This article is available open access under a CC BY NC ND 4.0 license as part of Berghahn Open Anthro, a subscribe-to-open model for APC-free open access made possible by the journal's subscribers.

INTRODUCTION

Un/Doing Authority and the Hinge between Moral Orders and Ethics

Naomi van Stapele, Anick Vollebergh, and Mette-Louise E. Johansen

Abstract: This special issue examines how authority is simultaneously made and unmade through situated ethical experimentation. We map a continuum of ethical practices, ranging from the improvisational adjustments of everyday life to high-intensity moments of rupture, showing how both ends of this spectrum can unsettle prevailing modes of authority and reconfigure the moral orders that sustain them. Conceptualizing un/doing authority as a hinge between ethical practice and moral order foregrounds the uncertain and often risky work through which legitimacy is enacted, negotiated, and contested. The contributions trace these dynamics across diverse socio-cultural contexts, engaging three globally significant discourses—authoritarianism, participatory governance, and self-help—to explore how experimental practices of authority-making open pathways for imagining and enacting alternative political and moral futures.

Keywords: authority, ethics, experimentation, legitimacy, moral orders, uncertainty

The resurgence of authoritarian regimes worldwide, alongside countermovements striving for inclusive democratic futures (Applebaum 2020, 2024), brings into sharp relief the question of how authority is made, unmade, and reconfigured in times of crisis and uncertainty. In this special issue, we propose a shift in perspective: rather than viewing authority as something that is either established or lost, we explore how it is simultaneously done and undone through situated ethical experimentation. By conceptualizing authority as a hinge between ethical practice and moral order, we foreground the uncertain,

Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology, Volume 69, Issue 2, 1–21
© The Author(s) • doi:10.3167/sa.2025.690201 • ISSN 0155-977X (Print) • ISSN 1558-5727 (Online)

embodied, and often risky work through which new registers of authority emerge while others are diminished, especially among actors at the margins whose claims to legitimacy are far from self-evident. This perspective invites renewed attention to the aesthetic and imaginative dimensions of authority-making: how legitimacy is performed, felt, and challenged through symbolic registers, embodied practices, and future-oriented experiments.

Approaching authority as a hinge between ethics and moral orders raises important questions about how authority becomes effective in particular contexts. Why do certain modes of authority resonate and consolidate, while others dissipate or are actively resisted? And how do these modes emerge from—or build upon—the ruins of what came before? These questions guide the ethnographic explorations in this issue, which focus on the fragile, situated, and often experimental practices through which actors attempt to claim, perform, and unsettle authority in everyday life. Across the contributions to this issue, we examine how authority is negotiated in contexts marked by uncertainty, rupture, and competing moral claims. Our ethnographies focus on actors whose authority is not institutionally guaranteed—including community organizers, former gang members, civil society leaders, refugee activists, and religious figures—and who engage in experimental, situated efforts to assert, reshape, or withdraw from authority in their everyday environments. These cases show that authority is rarely a linear process of consolidation or erosion; instead, it is continuously made and unmade through embodied and relational practices. We refer to this dynamic as 'un/doing authority', a term that captures how actors attempt to establish specific authoritative registers while simultaneously unsettling others. The entanglement of doing and undoing (un/doing) authority refers to situated relational practices, events, and processes that give rise to and sustain particular modes of authority (i.e., 'doing') while inherently and simultaneously dissolving other modes through contestation, reframing, or suspension (i.e., 'undoing').This ongoing, experimental work unfolds not in isolation, but within broader moral orders that structure what kinds of authority can be recognized, legitimated, or refused. By approaching authority as a hinge between ethical practice and moral order, we highlight how legitimacy is not simply imposed or granted, but cultivated through ethical action, often in spaces where its recognition cannot be taken for granted.

These ethnographic explorations foreground not only who exercises authority from the margins, but the way in which they do so—through improvisational, affective, and often ambiguous practices that rarely follow legible institutional scripts. This attention to the intimate, embodied, and situated processes of un/doing authority allows us to move beyond abstract notions of legitimacy and instead trace how authority is experienced, negotiated, and reconfigured on the ground. In doing so, the articles in this issue treat everyday ethical action not merely as a response to moral orders, but as a generative

force in reshaping what kinds of authority become thinkable, felt, and possible—and, in turn, how moral orders themselves are reconfigured.

Both classic (Evans-Pritchard [1940] 1968) and recent anthropological scholarship on authority—whether in the field of religion (Agrama 2012; de Witte et al. 2015; Mahmood 2005; Meyer 2010) or the state and sovereignty (Babül 2017; Bryant and Reeves 2021; Hansen and Stepputat 2006)—have shown that authority is best understood as an unstable, processual, and contested "relational force" (Jauregui 2016: 11), emerging from and working upon shifting, context-bound moral orders (see also Das 2015). Building on Beatrice Jauregui's (2016: 14) distinction between power as "a vectoral imposition of will by one subject vis-à-vis its others" and authority as "a relationship involving a confluence of plural subjective wills," we foreground how authority operates through 'demand' rather than 'command'. While command is top-down and assumes its own unquestionability, demand is "a forceful request or call for something that may come from an authoritative source or be linked with legal right. But a demand may also be made by anyone or anything, and it leaves space for questioning and negotiation" (ibid.: 15). This distinction illuminates how actors from marginal positions can make claims to authority and aligns with religious scholarship that frames authority as persuasive and inspiring, offering tools for self-making through joint ethical deliberation (Agrama 2010; Taragin-Zeller 2021). By moral orders, we refer to normative frameworks that define what is considered right, just, or authoritative in a given setting—frameworks that both constrain and enable the enactment of authority. In contrast, ethics refers to the situated, often uncertain practices whereby individuals navigate moral tensions and imagine how best to act in the world. Our approach thus shifts focus from institutional hierarchies to the everyday ethical practices through which authority is continuously done and undone—practices that not merely respond to existing moral terrains but actively reshape them, generating new and sometimes unstable forms of legitimacy.

