very small amount of which can cause severe dysentery resulting in death in 10 to 20 percent of cases. Reportedly, Puja had at first wanted to use *salmonella typhi* to poison Wasco County voters, but decided against it when it was explained to her that it might cause a typhoid epidemic which could be easily traced to the ranch.

Inside the same building law enforcement officials also discovered the following books and other written materials: *Deadly Substances*, *Handbook for Poisoning*, and *The Perfect Crime and How to Commit It*, as well as numerous articles on assassinations, explosives, and terrorism. There was also an article entitled "poison investigation" with sections on symptoms highlighted, and a clear plastic bag with articles on infectious diseases, chemical products, and chemical and biological warfare.



But that's not all. There was also discovered a top-secret research project called Moses Five, whose objective was to cultivate a live AIDS virus. Rajneesh had predicted that two thirds of the world's population would die of AIDS, and the first question was: If Puja could have produced such a virus, might Rajneesh possibly have used it to make his prediction come true? In his book on Aum Shinrikyo *Destroying the World in Order to Save it*, Robert Jay Lifton introduced the concept of "action prophet" to describe a cult leader who "aggressively sought to bring about whatever he predicted." "What made Asahara an action prophet," he explained, "was the inseparability of prophecy and action, of what he imagined and what he did."

If Puja had succeeded in cultivating a live AIDS virus, would Rajneesh have ordered its use? It seems that Judith Miller, in her 2001 book *Germs: Biological Weapons and*

America's Secret War, reached more or less the same conclusion I did about Puja—that she would have almost certainly deployed it. But what about Rajneesh? Would he have ended up as an action prophet if the commune hadn't come unraveled?

I had a conversation with Congressman Weaver on this subject. Same place, same office, same time of day, same libations. Jim had said in his speech about the salmonella poisonings that “People who would do that would stop at nothing”:

Moses Five,” he mused, “Moses ... Five. What do you suppose that refers to? Moses—Five—I think it refers to the Fifth Commandment, ‘Thou Shalt Not Kill.’ I think that was their way of indicating that they planned to violate that commandment, to kill a whole lot of people with that virus if they could have produced it. There is no doubt in my mind, given their history and trajectory, that if they had been able to develop that virus, they would have unleashed it on the world.”

Read more from [The Rise and Fall of the Rajneesh Cult](#)

Win McCormack

Win McCormack is the editor in chief of *The New Republic* and the author of *The Rajneesh Chronicles: The True Story of the Cult that Unleashed the First Act of Bioterrorism on U.S. Soil*.