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Emancipating ethics: an autonomist reading of Islamic forms of life in Russia

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This article advances a framework aimed at capturing the political life of ethical intensity by putting autonomist theory in resonance with ethnographic material pertaining to quietist Muslim milieus in post-Soviet Russia. The emancipatory and prefigurative potential of collective projects of self-legislation – in this case, 'halal living' – are explored through the notions of ethical form of life and Rule/Law. It will be argued that autonomist theory (a) is helpful in conceptualizing the friction between ethical projects (however quietist) and dominant moral/political orders; (b) has the potential to broaden anthropological conversations on virtue beyond existing fault lines (notably between what I call 'traditionist' and 'liberal' theoretical families) as well as conceptual silos ('religion', 'secularity'); and (c) can help us envision a radical, politically engaged anthropology of ethics.

Towards a radical anthropology of ethics

How do we talk about the political life of virtue? This article articulates a possible answer that departs from currently dominant assumptions and orientations in anthropological discourse. Though a discussion of a Sunni piety movement in Russia, I invite readers to explore perspectives from avant-garde Marxist thought – specifically, autonomist theory – and to expand the canon of the 'ethical turn' through a positive and analytically actionable engagement with the themes of emancipation, autonomy, and ethical intensity.

Questions of politics have long been circulating within the field of the anthropology of ethics and the related post-Asadian anthropology of religion (Mahmood 2005). Yet several issues remain hard to account for. How do we make sense of the seeming contradiction of ethical projects that, while predicated on individuals' freedom, demand the latter's curtailment through subjection to often severe discipline (Laidlaw 2014: 154)? Many accounts of ethical milieus describe a fraught relationship with their 'outside' – be it the state, the lay mainstream, or the market economy. There appears to be something 'unsettling' (Fernando 2014) to ethical life – especially, but not exclusively, of a religious type. But where does this unsettling potential emanate from? Does the oft-assumed congenital exclusivity of religion and secularity (Hallaq 2012) exhaust this issue's complexity? Lastly: the unprecedented surge in ethical trends – revivals,

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reform movements, self-betterment projects – characterizing late modernity (Feher 2009; Sloterdijk 2009) seems, paradoxically, to have produced a docile, vulnerable, exploitable (Rudnyckyj 2010) person, sometimes known as the 'neoliberal subject'. How do we reconcile this picture with the neo-Aristotelian portrait of the self-possessed virtuous subject in all its unsettling potential?

In grappling with these questions, the recent anthropological literature on ethics and religion has come to be dominated by a sometimes rivalrous intertwinement between what I call 'traditionist/communitarian' dispositions or inclinations and 'liberal' ones. These orientations have often cross-fertilized and engaged in dialogue with each other, in an exchange that has equipped the discipline with a formidable toolkit: the Asadian notion of discursive tradition (Asad 2009 [1986]) and a courageous critique of secularism (Ahmad 2017), on the one hand, and compelling reflections on liberty (Laidlaw 2014), the relationship between morality and personal self-cultivation (Faubion 2011), and the everyday (Das 2015), on the other. Their seminal character notwithstanding, the dominance of these orientations has limited the range of political imagination within this anthropological field. Of course, I am not suggesting that the variety of the anthropology of ethics can be exhausted by two positions, nor do I consider these dispositions to be internally homogeneous 'camps'.[1] However, the tension between traditionist and liberal inclinations – which has been less openly discussed than other 'fault lines' in the field with which it partly overlaps, such as the 'ordinary ethics' and the 'morality vs ethics' debates (Laidlaw 2018) – ought to be recognized in order to cast fresh light on existing culs-de-sac and contemplate alternative analytical possibilities.

Both dispositions are characterized by a limited engagement with, or scepticism towards, ideas of emancipation and autonomy, which, analytically, translates into the risk of misrecognizing their on-the-ground manifestations. Communitarianism's suspicion originates from a legitimate scrutiny of liberal modernity and related models of agency. This, however, incurs the danger of altogether rejecting all possibilities of subject emancipation. Here, the co-ordinates that orientate meaningful ethical action spring straight from the past – tradition – as it 'weighs in' on the present (Yadgar 2015: 10). The problem with this framework, besides the insular and past-bound moral pockets implicated, is that it risks foreclosing viable prospects for engaged/progressive social analysis and renouncing any openness to potentiality (Zigon 2017; 2018). By contrast, liberal dispositions are more resonant with Berlinian notions of (negative) freedom (Laidlaw 2014), moral plurality and agency, and the prospect of finding emic versions thereof ('the role given to choice in various cultures' – Robbins 2007: 295). These approaches can be ill equipped to capture experiences of heightened ethical intensity. By either foregrounding the impossibilities and torments of commitment, or shifting the analytical focus onto the 'ordinary' routines and compromises of moral life, scholars who share this orientation risk minimizing the extent to which ethicalists succeed in creating spaces of *extra*-ordinary coherence. As has been observed (Fadil & Fernando 2015), such approaches run the danger of depicting ethical intensities as mere variations of a hegemonic moral norm premised upon liberal-secular notions of personhood and society.

In what follows, I attempt to explore fresh possibilities for social analysis by foregrounding the ideas of emancipation and autonomy as framed by the political-philosophical tradition of autonomism.[2] The initiator of this Marxist 'heresy', Antonio Negri (1991: 190), has characterized the goal of emancipatory politics as

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a 'rich, independent multilaterality' of subjects. Related formulations include *life that 'coincides' with its form* (Agamben 2013*a*: 99), 'ownness' (Newman 2015), and *fidelity* to 'the line along which power grows' (Tiqqun 2010: 25). Building on this trajectory, this article frames emancipation as the meta-individual cultivation of affirmative, discerning, and enduringly fidelious subjectivities. Here, emancipation is not a sociological abstraction or a philosophical ideal but the realization of *an(y)* ethical difference irreducible to a heteronomous moral/political status quo. Although orientated towards universal truths, the experience of emancipation is always linked to concrete, historically specific ethical projects endowed with the power to disorganize existing arrangements and prefigure alternatives (Badiou 2002: 60).

Autonomism's take on emancipation departs from liberal negative freedom and cognate formulations emphasizing individual agency and availability of life options. It also turns the idea of discursive tradition on its head by asking what prefigurative practices and emancipatory vistas ethical traditions may unlock. But rather than standing in opposition, such a framing is in a conceptually productive tension with alternative theoretical positions in the ethical turn. My argument is particularly indebted to Giorgio Agamben (2000; 2013*a*) and to the French situationist collective Tiqqun (2010; 2012).[3] In what follows, I adopt a set of concepts elaborated by these authors: namely, the notion of *ethical form of life* and the attendant conceptual dialectic of *Rule* and *Law*. I argue that these concepts perform a powerful analytical function with respect to the political and prefigurative dimensions of ethical life, and deserve to be added to the conceptual toolbox of our discipline. This is all the more true since, throughout their work, many autonomist authors have elaborated a framework that disrupts reassuring compartmentalizations such as secular vs religious, traditional vs modern, and progressive vs conservative. They look at ethical phenomena across these divides – medieval cloisters, anarchist squats, conventicles, underground milieus – as repositories of political potentiality, spaces of generative intractability, immanentized prefigurations of emancipated communities. It is through this lens that I engage with my ethnographic case: a religious movement in a Muslim-majority Russian republic.