By developing an understanding of un/doing authority as a hinge between ethical action and moral orders, we aim to capture how authority emerges and is diminished precisely at the articulation point where individual ethical practices are delineated by, engage with, and potentially transform broader normative frameworks. While moral orders demarcate the modes of authority that are legitimate in a given context, they are not immutable structures but are continuously reshaped through the experimental ethical actions of those who occupy or aspire to positions of authority. This hinge becomes particularly salient in times of crisis, when actors must navigate unsettled moral terrains, and their ethical experiments generate new modes of authority even as they challenge established ones. The hinge thus operates bidirectionally: ethical actions are shaped by existing moral orders while also holding the potential to reconstitute them. This process remains inherently risky, as new authoritative styles may

fail to consolidate or may be actively delegitimized. By focusing on this hinge, where authority is neither simply possessed nor lost but continuously articulated through the intersection of ethics and moral order, we offer a critical lens for understanding how power circulates, consolidates, and becomes contestable in the present moment.

The contributors to this issue explore how ethical actions emerge as experiments in authority against a backdrop of uncertain and shifting political and social contexts. These vary in intensity, from everyday uncertainty—such as lived by aspiring community organizers with a refugee background in Rotterdam (van der Veer), or by young women seeking to combine Islam, love, and autonomy in Malaysia's Muslim public sphere (Kloos)—to high-stakes moments of rupture—for example, in the Nairobi ghetto, where former gang leaders seek to reform authority to address the threat of police violence (van Stapele). To capture this broad range of ethical practices and their situatedness within and up against moral orders, we theorize the connection between ethics, uncertainty, and experimentation in the section on ethical practice below. We do so by putting Cheryl Mattingly's (2014) notion of 'moral laboratories', which focuses on lower-intensity, fluid, everyday ethical experiments, in dialogue with Jarred Zigon's (2010, 2021, 2023) notion of rupture as high-risk, high-intensity moments of ethical reflection. This integrated view allows us to examine a spectrum of ethical actions engendering experiments in un/doing authority, from subtle, more individual, ongoing negotiations to acute, collective, organized interventions.

Before developing the spectrum of ethical practice and experimentation below, we first situate this special issue at the intersection of anthropological theories of authority, spanning debates on sovereignty and distributed authority, on the one hand, and on religious aesthetics and ethical techniques, on the other. In line with these approaches, we emphasize the unstable and processual nature of authority, and the emergence of new figures and registers of authority. By exploring authority as a hinge between ethical practice and moral orders, this issue expands the ethnographic lens to include not only the emergence of new authority figures, especially those in marginal positions, but also the prefigurative and experimental practices through which alternative moral horizons are envisioned and negotiated. We further elaborate how such experiments entail creative and risky work: forging registers of authority that resonate with others often requires an undoing, or unlearning, of remnants of previous modes of authority within the self. We close by reflecting on the dynamic relation between these experiments and the moral orders in which they unfold, attending to how the cases in this issue draw on and engage with hegemonic global discourses. This allows us to link ethical experimentation to the distributed and relational character of authority and to the processes of legitimation and delegitimation among interdependent actors. It is through these processes

that experimental registers may consolidate into recognizable public forms or, indeed, falter, remain fragile, or become caught in ongoing struggles over legitimacy. Theorizing from the ethnographic sites explored in this issue, we conceptualize the entanglement of un/doing authority as the interface where ethical action impinges upon moral orders. Tracing how individual and collective ethical practices simultaneously reproduce and challenge the moral orders in which they are embedded provides a more nuanced understanding of how particular modes of authority emerge, are sustained, or decline.

Anthropologies of Authority

A growing corpus of anthropological work on authority remains mostly split across two quite separate fields of literature. They are, on the one hand, works on the state, bureaucratic, and public authority (Babül 2017; Bryant and Reeves 2021; Hansen and Stepputat 2006; Jauregui 2016; Klem and Suykens 2018) and, on the other hand, studies of religious authority (Agrama 2012; de Witte et al. 2015; Volpi and Turner 2007). Whereas the former field links authority to enactments of (dis)order, state violence, and sovereignty, the latter understands authority through the prisms of ethical subjecthood, interaction between religious leaders and groups, and notions of authenticity. Nonetheless, the two bodies of literature also converge in significant ways. In this special issue, we distill from their combination a specific anthropological conceptualization of authority, which can grasp the simultaneity of doing and undoing authority, focusing on how ethical actions and relationships are intertwined with moral orders through this crafting process.

Both religious and state authority emerged as objects of anthropological inquiry against the backdrop of ethnographic and theoretical critique. Anthropologists turned to studying sovereignty and arrangements of public authority and order making when ethnic violence and insurgency (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 296) and hybrid or non-state forms of policing (Kyed 2018: 21–22) evacuated the state as the self-evident center of authority. Similarly, it was the fragmentation of religious authority that peaked anthropologists' interest to study how and why claims and performances of religious authority came to matter (Volpi and Turner 2007: 1). The fragmentation of religious authority emerged due to new mass media, revived religiosity, and mass education, as well as the manifestation of new religious figures, such as female evangelical 'microcelebrities' (Gaddini 2021) and Islamic self-help gurus (Hoesterey 2015).

