

The ten uncommandments

Towards a rainbow new deal

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Respect thy food providers, Lakshmi Narasimha & Matyalamma, Kondakindapalli village, Southern India © Ashish Kothari

1. Thou shall not centralize power

We are born with power inherent in us. Why cede it to governments (capitalist, socialist, royal, and whatever other brand)? Why forever run after parties, however revolutionary, thinking they will do the right thing when in power... when we know from experience this is usually not the case? Take back power... the power to do good, not the power to dominate over others... into the hands of people and collectives everywhere, to govern our own affairs. Bring democracy in its real meaning, power of the people, in village communities, urban neighbourhoods, institutions, and other self-identified communities or collectives, through assemblies in which all can take part on an equal basis. Learn from notions like *swaraj*, self-rule and autonomy with responsibility towards the autonomy and well-being of others; or indigenous peoples' ways of self-determination. Where a state may still exist over the foreseeable future, strengthen mechanisms of making it accountable to grassroots assemblies of *swaraj*.

2. Thou shall not disrespect nature

We are of nature, not separate from it. Without the rest of nature, we are dead (what do you think produces the oxygen without which we can't live for more than a couple of minutes?). Surely the Covid interregnum ought to wake us up to the enormous chasm that we have opened up between ourselves and the rest of nature? Heal this savage wound: re-insert ourselves, spiritually, ethically, materially, into nature, not as owners but as custodians. Regenerate degraded ecosystems and declining wildlife populations. Think of humans as not the pinnacle of evolution but one of 50 million species, each worthy of the same respect we accord each other. Don't go for half-hearted, undemocratic 'half-earth' approaches, go for the whole earth, in co-existence and interconnectedness.

3. Thou shall not put fences dividing ecosystems and cultures

Break down the walls and fences that have divided ecosystems and peoples in the name of nation-states. Act like custodians of the earth and each other; empower communities living or traversing the boundaries between current national boundaries to govern them in landscapes and seascapes of peace. Help strengthen biocultural identity of such peoples, while enabling cultural and material exchange that strengthens interconnectedness and mutual understanding. Help nomadic communities and migrating wildlife re-establish their patterns of mobility, rudely interrupted by national boundaries, or by large infrastructure. Bring down that infrastructure if necessary, such as the decommissioning of dams to free up rivers some peoples are already doing.

4. Thou shall not consume more than thou need to thrive

Do you see animals other than humans eat, or use the nature around them, more than they need? Do they accumulate vast amounts of material possessions, much less consider this a form of status and power? Tear down advertisements that entice you to go on shopping sprees; know that every extra item you buy has a consequence on the freedom of someone else whose lands and waters you mine for your consumption. Think thus: I must do all I can to establish my right to be happy, but what I do must not take away someone else's happiness. Consider that happiness is of course about having enough to meet basic needs, but beyond that, applying an approach of 'enoughness', it is about the qualitative aspects of life, especially relations with other humans and the rest of nature, and with oneself.

5. Thou shall not globalize what locally flourishes

Getting one's drinking water, or food, from a thousand kilometres away, is sheer madness. Be self-reliant in basic needs within your own surrounds, eminently possible with processes of localization, swaraj, and enoughness. Every cluster of communities, rural and urban, can provide for its own food, water, energy, housing, clothing, sanitation, health, learning, and establish its own thriving systems of governance, equal voice, dealing with conflicts, well-being and mindful living. Global relations will - indeed they must - continue, but over and above basic needs, for cultural exchanges, for materials we may desire but whose exchange does not undermine local self-reliance. You may still want coffee from somewhere far, but let it not be at the cost of either the growers' self-reliance or yours. Nor deny entry into your own economy or society of people in need from other regions; establish 'open localisation'!

6. Thou shall not steal the means of production from producers, nor the fruits of their labour

That some humans are allowed to steal the fruits of the labour of the vast majority of other humans, and even take control of their means of production; and that they can also monopolise the products of nature, is shameful. It is an inevitable consequence that the majority of producers live in precarious, insecure conditions, far more susceptible to systemic shocks like Covid-19 than the minority that does the stealing. Also inevitable is rising inequality, leading to a scenario, not so far away, of 1% of humanity controlling as much wealth as the remaining 99%... violating another of the Uncommandments coming up. And so, enable producers – in agriculture, pastoralism, fisheries, forestry, manufacturing, crafts, services – to take back control over their means of production, and to govern them democratically, justly, and sustainably. Let capitalist and nation-state owners join the ranks of workers and producers, equally responsible and entitled as is the current set of workers, but with no special privileges.

7. Thou shall not privatize the commons

For the better part of human history, nature, land, water, air, knowledge, have been in the ‘commons’, governed collectively. Not necessarily equitably, of course, but yet, never before has the earth seen the levels of private and selfish ownership over these as is seen today. Sustain what is still in the commons, including global heritage like the oceans, and re-common what has been privatized. Take back the car parks and convert them in urban gardens, give back privatized lands into community governance, question even the private inheritance of wealth, for it is one powerful reason for corruption of various kinds.