Before discussing how autonomist theory resonates with this case, though, two points must be clarified. First: autonomism comes with its own normativities, and by no means do I assume that anyone should automatically find it/them appealing. But regardless of what one thinks of autonomist politics, this set of ideas deserves to be heeded given its pertinence vis-à-vis certain forms of ethical life and persistent debates within the discipline. Second: I am not alone in pursuing a radical, progressive, and politically engaged anthropology of ethics and religion.

Didier Fassin is perhaps the most successful advocate of the idea that ethics is 'intimately linked with … political dimensions' (2015: 176). While Fassin's analyses of the moral dimensions of politically charged phenomena such as humanitarianism and policing are masterful, what I am attempting to elaborate here is, in a sense, the mirror image of his stance: a set of analytical tools suitable for unearthing the political dimensions of a quietist ethical project such as a Sunni piety milieu. Another voice that has boldly advanced a political anthropology of morality is that of Jarrett Zigon (2017; 2018), with whom I share an interest in political incipiencies manifested in 'worlds of duration and potential' (2018: 12). Zigon's framework, applied to the study of drug users and activists, straddles the traditionist/liberal divide: his critique of progress and reliance on Heidegger appear to chime with traditionist sensibilities, while his framing of freedom as 'openness and letting be' (2017: 107) suggests an existentially

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denser re-elaboration of the Berlinian ideal. In addition, Zigon's influences include autonomist thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben and Alain Badiou (Zigon 2007; 2018). His engagement with these authors is, however, partial: the themes of Rule-following and commitment to a truth, while crucial to these thinkers' understanding of the political, do not make it into Zigon's framework. This might be because such themes do not lend themselves to Zigon's ethnography; at a more fundamental level, moreover, his phenomenology-inspired work operates under what Agamben (2013*b*: 119) would call an 'ontology of being', rather than the commitment-based 'ontology of having-to-be' that the autonomists foreground.

Caroline Humphrey's theory of event and subjectivity builds on a Badiousian framework which I also draw on, utilizing Badiou's terminology to capture changes in ordinary human subjectivities and vicissitudes. However, Humphrey (2018) deliberately dials down the most radical aspects of Badiou's philosophy: its focus on fidelity, truth, and extra-ordinary compositions of subjectivity. By contrast, the framework I propose focuses on heightened ('extra-ordinary') ethical intensities. Ultimately, despite the seemingly vast distance between our case studies, the anthropological work that comes closest to what I offer in these pages is perhaps Naisargi Dave's perceptive study of queer communities in India. Her observations that 'radical worlds are always in process, linked through their shared existence in a field of possibility' (2012: 12) and that 'ethical aspirations … are common to all emergent radical worlds' (2012: 208 n. 4) aptly describe the *prefiguratively emancipatory* and *always-already political* dimensions of high-intensity ethical projects, no matter how quietist. The ethnographic setting to which I will introduce you in the following section is a case in point.

Tatarstan's halal milieu

While this article's terminology is indebted to autonomist formulations, my intellectual engagement with the idea of form of life originates from, and resonates with, the emic formulation of this term that I encountered during my fieldwork with Muslim pietists in post-Soviet Russia. I conducted ethnographic research in the multi-ethnic republic of Tatarstan, where I investigated the growing success of Islamic piety movements for one and a half years. Tatarstan is home to Russia's largest Muslim ethnic group, the Volga Tatars, a population of predominantly Turkic stock with historical and cultural ties to the Central Eurasian Sunni-Persianate-Chingisid landscape (Ross 2020). Despite the Volga Region's long Islamic history, the social and cultural institutions in the region today are predominantly secular, largely as a result of centuries of Russian rule topped by aggressive Soviet-era anti-religious campaigns.

Against this backdrop, the post-Soviet mushrooming of Sunni piety movements surprised most onlookers – including irreligious Tatars, the Russian state, and the media. Piety movements took hold with particular intensity among the emerging urban middle classes and the youth. These groups' engagement with Islam can to an extent be described as a local iteration of the global Islamic 'revival' (Schielke 2015). But in the study of religious life after real socialism, the term 'revival' risks proving misleading as it invites a framing of contemporary religious-ethical developments in terms of a 're-emergence' of 'traditional' faiths. While long-term continuities may of course be identified, many aspects of religious life in post-Soviet Tatarstan differ from what historical sources suggest about pre-revolutionary and Soviet times (Benussi 2021*a*). In particular, post-Soviet pious milieus flourish without relying on the civilizational

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institutes of pre-revolutionary Islamicate Eurasia – the range of pedagogical, juridical, administrative, and pastoral apparatuses that regulated the Muslim domain before Soviet-led modernization – and attract followers from across customary ethno-confessional boundaries. Islam in Tatarstan is in many respects post-civilizational, unmoored from (albeit sometimes nostalgic towards) the more organic and capillary moral orders of yore (Hallaq 2012).

Observing the broader landscape of religion in post-Soviet Russia, I find myself in agreement with Peter Sloterdijk's sceptical take on the very language of religious revival: where other commentators see a 'mere' return of religion, Sloterdijk discerns something new, an unprecedented blossoming of 'anthropotechnics' – codes of ethical living which are not *necessarily* defined by a religious character (2009: 5-6). Sloterdijk's argument is relevant even to a Sunni piety movement because, in disrupting clear-cut lines dividing secularity and religion, it invites social analysts to notice resemblances across the ready-made silos in which late-modern projects of subject formation can be classified. We shall see in a moment how pertinent Sloterdijk's thesis is to the case at hand.

The Islamic piety trends I researched in Russia are quietist ('post-Islamist') and place heavy emphasis on correct ritual practice, discipline (ranging from strict to very strict), the pursuit of religious knowledge, and the universality of the Islamic message. I refer to them, collectively, as Russia's 'halal milieu' (Benussi 2021*a*). This term defines an otherwise nameless, loose galaxy encompassing groups of various and sometimes even divergent theological orientations united by the same commitment to ethical-theological discernment and Islamically permissible conduct. At the time of my visit (2014-15), the halal milieu had a very tense relationship with the Russian state, which was bent on policing and surveilling domestic grassroots Islam. State apparatuses, including security agencies, official Islamic organizations, and media actors, share a dim view of this pious milieu, which, despite its quietism, is perceived as a jarring, unruly element in society (Benussi 2020). Large portions of the secular public, too, regard observant Muslims with apprehension. While some non-pious but ethnic-minded Tatars approvingly regard the Islamic boom as proof of the post-atheist vitality of the Tatars' 'national religion' (a reading with which pietists, who consider Islam to be a universal truth, are very uncomfortable), halalists are often branded as 'fanatical', 'ugly', 'strange', or 'obscurantist' by so-called 'ethnic' Muslims (i.e. Muslims by heritage and 'essence', but who do not, or only minimally, practise).

What is striking is that a number of people in the halal milieu appear to *enjoy* the bad press. Of course, they are conscious of the risk incurred by those who fall foul of the state and its repressive anti-'extremism' apparatus. As one friend told me, 'Our country has little patience with those who pursue alternative ways of living'. Yet there was something gleeful in my friend's awareness of standing out of the ordinary and being deliberately 'alternative'. In part, it is a doctrinal matter of following the Islamic notion of *gharib*: being estranged (*otchuzdennye*) from all things sinful, and drawing scripturally informed lines between orthodox Muslims and the rest. This apartness is cherished by some: as one interlocutor phrased it, pious Muslims ought to 'buffer themselves (*osteregat'sya*) from what is out there (*okruzhayuschee*)'.