Both sets of studies have critically engaged with Max Weber's ([1921] 1978) understanding of authority as de facto legitimate domination that is distinct from coercive power or violence. Anthropologists have demonstrated that rather than being grounded in social-political organizations or institutions

(bureaucracy, tradition, charisma), authority is better understood as an unstable and contested "relational force" (Jauregui 2016: 11) amid competing enactments of authoritative fields. Moreover, authority as a relation, "a confluence of particular wills" (ibid.: 14), depends fundamentally on the tentative and reiterated performance of authoritative registers, styles, or genres (Klem and Suykens 2018: 762). The ethnographic record shows that these registers are always in motion, as new ones emerge, and others lose their appeal or legitimacy. In fact, how and when new modes of authority become possible and take hold, has been a central although somewhat undertheorized question (e.g., Fader 2020; Gaddini 2021; Hansen 2018; Kloos 2019; Kyed 2018). This question brings out the role of aesthetics and sensorial form in the crafting of authority relations and their legitimization. Second, registers of authority simultaneously presume and instantiate particular 'publics' and subjectivities (Hansen 2018; Klem and Suykens 2018: 758) and concomitant visions of "the good" (Jauregui 2016: 16). We find that these two aspects have been worked out in different but complementary ways across the two fields of literature.

Within the body of work on politics and 'de facto sovereignty' (Hansen and Stepputat 2006), registers and figures of authority are understood as practices and claims of politico-moral order making. These studies show that the state does not have the monopoly on legitimately enforcing order or disorder. Rather, order enforcement is distributed across actors in ways that destabilize easy distinctions between the formal and informal, state and non-state, democratic and non-democratic (Hansen and Stepputat 2006; Klem and Suykens 2018; Lund 2006). Furthermore, authority as order making is moral in a dual sense. First, it can be deployed both in service of the state or against it, via the question of who can "(re)formulate rules and enforce them" and possesses "the ability to kill, punish, and discipline with impunity" (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 296). Second, it involves the question of who can legitimately provide vital (state) resources to particular publics, including the provision of security (Jauregui 2016; Kyed 2018). Rather than a zero-sum game in which the authority of the state dwindles as that of vigilantes, local strongmen, and activists grows, these studies reveal a much more complex landscape of interdependent enactments of authority. In this landscape, authority is sustained by the construction and emulation of 'stateness' and 'governance' across state/non-state or formal/informal divides.

For studies of religion, it is not so much the relations between different authorities that are at stake, as it is the calibration and achieved resonance between authority figures and believers and how this makes possible the cultivation of specific ethical subjectivities (Agrama 2012; Laidlaw 2002; Mahmood 2005; Taragin-Zeller 2021). Religious leaders and authoritative figures provide knowledge, models, practical bodily technologies, and ethical meaning-making (Agrama 2012), all of which allow believers to work on themselves in pursuit of

an ethical ideal (Laidlaw 2002; Mahmood 2005). These relations also support believers in working through ethical dilemmas and responsibilities, including those pertaining to power differences and inequalities (Kloos 2019; Taragin-Zeller 2021). The anthropology of religion has rigorously theorized registers of religious authority as the 'aesthetics of persuasion' (Meyer 2010) that are unfolded through "the whole range of bodily experiences at work in the relation between leaders and followers" (de Witte et al. 2015: 119). Importantly, sensorial and corporal style and form are inherent aspects of the pedagogical relation that religious leaders seek to establish with followers (Beekers 2015; Kloos 2019; Mahmood 2005: 79–117).

What unites the anthropological work on authority is its attention to instability and processuality, demonstrating how new modes of authority are continually 'done'. Building on this, we aim to explore how the emergence of new modes of authority inherently and simultaneously involves the undoing of others. In this special issue, we combine insights of these two approaches by following Jauregui's (2016) understanding of authority as intimately tied to and shaped by situated ethical praxis, on the one hand, and moral orders, on the other. Jauregui focuses particularly on police relations, but we use her approach in a broader sense to shed light on intimate forms of ethical relationality. In her analysis of authority as enacted in everyday interactions by police in Uttar Pradesh, police authority essentially consists of the "provision of sociocultural order making that is co-constituted with configurations of moral right and instrumental exchange" (ibid.: 13). Enacting an ethics of making do with scarce resources and contradictory demands placed upon them, police officers must constantly decide how and to whom they should provide their authority. Not only do police themselves understand and legitimize their actions in light of some greater good they seek to provide for others, but their actions are also interpreted and at times contested by the publics they serve through a moral framework of right and wrong (ibid.: 55–58). In her analysis, Jauregui points to authority as the "shifting capabilities and evaluations of the provision of 'the good' and 'the goods'" (ibid.: 16).

Jauregui hints at the notion of authority as a hinge between ethics and moral orders through her focus on its relational and situational enactments and the inherent moral instability of authority. While she does not explicitly frame it this way, we build on her insights by making this connection explicit and extending it further to explore the simultaneity of doing and undoing authority. In our view, authority serves as a hinge precisely because it mediates between individual and collective ethical praxis and broader moral orders, shaping and being shaped by these interactions. Jauregui's analysis shows how authority becomes morally unstable when it comes to providing both moral and material goods. We build on her approach by looking at actors who do not have institutional authority, as police do, yet still (try to) take on authoritative roles. When

such actors perform authority, they create new possibilities for how we can exist in the world. At the same time, they reshape our understanding of what makes a socio-political order 'just' and challenge or break down the frameworks we already have. To grasp this simultaneity of doing and undoing authority, we focus on how ethical actions and relationships are intricately intertwined with moral orders through their entanglement with modes of authority.

Ethics and Moral Orders

To make sense of the wide range of ethical practices through which authority is un/done, we put Cheryl Mattingly's (2014) idea of the moral laboratory in conversation with Jarrett Zigon's (2023) notion of rupture and episodic ethical reflection. Mattingly brings our attention to the slow, often understated work of ethical deliberation woven into daily life. Zigon, by contrast, focuses on high-intensity crises. Seen together, they open up a continuum of ethical experimentation—stretching from the smallest, barely visible negotiations to dramatic collective interventions, each carrying its own level of uncertainty and risk. This continuum, we suggest, is especially useful for seeing how those at the margins take on the risky task of reshaping authority, whether in the slow burn of everyday adjustments or in swift, decisive responses to crisis. Wherever one stands along this spectrum, the work being done has the potential to loosen the grip of prevailing registers of authority and to reconfigure the moral orders that give them life.