8. Thou shall not live unequally

Men dominate women, some races dominate others, casteism creates institutionalized exploitation, the ‘disabled’ are marginalized, and the young are not given the respect they deserve. Enable the struggles of the oppressed and marginalized to challenge all forms of inequality, recognize the fundamental rights of all to live lives of dignity, freedom, respect, and agency. Embrace multiple genders and sexualities amongst humans; embrace also multiple beingness amongst all life forms.

9. Thou shall not colonise and homogenise

Dissatisfied with what they have, some people have colonized other peoples, the greatest global manifestation of this being the colonization of the earth by a handful of northern nations in the name of god, ‘development’, and even freedom. And each has tried to impose its own notion of the ‘good life’, its culture, its religion, its language, its knowledge system as being the only one worth pursuing. And once colonized nations and peoples are now doing the same to others, in the name of ‘development’. Decolonise, now! Build your own self-reliant societies, covet not the lands and wealth of others, nor consider them ‘uncivilised’ and in need of conversion into clones of yourself. Unfetter the mind and the heart, enable the flourishing of diverse cultures and knowledges and technologies, rebuild and respect a pluriverse of ways of being/doing/knowing/dreaming.

10. Thou shall not ignore the self

The opposite of selfish individualism is the complete neglect, even denial, of oneself. Selflessness that leads to burnout, or physical and emotional stress, is eventually detrimental to not only oneself but to those we love, care for, and act for. So, find the time and space to look within, to deepen inside even as you widen outside, to integrate the inner with the outer, to question but also care for the self, to connect the spirit or soul with the body and the cosmos.

Postscript: a rainbow new deal

This set of principles involves undoing and unlearning much that both the dominant, and many of the dominated, have got used to. We think that the system we have is 'normal' or inevitable. But it is not, it does not have to be. Thus, Uncommandments.

If governments are serious about their claims of governing for the benefit of all, these principles should inform their Covid recovery packages and plans. But of course we know they (or at least the vast majority of them) are not serious, even allowing for some very committed individuals within them. So, arriving anywhere near these principles will have to be part of the agenda of people's movements. Especially the struggles of the most marginalized in the politics of gender, sexuality, race, caste, ethnicity, ability, and others, with sensitive support from others. Admittedly, many movements too will need to ask questions of themselves: how far do we practice diversity, equality, democracy within ourselves?

Too utopian an approach? Indeed, but so are most religions and faiths, at least in their basic tenets. I assume no-one really thinks it's possible to fully implement a 'thou shall not steal' commandment. Virtually every national constitution is also idealistic, committing to some or many of the above principles, yet we also know that these are not possible to reach, at least not within a few generations. But utopian visions have their own crucial relevance. As the Argentinian film director Fernando Birri said (quoted by the wonderful poet Eduardo Galeano):

Utopia is on the horizon. I move two steps closer; it moves two steps further away. I walk another ten steps, and utopia runs ten steps further away. As much as I may walk, I never reach it. So what's the point of utopia? The point is this: it makes us continually advance.

It is in this spirit that the above set of Uncommandments is offered. But it is also worth pointing out that in many diverse ways, we already have thousands of 'nowtopias' or 'living utopias' in our midst, achieving one or more of these principles (for several examples, see previous articles by this author on this platform, and sites like [Radical Ecological Democracy](#) and [Beautiful Solutions](#), and [Vikalp Sangam in India](#). The challenge is to sustain and nurture them even as multiple global crises intensify around us, to horizontally network them for greater critical mass, to draw lessons from them so many more such initiatives can be tried out in their own unique contexts, and to do all this in alliance with growing movements of resistance to the dominant system.

It is this kind of multi-coloured, multi-faceted set of movements that can help guide and try to actualize a 'rainbow new deal' or a 'rainbow recovery' ... beyond the progressive yet flawed '[green new deals](#)' that have emerged of late (mostly in the global North). We have to transform the current, deeply flawed system, by challenging the concentrations of power in patriarchy, statism, capitalism, racism, casteism, sexism, and

homosapienism, and by practicing and conceiving radical alternative structures and relationships to all these. It is not a matter of simply 'greening' the economy, nor only of seeking 'just transitions' that work for workers, but of seeking revolutions of multiple colours, towards justice of all kinds.

As transitions, we should certainly demand that Covid recovery plans focus on the regeneration and sustenance of hundreds of millions of dignified livelihoods in all sectors of the economy. These must enable moving towards localised self-reliance in basic needs, for all collectives and communities. Simultaneously, recovery packages need to invest wisely in the restoration and conservation of nature across the world. And as we do all this and more, we need to ask the fundamental questions that the above Uncommandments encompass, and nourish the answers that thousands of alternative initiatives are already giving us. We must not look to 'replicate' or 'upscale' these, for these are follies of minds that ignore diversity or want to become bigger and bigger. Rather, let us 'outscale' these initiatives, by more and more communities learning their vital lessons, and by connecting and networking horizontally, linking resistance and reconstruction across cultures and geographies. A tiny virus has given us this opportunity; we would not be worthy of the name 'sapiens' if we ignored it.

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