Yet alongside theological reasoning, I observed a sort of defiant *jouissance* stemming from cultivated difference, a sense of – dare I say it – *coolness* animating those in the innovation-orientated, cosmopolitan, aspirational halal milieu. Their use of language (peppered with expressions in Arabic, rather than 'old-fashioned' Tatar), attire (trimmed beards, headscarves, and a range of more or less overt sartorial statements),

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diet, and countless other conduct-related details mark the difference. People often exchange literature that is banned or disapproved of, pray in ways that diverge from the recommendations of state-controlled Muslim organizations, secretly gather in their university's dusty basements to perform *salah* between classes, surreptitiously empty liquor bottles down the drain at parties, or (on rare occasions) enter into polygamous arrangements frowned upon by the majority. These are acts of piety, but also *transgressions* of mainstream norms, and they set my participants apart from the conformism of the 'grey mass', to use the term of one of Russia's most prominent incarnations of 'Muslim cool' (Alyautdinov 2013: 30).

Some interlocutors have described their religious circles as *subkul'tura*: 'something that people deliberately (*osoznanno*) choose', rather than something one is born into. It is worth noting that a number of participants had been previously involved in underground milieus (gangsta rap, heavy metal, hardcore punk, etc.). Others had been involved in oppositional political circles or had experimented with religious movements. Many among the first post-Soviet generation of pietists had been active in the informal/criminal underground of the 1990s.

While at least in some Muslim circles 'coolness' is knowingly embraced, it is important to frame this as subordinate to the halal milieu's main pursuit, which is that of perfecting one's comportment in accordance with religious standards of divinely ordained permissibility (halal). There have been intriguing but problematic attempts in the literature to explore the interconnections of Muslim sociality, underground cultures, and coolness (Bayat & Herrera 2010; Herding 2013; Khabeer 2016). That approach, however promising, risks leading to flat, horizontal comparisons, awkwardly mixing two incommensurable domains – ethics/religion and pop culture/style – and doing an injustice to both in the process. Instead, through autonomist theory, this article proposes a meta-framework which throws new light on the family resemblances between seemingly 'incomparable' oppositional milieus.

My interlocutors' positionality, and their 'coolness', are based on the pursuit of self-willed, affirmative, rich, independent subjectivities – as Agamben would put it – steeped in the choice of 'living according to a plan (*zhit' po-planu*)' and against mainstream imperatives. Pietists' relationship vis-à-vis moral/political authorities, however, is not one of knee-jerk rebelliousness, but rather one of cultivated detachment from hegemonic norms that interfere with their 'plan'. To adapt the famous Althusserian metaphor, pietists tend to react to the worldly sovereign policeman's 'Hey you!' by sceptically raising their eyebrow, rather than falling on their knees – a disposition that they ought to reserve for God alone. Unsurprisingly, Russia's top-down command structure – its 'vertical of power' – has tended to see this as a symptom of 'disloyalty' and 'separatism'.

Its intractability notwithstanding, however, the halal movement remains immersed in the mainstream in important ways. Islamic movements did not take root until the late 1990s. As a respondent observed, 'All Muslims in Russia are converts', meaning that pietists have been raised in the same moral, cultural, and political-economic landscapes as their secular counterparts. At some level, pietists remain steeped in all-Russian and Tatar moral and biopolitical lifeworlds. They cannot but partake in the shared habituses and cultural memories of the post-Soviet society at large. When the policeman moves closer, they find themselves exposed to the workings of state apparatuses. Pietists' relationship with the market is marked by an analogous dialectic of cultivated detachment, even antagonism, and inescapable intertwinement. On the one

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hand, they make a strong investment in creating a 'halal' economic environment devoid of the ills of (Russian) capitalism, by experimenting with Islamic business practices, cultivating brotherliness among business partners, and avoiding mainstream financial institutions (official and 'informal', i.e. graft) and habits (speculation, wheel-greasing, haggling) to the greatest possible extent. On the other hand, Muslim economic actors remain subjected to the constraints of the dominant form of organization, and cannot entirely elude the norms and power relations undergirding their postsocialist market environment. To make a profit, pious entrepreneurs must adhere to market logic, while avoiding taxation, protection, and/or wheel-greasing is often impossible (Benussi 2021*a*). That said, the transformative effect of Islamic ethics on economic practice at the community level cannot be underestimated (Kaliszewska 2020).

Another form of life

Consider the halal milieu's defining traits: an emphasis on *fidelity*; the pursuit of a *universal truth* which transcends doxic norms and that transforms adherents' subjectivities; its members' willed choice to enter a *collective subjective composition* held together by its own norms, incongruous with, yet nested within, a broader social field; and a combination of *antagonism* towards, indifference to, and intertwinement with the mainstream. These elements define what Alain Badiou (2002) calls 'truth-processes', which he claims pertain to four domains: *aesthetic* (artistic, and arguably style-based, trends and milieus), *intellectual* (scientific or philosophical schools of thought), *amorous* (romantic and conjugal commitments), and *political* (revolutionary movements, militant groups). Developing Badiou's (2003) own (contradictory) engagement with religion, we may add another, *spiritual* domain. It is to this domain that piety movements such as the halal milieu belong.

Badiou's multi-domain, higher-order conceptualization of truth-based ethical projects directs our gaze towards a level that transcends the 'silo' of piety and religious traditions, inviting us to explore family resemblances between piety trends and a broader range of truth-driven forms of ethical intensity which are not codable as 'religious', including underground political and aesthetic milieus. To paraphrase Talal Asad (2009 [1986]), the theoretical problem behind resemblances across domains is not just a matter of choosing the right comparative parameters, but one of formulating the right meta-concepts: *form of life* and the dialectic of *Rule* and *Law* are just such concepts.

In my project, form of life first emerged, ethnographically, as an emic category. *Obraz zhizni* (Rus., literally 'image/shape' of life) and *tormış räveşe* (Tat.) are expressions used by pietists to describe their ways of living *po-planu*: 'The whole form of life of Muslims is wisely regulated by the norms of halal. Halal has to do with mental activity, nutrition, professional sphere, fitness and self-care'; 'Halal … is a complex of rules for living (*zhiznennye pravila*) which encompasses all aspects of life. It is like the Constitution of the believer'; 'Halal is like an axis (*sterzhen*), the core (*yadro*) of our collective existence'. Can these expressions be mapped onto social theories of form of life?

The notion of *Lebensform* has been made immensely popular by Ludwig Wittgenstein and his followers (Wittgenstein 1986 [1953]: 226e; see also Kishik 2008; Tonner 2017). Yet over the course of many decades, its contours have remained vague and its potential declinations near-endless, including: ways of living; modes of discourse; worldviews; language practices; biological realities; cognitive styles; fields of possibility; problem-solving mechanisms; and extraordinarily different types

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of community ranging from 'primitive/alien cultures' to organized faiths in the late-modern West. It is impossible to do justice to the manifold ways in which the *Lebensform* idea has been developed by philosophers and social theorists via sustained debates on issues such as relativism, rationality, religion, and science (Lukes 1982; Nielsen & Phillips 2005; Salazar & Bestard 2015).