Zigon (2023) describes rupture as a heightened moment of uncertainty in which familiar moral frameworks lose their grip, forcing individuals into deep ethical reflection and potential reconfiguration. What follows is what he calls an 'ethical demand', an urgent pull toward action that arises from the suffering or needs of others. This demand comes from outside the self yet obliges a personal response, drawing on whatever cultural, social, or institutional resources are at hand, while also pushing toward new moral possibilities in the absence of clear rules (Zigon 2021). In such moments—ranging from private heartbreaks to large-scale societal breakdowns—ethics becomes unmistakable, urgent, and often collective. While Zigon insists that ethics is always relational and situated, rupture is the point at which ethical reflection sharpens and gathers force. Some ruptures, such as moral panics or structural crises, may even require institutional action, showing how collective ethical work can shift from being more spontaneous to more organized (Zigon 2010, 2014, 2021).

Mattingly (2014), on the other hand, asks us to notice the more gradual and less spectacular forms of ethical life. Her moral laboratory captures how people live with ongoing uncertainty in their efforts to offer good care or contribute to a more just social world. Here, ethics is not the sudden flash of crisis but

the slow work of trial, adjustment, and improvisation, shaped by relationships, decisions, and recurring dilemmas (Mattingly and Throop 2018). These experiments—always provisional, often unresolved—trace the long arcs of value negotiation and the emergence of new forms of authority. Even the smallest actions can open a door to "something new" (Mattingly 2014: 16), shifting the realm of what feels possible rather than merely what seems likely. In settings marked by poverty, chronic illness, or long-term instability, such work involves a constant back-and-forth of trying, failing, and recalibrating. Mattingly's view is especially helpful for understanding how people facing persistent, low-intensity uncertainty still manage to adjust and rework the moral orders that shape their lives—as active participants from within.

For us, Mattingly's and Zigon's perspectives sit at different points on the same spectrum of ethical action under uncertainty. Mattingly brings out the careful, everyday labor of care, improvisation, and storytelling, whether in deciding how to stretch scarce resources or finding ways to support others in fragile settings. Such work may, over time, prepare the ground for the sharper, rupture-driven mobilizations that Zigon describes. And in moments of moral breakdown, Zigon's lens shows how reflection turns into urgent, often collective action. Taken together, these approaches suggest that ethics does not live only in the exceptional or the dramatic; it also thrives in the quieter, ongoing efforts through which people imagine and test new ways of relating, taking responsibility, and being in the world.

This conceptual continuum offers a particularly productive framework for analyzing how modes of authority are experimentally done and undone through practice. We understand modes of authority as complex, interwoven processes that both emerge from and shape ethical actions, processes deeply embedded within what Zigon (2010) terms 'moral assemblages': intricate networks of moral discourses, institutions, and techniques that provide individuals, and particularly aspiring authority figures, with resources for ethical action. These assemblages constitute the terrain upon which actors negotiate legitimacy, respond to ethical demands, and seek to transform or fundamentally reorient existing moral orders.

By integrating these perspectives, we suggest that ethical actions exist along a continuum of intensity and scale, ranging from the lower-stakes uncertainty and intimacies of daily life to the high-risk, intense moments of rupture that may encapsulate entire societies. The contributors to this special issue focus on moments when figures of authority engage in ethical experimentation, as well as on how powerless and marginalized actors 'experiment' with un/doing authority. Ruptures, understood as moments of heightened uncertainty and risk, demand closer attention from individuals, especially those aspiring to or occupying positions of authority. These instances may offer deeper insight into how ethical actions contribute to the perpetuation, destabilization, and

transformation of particular modes of authority and related moral orders. By recognizing how ethical action spans a continuum of everyday experimentation and episodic rupture, we capture the full range of ways in which authority is enacted, challenged, and transformed in relation to moral orders. The concept of 'un/doing authority' thus becomes a crucial lens for understanding how actors involved in the negotiation of authority navigate and transform moral orders and also the very structures of power and legitimacy that sustain them.

In the next section, we turn to core examples and key theoretical insights from the anthropology of religion and therapy, where ethical work on the self offers a vivid lens on the intimate, embodied processes of un/doing authority.

Un/Doing Authority as Experimental Work

The un/doing of authority involves various forms of ethical work on the self, extensively explored in the anthropology of religion (Agrama 2012; Kloos 2019; Norget 2021) and in work on therapy and neoliberal self-help (Arnason 2001; Dunn 2016; Sa'ar 2016). This special issue highlights how such work is central to both the undoing of previous authoritative dispositions and the experimental crafting of new registers of authority. Across the contributions, we trace a range of such undoing practices, from individual and informal to more institutionalized or redirected techniques. For example, van Stapele explores the process of 'unlearning the self' among former gang members in Mombasa, showing how undoing authority entails the difficult and deliberate task of suspending habituated violent masculinities and experimenting with new, embodied ways of being young men. This improvisational work involves exposure to unfamiliar moral spaces and the cultivation of alternative dispositions.

Unlearning, then, is not a spontaneous act but a conscious and effortful process of ethical reconstitution, a reworking of aspirations and sensibilities, and a sustained engagement with the limits of existing moral orders (Kiem and Suykens 2018: 781). Moments of rupture are particularly critical here, as they force actors to confront the inadequacy of former authoritative frameworks and open space for moral and affective recalibration. Un/doing authority emerges from such moments, where individuals navigate the dissonance between established and emerging moral imaginaries. We approach authority as a form of ethical work on the self that unfolds in the intersubjective space between those seeking to enact authority and those expected to submit to it. This process is mediated by bodily practices (Mahmood 2005) and shared aesthetic registers (de Witte et al. 2015; Meyer 2010). Mahmood's (2001: 217) notion of the intimate "architecture of the self" attends to how followers or believers engage religious authority to cultivate piety or navigate ethical dilemmas, while religious leaders engage in self-fashioning to maintain or transform their authoritative role

(Agrama 2012; Jamil 2019; Kloos 2019). Crafting authority is not merely about undoing the old; it also entails the creative articulation of new aesthetic forms, embodied performances, and material expressions (specific rituals, objects, or spaces) that resonate with an intended public (Meyer 2010). These experiments in authority-making are never isolated but unfold within dense webs of relationality wherein actors test, improvise, and recalibrate their ways of being authoritative. In this sense, un/doing authority is not only an embodied practice, but also a profoundly relational and experimental one, entailing processes of learning, unlearning, and reconfiguring both present and potential moral orders.

