

Rule Breaking

By Raj Patel

There's a story about Yale anthropology professor James C. Scott that I've retold often. In this story, the professor has a ritual. Every fall, he addresses his freshman class of anthropology students, explaining to them that, "the world is changing. It's becoming more unjust, more unequal, more corrupt. You might be able to pinch your noses and live in this mire for now, but there will come a time when a rule is laid down that you cannot abide. Something will happen that strikes to your moral core."

"My worry, ladies and gentlemen," James Scott continues, "is that when that rule is written, you won't know how to break it. You will have become so complacent, so inured, so used to doing what you're told, so used to swallowing your bile that, when the time comes, you'll be powerless to stop a world that has come to rule you." The class is hushed.

"My advice to you," the professor continues, "is simple: every day, break a rule. Cross the road where you shouldn't. Plant something where it doesn't belong. Take from the rich and give to the poor. Do something to keep yourself sharp. These are skills that you'll need not just when the government imposes Draconian laws. They're skills that help you fight the Draconian laws that are already on the books."

It was only a small disappointment that, when I was able finally to meet Jim Scott, he told me the story wasn't true. Well, even if he doesn't say it to his students, I've said it to mine. And they seem to understand the force of the call to break rules.

Rule-breaking isn't just a clever way to prepare for some future counter-insurgency, some sort of psychological survivalist calisthenics. The most potent parts of breaking rules are these: they're a way to take a step back and see how many decisions are already made for us, how many rules we follow without thinking and, ultimately, a gateway to imagining what our social rules might look like.

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We live in a capitalist society. To imagine something different, think about the cardinal institutions of capitalism: private property, finance, the state, the gendered division of labor.

See? It's hard to think about all that. The ideas are technical and abstract. They still govern much of what we imagine to be possible in the world today, to be sure. But it's hard to imagine a world beyond them because it's hard to see the rules that keep them ticking. It's only in their breach that we see what these institutions look like, in silhouette, lit by a different world behind them.

Yet in Maine and beyond, groups are breaking capitalism's rules in ways that make it easy for people to see: Abolishing corporate personhood; defying the Food Safety Modernization Act; socially controlling flows of investment funds; collectively governing; managing resources in common; reinventing family and work in the home. These are all ways of piercing the veil that late capitalism drapes between us and our imagination of a better world. These are examples of justice rising. And they're worth breaking rules in order to see.

Raj Patel regularly writes for The Guardian, and has contributed to the Financial Times, NYTimes.com, and The Observer. His first book was Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System and his latest, The Value of Nothing, is a New York Times bestseller.

Agriculture Commissioner, Walter Whitcomb

"It's clear that Whitcomb has sympathy for local producers who want to buck state-licensing requirements — at one point, he half-jokingly suggests that the state offer a grant so all can comply, rather than waste much larger sums of money on lawyers' fees." — Deirdre Fulton in *The Portland Phoenix* reporting on the state of Maine's response to the LFCSGO in a "test case" lawsuit brought against Blue Hill farmer Dan Brown. — Commissioner Whitcomb was listed as a plaintiff in the 2011 suit against Brown (ed.).