For the purpose of this article, suffice it to point out the rivalry between what has been called Wittgensteinian 'fideism' and its humanist critics (Nielsen & Phillips 2005). The former term has been applied to thinkers who envision *Lebensformen* as essentially coherent, incommensurable worlds of practice resting upon internal criteria of appropriateness, unanswerable to external 'rational' parameters (Gier 1980; Phillips in Nielsen & Phillips 2005; Taylor 1989; Winch 2003 [1958]). The latter position includes authors who view forms of life as sociohistorical formations that could and should be critically engaged with from a rational-humanist meta-standpoint (Gellner 1960; 1986; Jaeggi 2018; Nielsen in Nielsen & Phillips 2005). An analogy may be detected between the diatribe of opposing fideists and humanists, on the one hand, and the anthropological 'fault line' separating what I have called traditionist/communitarian and liberal orientations, on the other. However, Wittgenstein's influence on the 'ethical turn' has been wide-ranging across disciplinary divides. Wittgensteinian themes (like Foucauldian ones), for example, can be discerned on both sides of the 'everyday debate', having contributed, via Alasdair MacIntyre, to the 'exceptionalist' Asadian anthropology of piety (Asad 2020; Viersen 2019) as well as to 'ordinary ethics' approaches via Stanley Cavell (Das 2012; 2015; Tayob 2017; see also Deutscher 2016).

Wittgenstein's *Lebensform* has thus proved fruitfully open-ended, but also frustratingly blunt as an analytical tool and manipulable as a framework. Given its elusiveness and associations with theoretical controversies that this article seeks to transcend, in what follows I explore a different take on the 'form of life' concept. There is yet another fundamental reason to do so: the Wittgensteinian commandment to 'leave the world as it is', and its latent conservativism, are hardly compatible with the aspirations of an engaged social analysis (McLennan 2015) capable of foregrounding the liberative and prefigurative dimensions of religious piety. To that end, a militant epistemology of ethical intensities is required.

Hailing from the autonomist intellectual/political tradition and equipped with keen concerns about the conditions of possibility for *another community*, Giorgio Agamben (1998; 2000; 2013*a*; see also Kishik 2012) and Tiqqun (2010; 2011*b*) have offered a tighter, more idiosyncratic, and uniquely generative conceptualization of form of life. Specifically, Agamben (1998) can be credited with reshaping *Lebensform* into a novel guise laden with explicit ethical and political connotations. Unlike Wittgenstein and most of his followers *as well as* critics, Agamben does not conceive of 'life' as a given. Life *always* unfolds within political entanglements and power relations; therefore, life and power must be considered together. While Wittgenstein's *Lebensform* is a figure of actuality, Agamben's form of life is one of potentiality (Kishik 2012: 40). I will not rehearse Agamben's well-known argument about bare life (biological life under the aegis of sovereign Law), but will merely point out that, to him, *form of life is the structural opposite of bare life*. Form of life describes an existence in which encroachments by sovereign, judiciary, or economic power are kept in check, a condition by which *zoé* and *bios* cannot be extricated at (sovereign) will: 'human life … removed from the grasp of the law, … [characterized by] a use of bodies and of the world that would never be

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substantiated into an appropriation. … [Life that] is never given as property but only as common use' (Agamben 2013*a*: xiii). In other words, emancipated life.

Is such a scenario 'sociologically' possible? Agamben's framing of form of life should be understood in the context of a radical politics of prefiguration (Smith 2013), making it analytically applicable to 'actual' instantiations of prefigurative praxis. As anyone who is familiar with his oeuvre appreciates, Agamben's thought is anything but naïve. Autonomist philosophy generally recognizes that actualizations of emancipated life have been fleeting, partial, fragile, and contested throughout human history – although this does not make their ripple effects in the political and ethical field any less worth recording. In the words of Alain Badiou (2002), the pursuit of singular, universal, radically innovative, and binding truths displaces and alters sociohistorical 'situations', with all their contingent power/moral dynamics, but insofar as humans are inescapably situational beings, this pursuit will necessarily still take place in the realm of situations. It will be fraught and prone to failure. In this picture, the emancipatory potential of ethical praxis is always-already intertwined with its dialectical opposite, that is, the hegemonic norm. It is precisely this tension that the autonomist heuristics of form of life and the related dialectic of Rule/Law are uniquely suited to capture.

In a volume that expands prefigurative politics beyond a familiar secular-modernist family album, Agamben (2013*a*) brings his concept of form of life (Agamben 1998) to bear on the case of medieval Christian monasticism. Form of life is evoked as individual and collective human life *given shape* through the adoption of a Rule – here, a more specific term than in Wittgenstein's (1986 [1953]), Winch's (2003 [1958]), and Taylor's (1989; 1995) use. The implementation of Rule depends on persons' volition, for example through the wilful pledge of a vow. As exemplified by monastic *regula*, Rule encompasses virtually all aspects of life, including day-to-day bodily conduct, timing, labour, speech acts, finance, and affective or mental states. Rule is the *nomos* of autonomy; embracing it prefigures a 'life that coincides with [its form]' (Agamben 2013*a*: 99), enabling the fulfilment of human potentialities. I argue that this autonomist framing of ethical form of life, underpinned by the concept of Rule, also resonates intensely with Tatarstani pietists' *obraz zhizni* and illuminates their emphasis on halal as a reflexively chosen 'plan for living'.

Crucially, Rule stands in a complex relationship with what Agamben calls Law, namely dominant juridical as well as moral norms (the internal regulative forces of a 'situation'). This framing of Law is, in the reading I propose, close to what James Faubion has defined as 'the themitical', that is, 'regnant normative order[s] … that include *values, ideals and exemplars* as well as imperatives' (2011: 24, emphasis added, 104ff.). These two terms stand for different patterns of obedience. Whereas Rule adheres to the 'complex biographical reality' of each individual, subjection to and through the Law tends to conformity: enabling, in contexts of power asymmetry, the production of heteronomous (and hence alienable) selves and regimented (hence recruitable) bodies. If thinkers of different stripes, liberal (Flathman 2003; Weber 1946) and (post-)anarchist (Newman 2015), have long discerned a liberating potential of self-discipline, Agamben casts a fresh light on this potential by linking it to a non-dichotomous dialectic (Rule intertwines Law) of subject formation.

In Tatarstan, Law does not emanate solely from secular state apparatuses (although they remain the chief seat of sovereignty), but also from official Islamic institutions. A pietist friend once complained about what he called *mechetsky islam* – 'the Islam of [institutional] mosques' – referring to anodyne sermons made up of platitudinous

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exhortations to 'be good to one another and respect authority'. During a public lecture on Islam that I attended in Kazan, a spokesman for the state-backed Islamic bureaucracy defined Muslims as 'those who respect our elderly'. While filial piety is, indeed, an Islamic virtue, some pietists in attendance later expressed dissatisfaction with a statement smacking of generic humanist morality. Every decent person can respect the elderly. Pietists do so too, but this is done in the context of their fidelity to the Qur'an and Sunna and out of a personally binding God-awareness. Of course, pietists *are*, by and large, decent people who would respect the elderly anyway, but they strive to be more than – *different* to – that: a form of life. The spokesman's remark 'diluted' what Islam 'really is about' (in pietists' eyes) – that is, fidelity to a truth – into reassuring, mainstream other-orientated morality.

By putting the autonomist concepts of form of life and Rule/Law in resonance with pietists' *obraz zhizni*, I aspire to develop a conceptual apparatus endowed with broad analytical purchase. Cognizant of the injustice I am doing to autonomism by extracting a social scientific 'model' from it, but optimistic about the promise of such a move, I frame an ethical form of life as (a) a socially codified, collectively experienced, reflexively chosen way of living, (b) defined by a Rule or code of fidelity, which (c) applies to bodies, minds, actions, temporalities, and so on, and (d) transcends and relativizes the moral, juridical, and political-economic norms (Law) of a situational order. Forms of life (e) strive towards states experienced as self-affirmatory, (f) thereby actualizing or prefiguring emancipatory potentialities.