To explore the creative work involved in crafting authority across the discussed articles, we turn to the concepts of 'register' and 'resonance'. In his work on authenticity, Mattijs van de Port ([1998] 2004: 11) defines register as "a mode of communication that brings certain experiential fields 'into resonance', similar to how the sound of a stringed instrument gains depth when the vibration of one string causes other materials to resonate." Drawing on this analogy, crafting a persuasive form of authority involves three intersubjective experiments. First, authority figures must experiment with how embodied, performative registers might be seen as authoritative. These performances of authority must "literally 'make sense'" to their audience, generating a "sense of fit" (Schulz 2015: 141). Second, resonance between register and audience depends on the 'depth' of resonance within the register itself. When emergent authority forms straddle different genres and styles, this requires experimentation with blending practices and aesthetics to create a sense of coherence. Third, resonance assumes a degree of aesthetic 'anticipation' (ibid.: 135), as new registers of authority may fail to resonate with the public if they lack shared moral frameworks. These dynamics highlight the relationship between the improvisational, uncertain crafting of new authority and the modularity of pre-existing models or genres of authority.

The articles by Vollebergh and Kloos in this issue illustrate most explicitly how the crafting of new modes of authority requires something akin to a social or moral intuiting, the ability to sense the time, the social mood, or the moral concerns among certain publics. Using the notion of 'scaling labor', Vollebergh describes how community organizers and governance actors in a marginalized Parisian neighborhood tentatively reorient the techniques and moral framework of an American parenting self-help program, not to change parents, but to critique the operations of the state and its institutions. Grasping the parenting method as potentially prefiguring the undoing of institutional violence toward marginalized families, organizers experimentally rescale the program from the domain of parenting to that of state-citizen relations, thereby making imaginable a more 'human' kind of institutional authority. Kloos explores how a popular Malaysian female preacher, Fatima Syarha, blends teen literature, Islamic knowledge, self-help discourse, and fictionalized accounts of the religious self to

create a soft, emotionally resonant register of spiritual guidance. Through this genre experimentation, Fatima Syarha not only builds a new register of religious authority, but also encourages her followers to creatively remix religious and emotional discourse around their own experiences, thus situating women at both the center and the receiving end of Islamic ethical and spiritual life.

The articles by Mohamed, van der Veer and Hird-Younger in this issue seemingly accentuate doing authority, in the sense of crafting, performing, and enacting it, but they also reveal how undoing authority is always already implicated. For example, Mohamed analyzes how social media debates in Guatemala over the deaths of countercultural youth enact competing claims to authority by framing their deaths as either justified or grievable. These digital deliberations reproduce and contest dominant moral and epistemic frameworks, revealing how authority over the meaning of violence is negotiated across networked spaces, both online and offline. Likewise, Hird-Younger's contribution focuses on a civil society network in Ghana to highlight how the performance of representational authority simultaneously reinforces donor and government legitimacy while unsettling localized forms of authority among member organizations. The article traces how the network's leadership navigates competing moral orders, partnership, and resource fairness to craft a provisional and context-dependent register of collective authority. Van der Veer's article explores how non-white community organizers with a forced migration background and white advisors co-construct the institutional role of 'bridge-builder' within Rotterdam's refugee governance. For organizers, authoritatively inhabiting this role requires navigating racialized power asymmetries and performing relational authority in ways that resonate with bureaucratic expectations. While the role enables them to mobilize their migration background as institutional capital, it also exposes the limits of undoing authority in a field where white advisors retain gatekeeping power.

The articles in this issue thus describe a range from intensely personal moral insecurity and rupture (van Stapele, van der Veer, Mohamed) to contexts characterized by a collective concern over some moral crisis or dissatisfaction (Vollebergh, Hird-Younger, Kloos). They also follow the scale from more informal and spontaneous experiments with new ethical techniques (van Stapele), to more collective ethical experimentation that draws on existing techniques and discourses (Kloos, Vollebergh), to everyday improvisation and tentative experiments from within ascribed registers of authority (van der Veer, Hird-Younger, Mohamed).

Moral Order and De/legitimizations

Modes of authority are best understood as complex, interwoven processes that are grounded in moral orders and embedded within moral assemblages

(Zigon 2010), that is, networks of moral discourses and techniques that also circulate globally and provide individuals (and especially authority figures) with resources for their ethical actions. These assemblages form the contexts within which many people engage in the ethical experimentations that are the focus of this special issue. These broader discourses provide powerful 'moral-temporal grids' or 'moral teleologies' (Vollebergh) that guide local actors as they navigate modes of authority, evaluate their legitimacy, and experiment with new modes through ethical actions that in turn interact with and may reshape these assemblages.

Modes of authority as relational forces, as noted by Jauregui (2016), are also intertwined with other modes within context-bound and intersecting moral assemblages. This means that shifts in modes of authority through individual ethical actions do not necessarily lead to immediate recognition within the broader configuration of modes of authority and related moral orders. The way that authority figures within such assemblages enact, reinforce and change modes of authority are continuously subject to evaluation and contestation through pre-existing moral discourses and in the context of broader relationships. This adds a layer of complexity to how modes of authority are exercised, maintained, and transformed. Authority is not just passively undone; it is actively reshaped, creating the possibility for alternative futures—futures that emerge when the world is enacted 'otherwise' (Rutazibwa 2018). These fleeting but significant new moral horizons may offer the potential for new modes of authority to take root, depending on how moral orders intersect in the process of de/legitimization.

Building on the notion that authority is un/done within and against overlapping and sometimes conflicting moral orders, authority emerges from an assemblage of interconnected actors—professionals, agencies, organizations, citizens, and publics (Jauregui 2016; Kyed 2020). These networks simultaneously reinforce and challenge each other, creating webs of im/possibilities that are always in flux. In the context of policing, for instance, authority is not limited to formal police units but extends to community policing groups, gangs, private security firms, and beyond (Diphoorn and van Stapele 2021). Through these networks, we see the circulation of not only material objects, such as arms, but also ideas, practices, and information (Diphoorn 2020). The authority of police and gangs may appear antagonistic, yet they are deeply intertwined, with one often contingent upon the other through these exchanges. This dynamic interaction foregrounds the complexities and contradictions that permeate everyday negotiations of authority. The ongoing process of un/doing authority allows particular moral orders to emerge as (newly) normative and desirable, even if fleetingly so. Yet this process inevitably generates opposing categories, subjectivities, and social positions that are deemed problematic or threatening (Ellison 2018). The lens of un/doing sheds light on how authority is

assumed and exercised and how these positions are contingent upon and often antagonistic to other forms of authority, including the state. It also exposes the processes of de/legitimization that occur along the lines of social division, such as race, gender, and class, making visible the ways in which authority is both constructed and contested across different power structures.

Moral assemblages, as we conceptualize them here, straddle both locally embedded moral orders and globally circulating discourses, models, and regimes of truth. They bring together diverse elements that experiments in authority use, adapt, or seek to transform; from pedagogical methods and self-cultivation practices to aesthetic and affective styles, moral discourses, and institutional structures such as funding flows, public recognition, and sanctioned roles. These assemblages are not static backdrops, but dynamic terrains shaped by intersecting global and local forces, including development logics, security regimes, and racialized assumptions that condition both the possibilities and limits of authority-making and breaking. Experiments in un/doing authority emerge from these assemblages and often work through them, selectively mobilizing certain techniques or sensibilities while challenging or reworking others. At the same time, these experiments remain subject to processes of de/legitimization and capture by dominant actors and discourses, underscoring the fragile and situated nature of emerging modes of authority.

The articles in this special issue explore how the dynamics of un/doing authority draw upon and contest at least three globally significant moral discourses, while also reflecting their local embedding and appropriation. The first discourse, explored by Mohamed and van Stapele, focuses on authoritarian citizenship (Pearce 2017) and democratized authoritarian enactments of sovereign order (Mazzarella et al. 2019: 2–3). Mohamed's analysis of online discussions of "the guilt of the dead" in Guatemala illustrates how social media users retroactively frame the deaths of countercultural youth as deserved, reflecting a struggle over the limits of belonging and citizenship. Van Stapele's examination of former gang members highlights their efforts to 'unlearn' violent dispositions and craft new modes of authority in response to the existential threat posed by their former gang identities. Yet these efforts to undo and remake authority are fraught with insecurity, as there are no external frameworks to provide legitimacy, and it is unclear whether other residents will recognize these new forms of authority.

The second moral discourse, touched upon by van der Veer and Hird-Younger, centers on globally circulating ideals and models of 'participatory', 'empowerment', or 'relational' governance and development (Vollebergh et al. 2021). These discourses promote more horizontal and inclusive governance relations, resulting in the emergence of new roles and positions, such as 'the active citizen', sought after by governance actors and donors. Van der Veer

examines Rotterdam's refugee reception policy, revealing the emergence of a new broker figure connecting the municipality, NGOs, and refugee populations. Refugee grassroots organizers creatively adopt this role and as such embody 'relational authority' by cultivating networks that resonate with other actors in this particular assemblage of refugee reception. The municipal policy entails a promise of empowerment and active participation, yet it is also driven by a deep distrust of (non-white) 'mono-ethnic' activism, thus elucidating how emancipatory and repressive (e.g., racialized) logics can become entangled within the experimental play in the un/doing of authority.

Hird-Younger explores how self-proclaimed representatives of civil society actors in Ghana establish collective authority through performative adherence to global discourses on participation and resource redistribution. The unequal distribution mechanisms within this NGO network raise important questions about the im/possibilities of representational authority and the role of accountability in de/legitimization processes in situations where distance to power is particularly strained.

The third and final moral discourse, explored in the articles by Kloos and Vollebergh, revolves around therapeutic models of self-help and the techniques employed to achieve an authentic self. In Vollebergh's case, community organizers and governance actors in northeast Paris redeploy the moral teleology of a 1970s American parenting method to give their critique of the 'violent' authority of the French state a reinforced, expert-sanctioned moral aura. Grasping the self-help parenting method as potentially prefiguring the undoing of institutional violence toward marginalized parents, governance actors rescale the method into a morally normative and universally applicable model for just and benevolent authority relations, including state-citizen relations. This scaling work comes with a drawback, as it stands in tension with, and may undermine, simultaneous efforts to free marginalized parents from the yoke of normative ideas about parenting as espoused in often stigmatizing ways by teachers and other institutional professionals. In a surprising twist, Kloos's article explores how a Malaysian female celebrity preacher combines a 1970s American parenting method (the same method explored by Vollebergh in Paris) with Islamic instruction and self-help techniques. This unique blend provides celebrity preachers with new registers of authority in guiding others toward an Islamic life and navigating challenges. Local experiments and contestations of authority draw on the moral grid, techniques, resources, and positions that these global discourses offer. The "moral and political force" (Babül 2017: 20) of these discourses—often backed up by the authority of scientific expertise or authoritative acts and policies of governments or international bodies—makes locally situated experiments in moral order possible. If we understand everyday social interaction as an unfolding of experiments, this allows for particular insights into authority as moral order.