Being a manifestation of ethical intensity, form of life resonates with Asadian notions of ethical praxis and subject formation. However, there are points of difference. First, whereas traditionist approaches emphasize engagement with the past and surrender to its moral-religious authority, autonomism foregrounds the future orientation of ethical life as an actualization of potentialities. In Badiou (2002), the ethical subject co-participates in the processual, in(de)finitely unfolding *advent* of a truth, which in itself is temporally 'infinite', for a truth's emergence is by definition a breach in situational temporality, under the imperative to 'keep going!' This is not to deny the temporal trajectory of Rule, but to capture an important facet of ethicalists' experience: for all their reverence for the Prophetic age, Tatarstani pietists commit to Islam's timeless truth in light of the future possibilities it discloses, its transformative power and salvific promise actualized in Muslim life.

Second, through the dialectic of Rule and Law, the 'form of life' framework allows a greater understanding of the broader power dynamics within which ethical projects unfold – the extent to which Rule-following keeps the Althusserian policeman in check, or, at least, gives him something to worry about, as exemplified by Russia's sovereign anxieties over Muslim quietists.

Additionally, form of life maintains analytical purchase across the religious-secular divide, applying to piety movement such as Tatarstan's halal movement *as well as* non-religious counter-milieus and forms of praxis characterized by fidelity, coherence, and 'unsettling' subjectivity. Rule enables autonomous forms of subjectivity and eccentric collectivities: vis-à-vis the homogenizing, *constituent* power of Law, Rule amounts to *destituent* power. As post-anarchist theorist Saul Newman (2015) puts it, ethical discipline actualizes the prospect of an 'exodus' from existing orders of sovereignty. In Badiousian terms, an 'ethic of truth' displaces the order of situations (Badiou 2002). Furthermore, Rule establishes a binding, personalized link between individuals and their ethical goals without the need for heteronomous apparatuses, thereby relativizing

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sovereign claims to moral authority and a monopoly of the good. As a later incarnation of the Tiqqun collective put it, 'I am free because I have ties, I am linked to a reality greater than me' (Invisible Committee 2015: 127).

In experiences of heightened ethical intensity and saturation, Rule manifests itself as a figure of force, of *power*. By breaking the spell of heteronomous influences, it disorganizes the forcefield of Law, without, however, substituting it – as orthodox revolutionary projects, 'typical' nationalist groups, and even 'classic' Islamist formations beholden to the state model (Hallaq 2012) might attempt to do. Quietist Muslim pietists remain within a situational landscape which the juridical primacy of the (secular) state, the economic dictates of the market, and the moral habituses of the Russian mainstream never cease to impinge upon, thereby continuing to affect their own pious existences. Rather than combating this order and its Laws with other Laws, pietists pursue autonomy within it, immanentized through the intensity of their ethical engagement with a Rule: 'the Constitution of the believer'. Islam thus offers an 'axis' to which ethical effort is directed in a process that actualizes emancipating subjects and collectivities. In other words, although an ethical form of life produces friction with the mainstream and unbalances the political status quo, its *primary* orientation is not towards reforming or overturning the order external to it, but towards the lateral realization of a different life. In this sense, quietist piety milieus are different from earlier Tatar nationalist groups or social campaigners pushing Islam as a rallying cry to advance overt policy agendas. Yet this does not make them any less 'political' – in fact, they seem even more conducive to profound and capillary transformations in subjectivity and the situational order.

The politics of ethics

During a conversation about the emancipatory dimension of piety, one of my respondents – a well-respected imam, influential within the halal milieu – declared that

> Virtue and liberty are intimately connected. Submitting to God is the highest form of liberty (*svoboda*). It is, in fact, the highest condition a human being can attain. Because of our nature – partly spiritual, partly earthly – we are all natural-born slaves. Even the most powerful of us. We can never be completely free – *but* we can be *relatively* free. Achieving this relative liberty, in this life, consists in submitting to the only true Owner. This is the way to dignity. The way of slavery under our only real Master – this is what makes us strong, and gives us protection.

This passage encapsulates several important themes. Although it starts as a theological reflection, the politically tinged language used – power and strength, liberty, dignity, self-enslavement, protection – gestures towards the dynamics of 'this life' and chimes with the conceptual apparatus of this article.

How can autonomist theory help us capture social-political and intersubjective dimensions of virtue? Expanding on Agamben's early works, the French collective Tiqqun have put form of life at the front and centre of their framework, affirming that

> the elementary human unit is not the body – the individual – but the [ethical] form-of-life … Each body is affected by its form-of-life as if by a clinamen, a leaning, an attraction, a taste … When, at a certain time and place, two bodies affected by the same form-of-life meet, they experience … a pact. They experience community (2010: 18, 37).

This affective pull is something that Tatarstan's halalists experience daily as they move in their milieus, partaking in collective choreographies of piety, reinforcing each other's faith, and building solidarity with fellow Rule-followers.

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With Agamben, Tiqqun frame forms of life as materializations of high-intensity ethical projects ('all differences among forms of life are ethical differences', 2010: 58) which stand in complex contradiction to political, economic, and moral hegemonies. Tiqqun's framework foregrounds a tension – a 'civil war' – between ethical projects and worldly authorities, an oppositional tendency that had first been discerned long ago by Max Weber, who spoke of the 'magical power obtained by abnegation' and its efficacy in 'displac[ing] worldly power through the super-mundane' (1946: 327). In a conscious bid to re-enchant the field of politics, Tiqqun contrast forms of life's joyously insurgent magic (2011*a*: 174) with statecraft, capitalism, and moral conformism as avatars of sovereign 'black magic' (2010: 83) aimed at pre-empting/curbing forms of life (framed as 'sects', fringes, etc.) through repressive and ideological apparatuses. While high-modern repressive states have attempted a complete banishment of forms of life – the Soviet Union's most virulent anti-religious policies being a textbook example of this approach – Tiqqun argue that late-modern liberal states operate mostly through *attenuation* and *co-optation* of forms of life, thereby preventing ethical differences from attaining a politically threatening level of intensity. The interplay of attenuated forms of life, normalized difference, may even be encouraged by mature governmental regimes ('Empire tolerates all transgressions, provided they remain soft', Tiqqun 2010: 141). The proliferation of official Islamic bureaucracies and state-approved Islamic discourses in post-Soviet Russia (Benussi 2020) is an example of biopolitical apparatuses aimed at harnessing and attenuating the ethical intensity of piety movements in a bid to recruit Muslims into a 'managed civil society' framework under which pietists are given economic rights and business opportunities but not full civil rights.

A Tiqqunian framing of the politics of ethical intensity may invite the question of whether *ultimate* emancipation – which Tiqqun imagine as a generalized, existential insurrection – is achievable, or, indeed, desirable. For Tiqqun, the answer depends on which form of life one is, or is not, part of. For the purposes of an autonomist social analysis, the question itself would be ill posed, as this theoretical area refrains from dealing in ultimates. What matters is the experiences of ethicalists as discerning, self-possessed beings, and the unsettling of the structures of the ordinary by forms of life. In Tatarstan, pietists create solidarities, raise affective tones, transgress norms, alarm 'normies', unsettle authorities, taste dignity and freedom, and face both the challenges and possibilities of the future. It is to these potentialities of ethical fidelity that autonomist theory attunes us (Badiou 2002; Laclau 2007: 12-17), even if none of this is 'final', at least in this life. Ethical truths are only observable as they manifest themselves in the inherently messy situational realm (Badiou 2002).

My imam interviewee's assertion that liberty will necessarily be partial may be framed as awareness of the (*almost*?) inescapable intertwinement of Rule with Law. Consider some of the ways in which Tatarstani Muslims self-legislate their communities, such as (a) developing Islamically sanctioned economic activities between fellow halalists, (b) home-schooling children, or (c) autonomously seeking theological guidance in defiance of state-issued blanket bans on 'undesirable' religious literature and the hegemonic pretences of Islamic officialdom. As a result of these strategies, a significant degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the economic, pedagogical, and moral-ideological normative order is achieved. Nevertheless, necessary taxes and insurance fees are still paid, even if they contradict Islamic economy; home-schooling is done via certified secular institutions; and officialdom-provided institutional coverage is accepted as a fact of life (and even sought when advantageous). To return to

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Agambenian terminology, Law is still in the picture. However, these encroachments by Law are buffered and subsumed under Rule as Islamic justifications are formulated in the context of such micro-capitulations. As several respondents pointed out, open illegality/rebelliousness would risk generating *fitnah* (strife, sedition), which is a sin, thereby endangering the *maslahah* (welfare) of the ummah. Obeying Law, thus, is a matter of Rule.

How does autonomist theory help us – against itself, so to speak – to capture the limits and difficulties of emancipation? As Badiou (2002) explains, humans, as social 'animals', namely complex biopolitical and moral beings, ordinarily rely on Law to regulate relations in the situational domain. We are reminded of the Foucauldian principle – which Agamben does not ignore – that power is not merely coercive and suppressive but also life-sustaining: existence under the aegis of sovereign power ('bare life') is the *prevalent* arrangement under which human life unfolds. Inasmuch as they are biopolitical beings – citizens, consumers, producers, moral persons – humans are *constitutively* immersed in Law and produced by it. *Destituent* Rule, thus, is, as we know, less about 'subverting' or 'resisting' Law than it is about disorganizing it (Badiou 2002: 60), eluding it through 'internal desertion' and 'irreducible subtraction' from Law's forcefield (Tiqqun 2011*b*: 55; 2011*a*: 59-60). In other words, existing within a sovereign forcefield while retaining what Newman, echoing Max Stirner, calls 'ownness' (2015: 117).

Form of life and the social

At this point, something ought to be said about the broader moral and biopolitical ecosystem within which ethical forms of life unfold. Anthropologists have sometimes pondered about, even questioned, the ethical turn's analytical robustness vis-à-vis systemic matters of power and politics (Fassin 2014; Faubion 2011: 119; Zigon 2018). On the other hand, classic ethnographic studies of religious ethics have long grappled with issues such as resistance and conflict (Mahmood 2005), recognizing an antagonistic dimension to the ethical 'counterpublic' (Hirschkind 2006). However seminal, these pioneering discussions have provoked some debate (Schielke 2015; see next section). Autonomist theory offers anthropologists a way to expand on pre-existing contributions and address their vulnerabilities without rejecting their heuristic potential. It does so through a sophisticated understanding of the social as a field of tensions *among* forms of life and *between* forms of life and the sovereign order and its political, economic, and themitical apparatuses.

Tiqqun frame the social (they reject 'society' as a viable construct) as the interplay of multiple forms of life of different ideological orientation, that is, animated by different Rules (Islamic, anarchist, reactionary, revolutionary, spiritual-religious, anticlerical, etc.), and of varied 'intensity'. Contraposed to the interplay of forms of life, sovereign moral and political-economic apparatuses act as ordering/homogenizing factors bent on mitigating and/or controlling forms of life's ebullience: in Russia, for example, attempts to do so range from co-optation of individuals into the ranks of Islamic officialdom to persecution of dissidents.

This conceptualization of the social is proudly disharmonious and open to the ever-lingering chance of conflict, bearing a resemblance to the approach of the Lacanian left (Mouffe 2005; Stavrakakis 1999), which also focuses on emancipation as 'human essence's coincidence with itself' (Laclau 2007: 1). Forms of life interact with each other through a gamut of affective-relational modes: from friendship to hostility,

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through the middle grounds of hospitality, truce, and enmity (Tiqqun 2010: 53-8). Higher-intensity forms of life are associated with particularly affirmative, potentially intractable, Law-deflecting subjectivities, and with praxes susceptible to 'unsettl[ing] the republic' (Fernando 2014). Low-intensity forms of life (lifestyles, etc.), by contrast, are associated with 'less sublimely intimidating form[s] of identity' (Eagleton 2015: 75), in harmony with the governmental ideal of maintaining ethical differences at the lowest possible level. Low-intensity subjectivities can be seen as the paradoxical outcome of late modernity – an age of 'neoliberal' anthropotechnics and self-reform projects that train subjects into becoming more vulnerable, alienable, exploitable (Tiqqun 2012: 8), as exemplified by Rudnyckyj's (2010) case of Indonesian corporate training using Islamic themes and popular self-help to discipline Muslim workers. However, Tiqqun conceptualize all forms of life, even 'weak' ones, as repositories of *some* emancipatory potential.

The Tiqqunian framework enables us to analytically account for variety and gradation in the fields of the politics of virtue. Some forms of life seek destitution from the mainstream and a cultivated agonism towards the world as well as rival forms of life. Certain segments of Tatarstan's halal milieu, especially those animated by Salafi theology, are closer to this 'high-intensity' end of the gamut and display autarkic, antagonistic, and exclusionary tendencies. Other forms of life explore the ambiguous terrain of amicability. For example, followers of the ecumenist Turkish reformist Fethullah Gülen, in Russia and elsewhere, are invested in promoting interfaith dialogue. Others pursue ephemeral, tentative, approximate 'everyday utopias' (Cooper 2013) such as temporary autonomous zones, social centres, or, in some religious communities, physical spaces in which scriptural norms are enforced (Benussi 2021*b*). Lastly, 'low-intensity' forms of life dilute the imperative of ethical reform into superficially transgressive 'lifestyles' while acquiescing to the mainstream, and/or weave projects of self-formation into dynamics of self-exploitation.

Rather than banishing emancipation from a field of ethics framed as compliance with received teleologies (the traditionist tendency), or zooming in laterally on themes of individual agency and the mundane coexistence of multiple moral registers (the liberal one), autonomist theory anchors ethics to an agonistic, biopolitically dense conceptualization of the social, whereby the emancipatory dimension of ethical projects emerges vis-à-vis the structural conditionings – moral, political, and economic – that weigh upon human subjects as members of social bodies. Virtue is thus understandable (and experienced) as being emancipatory in the sense that it enables autonomous self-government (Flathman 2003; Newman 2015) and reveals the relativity of sovereign Law. Of course, this analytical/intellectual vantage point does not invalidate alternative ones, but it can complement them – as per the discussion below – and offer vital insight for a politically attuned anthropology of ethics and religion.

Beyond the Enlightenment debate

The Asadian 'revolution' in the anthropology of religion (Ahmad 2017; Mahmood 2005; Tayob 2017), intellectually indebted to MacIntyrean philosophical genealogies (Asad 2009 [1986]),[4] has generated a sensitive fault line in social theory by enabling a critique of Enlightened secular modernity as a space of *ethical crisis* (Ahmad 2017; Asad 2020; Hallaq 2012). Such a move provides a foil for the morally integrated social pockets whose inner workings anthropologists seek to understand (McLennan 2015). Behind this picture, however, one might discern an often implicitly hierarchical contrast

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between the sympathetically depicted traditional virtuous subjects and ethically stunted – if hardly differentiated in their 'liberal', 'secular', 'feminist', or 'leftist' versions – post-Enlightenment subjectivities.