Conclusion

This special issue takes up the complex and often messy ways in which authority is made and unmade, offering new angles to explore the interplay between ethics and moral orders. By approaching authority as a dynamic, relational, and frequently contested force, the contributions here suggest that it is best understood as a hinge between ethical experimentation and moral ordering. The cases—drawn from diverse socio-cultural, political, and religious contexts—show that authority is rarely a fixed end state. It appears instead as something fluid and iterative, shaped through both intimate and collective acts of doing and undoing. This framing builds on long-standing anthropological debates on authority, yet it also shifts the emphasis toward the simultaneity of legitimation and contestation, extending Jauregui's notion of authority as a relational force and situating it within the ongoing processes of moral reconfiguration.

Thinking of un/doing authority as a hinge between ethics and moral orders offers a way to trace how specific modes of authority are fashioned and sustained while others are, sometimes in the same moment, weakened or dissolved. This conceptual move may also prove useful for exploring authority in newer domains, including digital governance and responses to the climate crisis, where legitimacy and moral order are often unsettled. Taken together, the contributions highlight a spectrum of ethical practices that shape moral orders and the corresponding relations of authority.

Ultimately, the pieces gathered here invite deeper reflection on how moral orders and ethical practices meet, rub against one another, and together shape, sustain, or alter authority in today's volatile and fragmented social worlds. In a period marked by the rise of authoritarian regimes, hybrid governance, and intersecting global crises, the lens of un/doing authority offers a critical way to grasp authority as a relational force, one grounded in moral orders yet continually reworked through situated ethical reflection and action. This framework is also well-suited to probing the aesthetic dimensions of authority-making and offers methodological footholds for ethnographers seeking to capture such dynamics in practice. We invite readers to treat this framework as an opening, both for reconsidering the conditions under which authority is made and unmade, and for imagining alternative futures grounded in ethical experimentation and moral imagination. Above all, we hope it prompts fresh ways of thinking about the situated interplay of ethics and moral orders in the ongoing work of making and unmaking authority.

Acknowledgments

The insightful discussion of the papers in the panel "Towards an Anthropology of Authority" at the 2021 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association by Thomas Blom Hansen, Nitzan Shoshan, and Beatrice Jauregui kickstarted our thinking toward the arguments set out in this special issue. The contributors have provided insightful analyses and ethnographic narratives that have been indispensable for our understanding of the relation between authority, ethics, and morality. We want to thank the anonymous reviewers whose feedback has sharpened our thinking. We are especially grateful to Hans Steinmüller for his constructive and attentive editorship.

Naomi van Stapele is a Professor in Inclusive Education at The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS). Her research focuses on undoing authority in (higher) education in the Netherlands and in Kenya, enlisting members of marginalized and criminalized groups as co-researchers in order to work toward transformative education and community organizing. Her research projects include working with undocumented students, young (queer) refugees, young sex workers, young delinquents, and many other groups that are excluded in and from (higher) education worldwide. ORCID-ID: 0000-0003-0652-0181. E-mail: n.vanstapele@movisie.nl

Anick Vollebergh is an Assistant Professor in Cultural Anthropology and Development Studies at Radboud University. Her work deals with shifts in welfare and governance regimes in post-colonial Europe, focusing on grassroots and policy efforts to recraft state-citizen relations and rearticulate institutional authority in the urban margins. She has written on the governance ideal of 'living together' in superdiverse urban spaces in Antwerp, and the way this ideal reshapes convivial practices through a multiplicity of ethical registers of neighborliness. Her work has been published in *Current Anthropology* and *American Anthropologist*, among others. ORCID-ID: 0000-0002-1835-7847. E-mail: anick.vollebergh@ru.nl

Mette-Louise E. Johansen is a Senior Researcher at the Danish Center for Social Science Research, VIVE. She holds a PhD in Anthropology from Aarhus Uni-versity, where she was an Associate Professor until 2020. Her work deals with intimate welfare, focusing on welfarist policing and relationality between wel-fare workers, law enforcers, and marginalized families and youths in the urban margins in Denmark. Her publications on policing, social reformation, state and kinship relatedness, marginality, and urban security have been published in *Ethnography*, *Critique of Anthropology*, and the *British Journal of Criminology*, among others. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4435-640X. E-mail: mlej@vive.dk

References

Agrama, Hussein Ali. 2012. "Reflections on Secularism, Democracy, and Politics in Egypt." *American Ethnologist* 39 (1): 26–31. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2011.01342.x.

Applebaum, Anne. 2020. *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*. New York: Anchor.

Applebaum, Anne. 2024. *Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World*. New York: Random House.

Arnason, Arnar. 2001. "Experts of the Ordinary: Bereavement Counselling in Britain." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 7 (2): 299–313. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.00064.

Babül, Elif M. 2017. *Bureaucratic Intimacies: Translating Human Rights in Turkey*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Beekers, Daan. 2015. "A Moment of Persuasion: Travelling Preachers and Islamic Pedagogy in the Netherlands." *Culture and Religion* 16 (2): 193–214. https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2015.1058530.

Bryant, Rebecca, and Madeleine Reeves, eds. 2021. *The Everyday Lives of Sovereignty: Political Imagination beyond the State*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Das, Veena. 2015. "Everyday Life and Its Moderate Amorality." In *'There Is No Such Thing as the Good': The 2013 Meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory*, ed. Soumhya Venkatesan. *Critique of Anthropology* 35 (4): 433–440. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0308275x15598384.

de Witte, Marleen, Martijn de Koning, and Thijl Sunier. 2015. "Aesthetics of Religious Authority: Introduction." *Culture and Religion* 16 (2): 117–124. https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2015.1058524.

Diphoorn, Tessa. 2020. "'Arms for Mobility': Policing Partnerships and Material Exchanges in Nairobi, Kenya." *Policing and Society* 30 (2): 136–152. https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2019.1596102.

Diphoorn, Tessa, and Naomi van Stapele. 2021. "What Is Community Policing? Divergent Agendas, Practices, and Experiences of Transforming the Police in Kenya." *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 15 (1): 399–411. https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paaa004.