Criticism of the Enlightenment, of course, is sound and productive. Anthropologists have utilized traditionist/communitarian arguments to pursue intellectually valid ends: not just a subtler appreciation of piety as an experience, but also, in a critical spirit, the disruption of colonial and evolutionist assumptions at the heart of liberal academia. Yet this position harbours some intellectual dangers as well, such as turning secular humanism into an ungenerous caricature, and/or producing hagiographic or idealized renditions of religious phenomena (Schielke 2015). Even more perturbing are some implications of communitarianism at the political level (Flathman 2003; Gellner 1986; Laidlaw 2014: 65-71).[5] Scholars in this vein have taken pains to distinguish academic and philosophical traditionism from political conservativism (Yadgar 2015). However, the traditionist/communitarian school's critical framing of modernity as ethically sterile, and its latent antipathy for secular humanism, have disquieting echoes – Irfan Ahmad's failure to take a stance vis-à-vis the reactionary and authoritarian elements of Abul A'la Maududi's work, in his otherwise thought-provoking monograph (Ahmad 2017), being an example of these dangers. From this perspective, a traditionist orientation is vulnerable to charges of political irresponsibility analogous to those that have been levelled against the Wittgensteinian fideists (McLennan 2015; Nielsen & Phillips 2005).

There are, furthermore, methodological reasons to critique traditionist approaches. One is a latent temptation to depict certain communities or societies – normally non-Western, and especially Islamic – as organically anchored in and defined by tradition. The risk here is that a framework developed to escape the strictures of earlier anthropologists' civilizational thinking (religion as a 'blueprint' for societal arrangements) ends up reinforcing civilizational divides (typically, the West vs Islam) and minimizing key aspects of global post-Enlightenment modernity, especially modernity's conduciveness to a blossoming of ethical projects, including in non-Western settings (Keane 2006; Sloterdijk 2009; van der Veer 1996). Another related reason is traditionism's tendency to cast the ethical qua (religious) tradition and the secular as irreconcilable dimensions. This framing has it that virtue ethics started to decline in Enlightened Europe, with the modern state becoming increasingly assertive in establishing a 'proper' (diminished) place for religion in society. This spelled the start of a secular age which would establish itself globally via imperial routes, albeit not without encountering resistance (Hallaq 2012). This reconstruction is not unproblematic: the assumption that there must exist a fundamental incompatibility, at all levels, between religion/virtue ethics and Enlightened modernity is anything but self-evident, especially once religion is decoupled from clericalism. Furthermore, the communitarian paradigm fails to adequately distinguish between Law and Rule and, consequently, construes a shift in political theology – the historical eclipse of the *ancien régime*'s self-legitimating traditional-clerical authority – and the concomitant fragmentation of the moral-themitical order, as a disappearance of teleology/ethics *as such*. But the historical and ethnographic records suggest that teleologies have *not* disappeared since the Enlightenment, in fact they have multiplied (Kishik 2012: 112-13) into a plethora of ethical forms of life of different intensities.

In short, depicting political tensions around virtue-ethical movements in terms of *religion/virtue ethics* vs *secularity/humanism/modernity* is tempting, and in some cases

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pertinent, but it rests upon a self-validating narrative of paradigm exclusivity. Such a framing in turn reinforces the narrative, generating a circularity that leaves no room for alternative optics. Yet if we reframe these tensions in terms of (a) a complex dialectic of ethical forms of life and sovereign-themitical order, and (b) this dialectic's biopolitical-situational ripple effect, we are in a position to appreciate that antagonism does not necessarily originate from the ideological *content* animating different human aggregates (religious vs secular), but from the 'structural' friction of Rule and Law. We may have 'religious' *or* 'secular' Rule and 'religious' *or* 'secular' Law: their antagonism is not explained by these poles' respective positionality vis-à-vis the Enlightenment, but by their inherent power dynamics. This is particularly relevant to my case study. Consider the often-antipathetic relationship between pietists and the official Islamic bureaucracy: it would be distortive to characterize the sovereign-themitical order within and against which the halal milieu moves as simply secular, humanist, and so on, for both Russian and Tatarstani state apparatuses, as well as the Tatar moral mainstream, are infused with religion (Benussi 2020; Karpov 2010).

An autonomist framework does not posit secularism, modernity, or the Enlightenment as the *cause* of the state and the moral mainstream's hostility towards ethical communities. Instead, it foregrounds Rule and Law as antagonistic yet situationally intertwined modes of subject-making: a dialectic that does not separate human aggregates into compartments, but runs across individuals and groups, which are simultaneously subjected to both. Autonomist theory charts the tension between the constituent power of the sovereign-themitical order and the destituent/emancipatory potential of forms of life. Modern governmental aversion towards religious groups is a specific instantiation, or sub-type, of a more general friction between heteronomous subject formation and the power of self-legislation, Law and Rule. This friction is not reducible to the religion-secularity distinction, as illustrated by Badiou's (2003) engagement with Christian truth-processes, Agamben's (2013*a*) reflection on monasticism, and Tiqqun's omnivorous search for emancipatory potentiality in forms of life as diverse as Aragonese rural anarchism, Sephardi messianism, or indeed Islam (Tiqqun 2011*a*: 66-7; 2011*b*: 53).

Autonomist theorists speak to the other side of the Enlightenment fault line as well, in particular to those sectors of the left – including the academic left – that tend to reject/dismiss religious phenomena as, at best, pre-political and politically inert, or, at worst, inherently reactionary (Lagalisse 2019: 58, 75-8). Autonomist thinkers invite analysts to look beyond (without either ignoring or embracing) the socially conservative values that may be expressed by piety groups, to focus instead on *the very existence of ethical forms of life as a political fact*: manifestations of truth-processes which harbour the potentiality to alter the situational status quo, unsettle sovereign power dynamics, and foster affirmative, self-governing subjectivities. It is this emancipatory potentiality that helps explain why state apparatuses have 'little patience for alternative ways of living', as my friend phrased it. In this respect, it is worth observing that while many (though not all) segments of the halal milieu could be deemed socially conservative, some pious respondents were aware of a 'meta' level at which a synergic interplay with other oppositional groups/forms of life would be possible in Russia. One respected young imam told me that despite his being, on a personal level, conservative with regard to gender and civic rights issues, he appreciated that halalists' struggles are structurally similar to those experienced not only by other minority faiths but also by queer groups and progressive milieus.

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Ambiguity or intensity?

Partly to elaborate a response to the strictures of traditionist approaches, a scholarly current in the 'ethical turn' has foregrounded 'everyday/ordinary' moral life as a site of ambiguity, pragmatism, and ambivalence (Lambek 2010), with some 'everyday' approaches highlighting a plural coexistence of moral repertoires within which subjects move, juggling multiple ethical options (Schielke 2015). Despite their analytical purchase on many real-life situations, such voices have been criticized for smuggling secular assumptions and liberal dogmas back into an 'ethical turn' that had begun with a critique of those assumptions. Analytically, 'everyday' approaches are exposed to the risks of being out of touch with forms of intense ethical commitment – the experience of individuals and communities who obstinately run against the grain of 'ordinary' morals, 'keeping going' *in spite of* setbacks and compromises.

'Everyday' approaches are palpably over-represented in the anthropology of post-Soviet Islam (Louw 2018; Rasanayagam 2011), in which the 'secularized' viewpoint of Muslims by heritage is often accepted as the default, and piety movements, by contrast, are cast as marginal or culturally inauthentic. In the case of Tatarstan, 'everyday' approaches might, indeed, smoothly map onto the way of living of non- or minimally pious Tatars – who are still a majority – but would fall short of capturing the experience of the halal milieu. This suggests that the issue here is not which side of this fault line is 'correct', but which framework is elastic enough to account for differing forms of engagement with Rule. Autonomist theory, again, offers such flexibility.