Dunn, Cynthia Dickel. 2016. "Creating 'Bright, Positive' Selves: Discourses of Self and Emotion in a Japanese Public-Speaking Course." *Ethos* 44 (2): 118–132. https://doi.org/10.1111/etho.12121.

Ellison, Susan Helen. 2018. *Domesticating Democracy: The Politics of Conflict Resolution in Bolivia*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1940) 1968. *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fader, Ayala. 2020. *Hidden Heretics: Jewish Doubt in the Digital Age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Gaddini, Katie Christine. 2021. "'Wife, Mommy, Pastor and Friend': The Rise of Female Evangelical Microcelebrities." *Religions* 12 (9): article 758. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090758.

Hansen, Thomas Blom. 2018. "Whose Public, Whose Authority? Reflections on the Moral Force of Violence." *Modern Asian Studies* 52 (3): 1076–1087. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17000282.

Hansen, Thomas Blom, and Finn Stepputat. 2006. "Sovereignty Revisited." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35: 295–315. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.35.081705.123317.

Hoesterey, James Bourk. 2015. *Rebranding Islam: Piety, Prosperity, and a Self-Help Guru*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.

Jamil, Nurhaizatul. 2019. "'This Is a Gathering of Lovers': Islamic Self-Help and Affective Pedagogies in Contemporary Singapore." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 25 (3): 467–486. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13078.

Jauregui, Beatrice. 2016. *Provisional Authority: Police, Order, and Security in India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Klem, Bart, and Bert Suykens. 2018. "The Politics of Order and Disturbance: Public Authority, Sovereignty, and Violent Contestation in South Asia." *Modern Asian Studies* 52 (3): 753–783. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17000270.

Kloos, David. 2019. "Experts beyond Discourse: Women, Islamic Authority, and the Performance of Professionalism in Malaysia." *American Ethnologist* 46 (2): 162–175. https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12762.

Kyed, Helene Maria. 2018. "Street Authorities: Community Policing in Mozambique and Swaziland." *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 41 (S1): 19–34. https://doi.org/10.1111/plar.12251.

Kyed, Helene Maria, ed. 2020. *Everyday Justice in Myanmar: Informal Resolutions and State Evasion in a Time of Contested Transition*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

Laidlaw, James. 2002. "For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 8 (2): 311–332. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.00110.

Lund, Christian. 2006. "Twilight Institutions: Public Authority and Local Politics in Africa." *Development and Change* 37 (4): 685–705. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2006.00497.x.

Mahmood, Saba. 2001. "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival." *Cultural Anthropology* 16 (2): 202–236. http://www.jstor.org/stable/656537.

Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Mattingly, Cheryl. 2014. *Moral Laboratories: Family Peril and the Struggle for a Good Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mattingly, Cheryl, and Jason Throop. 2018. "The Anthropology of Ethics and Morality." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 47: 475–492. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102317-050129.

Mazzarella, William, Eric L. Santner, and Aaron Schuster. 2019. *Sovereignty, Inc.: Three Inquiries in Politics and Enjoyment*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Meyer, Birgit. 2010. "Aesthetics of Persuasion: Global Christianity and Pentecostalism's Sensational Forms." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109 (4): 741–763. https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2010-015.

Norget, Kristin. 2021. "Mediat(iz)ing Catholicism: Saint, Spectacle, and Theopolitics in Lima, Peru." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 27 (4): 757–779. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13606.

Pearce, Jenny. 2017. "Authoritarian and Resistant Citizenship: Contrasting Logics of Violence Diffusion and Control in Latin America." In *The Transformation of Citizenship*. Vol. 3: *Struggle, Resistance and Violence*, ed. Juergen Mackert and Bryan S. Turner, 127–146. London: Routledge.

Rutazibwa, Olivia U. 2018. "On Babies and Bathwater: Decolonizing International Development Studies." In *Decolonization and Feminisms in Global Teaching and Learning*, ed. Sara de Jong, Rosalba Icaza, and Olivia U. Rutazibwa, 158–180. New York: Routledge.

Sa'ar, Amalia. 2016. *Economic Citizenship: Neoliberal Paradoxes of Empowerment*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Schulz, Dorothea E. 2015. "Mediating Authority: Media Technologies and the Generation of Charismatic Appeal in Southern Mali." *Culture and Religion* 16 (2): 125–145. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14755610.2015.1058525.

Taragin-Zeller, Lea. 2021. "A Rabbi of One's Own? Navigating Religious Authority and Ethical Freedom in Everyday Judaism." *American Anthropologist* 123 (4): 833–845. https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13603.

van de Port, Mattijs. 2004. *Gypsies, Wars and Other Instances of the Wild: Civilization and Its Discontents in a Serbian Town*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Vollebergh, Anick, Anouk de Koning, and Milena Marchesi. 2021. "Intimate States: Techniques and Entanglements of Governing through

Community in Europe." *Current Anthropology* 62 (6): 741–770. https://doi.org/10.1086/718140.

Volpi, Frédéric, and Bryan S. Turner. 2007. "Introduction: Making Islamic Authority Matter." *Theory, Culture & Society* 24 (2): 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407074992.

Weber, Max. (1921) 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Vol. 1. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Zigon, Jarrett. 2010. "Moral and Ethical Assemblages." *Anthropological Theory* 10 (1–2): 3–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499610370520.

Zigon, Jarrett. 2014. "An Ethics of Dwelling and a Politics of World-Building: A Critical Response to Ordinary Ethics." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 20 (4): 746–764. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12133.

Zigon, Jarrett. 2021. "How Is It between Us? Relational Ethics and Transcendence." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 27 (2): 384–401. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13496.

Zigon, Jarrett. 2023. *How Is It between Us? Relational Ethics and Care for the World*. Chicago: HAU Books/University of Chicago Press.