Tiqqun's above-discussed reflection about *ethical intensity* helps us recognize that not all forms of 'ethical difference' are identical – some (low-intensity) being closer to the 'everyday morality' picture, others (high-intensity) to 'ethical virtuosity' approaches. In *both* scenarios, however, Rule *does not exhaust* the complexity of moral life. Even high-intensity forms of life, as we have seen, cannot *entirely* escape the forcefield of Law. Law's positive function sustains the biopolitical order. At a fundamental biopolitical level, the 'raw matter' constituting form of life, that is, *life itself* – Badiou's 'support' of any ethical truth: the 'human animal' – remains under the spell of Law. Form of life is dialectically symmetrical to, but not insulated from, Law – just like, in Agamben's example, the Franciscan cloister was enveloped within, and structurally sustained by, the forcefield of the church. For all their prefigurative potential, forms of life remain at some level permeable to, and even dependent upon, the darker 'magic' of the market economy, the state's sovereign power, and regnant moral orders.

Thus, in Tatarstan, pietists do not stop being citizens, economic actors, and ethnic Tatars. Russia's state sovereignty, the new-fangled market economy, and Tatarstani moral discourse and its propagators (including Islamic officialdom) are the biopolitical and themitical ecosystem against-yet-within which the halal movement's form of life blossoms. As a result of the persistent force of Law, as we have seen a few pages above, pietists do make compromises in matters of governance and money. When state-issued juridical obligations run counter to religious norms but cannot be circumvented (as in the case of norms concerning insurance), they are met, with theological justifications being offered retrospectively. Even if the halal milieu's relationship with officialdom is rocky, engagements with Islamic institutions are still pursued, for instance in the sphere of halal certification (Benussi 2021*a*). And undeniably many pietists have some degree of positive engagement with mainstream moral discourses, such as Tatar ethnic pride and Russian patriotism. As Badiou explained, truth-processes unfold in the world of situations: people become subjects of truth while remaining 'human animals', faced with

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expectations and obligations towards 'the other' and grappling with the messy realities of power, domination, and interest. Navigating moral complexity is thus unavoidable, and fidelity to a truth does not exhaust moral life in its entirety, nor does it altogether eliminate ambiguity or the possibility of failure. It does, however, bind ethicalists to their truth, inspiring them to 'keep going' without allowing compromise to undermine their fidelity to the point of 'betrayal' (Badiou 2002: 78).

In sum, experiences of 'ownness' can indeed be fragile and incomplete ('we can never be completely free'), and autonomy requires constant maintenance. Nonetheless, by treasuring truth and assiduously following Rule, ethical forms of life do transcend the situational forcefield to foster autonomous, rich, 'multilateral' subjectivities. In doing so, they unsettle the themitical/biopolitical structures ordering their situational environment.

What makes an autonomist framework relevant to this set of debates is that it relieves us from the unnecessarily exclusive choice between approaches that focus on commitment and approaches that foreground ambiguity and compromise. It allows us to recognize the two as poles in a spectrum of fractious entanglement of Rule and Law, in which transcending and relativizing Law though Rule is lived as an intense manifestation of autonomy, even when heteronomy cannot be escaped altogether.

Conclusion

By placing the works of Agamben, Tiqqun, and Badiou in conversation with ethnographic insight pertaining to the halal milieu in Russia, this article has argued that autonomist theory can equip anthropologists with powerful analytical instruments for the conceptualizing of political frictions surrounding ethical projects experienced as counter-hegemonic at the societal level and emancipatory at the individual and community level. 'Emancipation' has been framed as a matter of prefigurative opening – a processual orientation towards autonomy – rather than a sociologically stable condition. Ever-incipient emancipatory processes have been found to possess observable effects on situational power dynamics as well on human subjectivities and interpersonal affective states. The analytical purchase of autonomist concepts such as form of life, the Rule/Law dialectic, and truth-process emerges in dealing with these effects. Autonomist categories can be applied across a spectrum of scenarios often pigeonholed in dichotomous categories – religious/secular, ordinary/extra-ordinary, progressive/conservative, etc. – and thus offer anthropologists of ethics and piety an opportunity to reassess some of the fault lines in our discipline under a new light.

At a minimum, this article hopes to contribute to the anthropological conversation by drawing attention to the political normativities and analytical limitations implicit, and sometimes explicit, in dominant approaches and dispositions in the 'ethical turn' (particularly, but not solely, those I called traditionist/communitarian and liberal), thereby illuminating the importance of 'keeping going' in the pursuit of fresh conceptual stimuli. I am cognizant of autonomism's own normativities and appreciate that this framework may not enjoy universal applicability; however, this conversation remains one worth having, and to that end this article invites its readers to explore, with an open mind, the possibilities of this radical philosophy's vast and nearly untapped reservoir of intellectual possibilities.

At its most ambitious, this article hopes that autonomist thought may indeed 'unsettle' and broaden the theoretical canon of the ethical turn, helping us to gain a firmer analytical grip on the power dynamics surrounding ethical/religious phenomena

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and high-intensity ethical subjectivities. This would be one more step towards a radical, politically engaged anthropology of ethics.

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NOTES

[1] This intellectual-political 'fault line' should be seen as running across (and animating) collective conversations and even the oeuvres of individual scholars. For the purposes of this article, I consider Cavellian 'everyday' approaches as sharing common 'liberal' sensibilities with post-Foucauldian approaches (Deutscher 2016).

[2] Autonomism elaborates a political alternative to both the capitalist/(neo)liberal order and bureaucratic models of organization based on Marxian orthodoxy (Virno & Hardt 1996). It sits at the intersection of communist and anarchist thought.

[3] I must point out that these authors are not a compact club, and disagreements between them have been intense. Furthermore, some may question my characterizing the post-(?)Maoist Badiou as an autonomist. I do this on the grounds of structural analogy, rather than pedigree.

[4] MacIntyre and Wittgenstein are not Asad's only influences. Foucault, Arendt (much admired by Agamben), Marx, and postcolonial critique have profoundly shaped his thought, suggesting potential resonances with the autonomist framework explored here (not to mention MacIntyre's own Marxist background).

[5] Anthropologists' engagement with communitarian thought is not synonymous with active endorsement. My point, however, is that even theories used in a detached or instrumental fashion have implications worthy of consideration.

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L'éthique émancipatrice : une lecture autonomiste des formes de vie islamiques en Russie

Résumé
Cet article propose un cadre visant à comprendre la vie politique de l'intensité éthique en mettant la théorie autonomiste en résonance avec le matériel ethnographique relatif aux milieux musulmans quiétistes au sein de la Russie post-soviétique. Le potentiel émancipateur et préfiguratif des projets collectifs d'auto-législation, le « style de vie halal » dans ce cas, est exploré à travers les notions de forme de vie éthique et de règle/loi. Il sera argumenté que la théorie autonomiste (a) est utile pour conceptualiser la friction entre les projets éthiques (même quiétistes) et les ordres moraux/politiques dominants ; (b) a le potentiel d'élargir les conversations anthropologiques sur la vertu au-delà des lignes de fracture existantes (notamment entre ce que l'auteur appelle les familles « traditionistes » et « libérales ») ainsi que les spectres conceptuels (« religion », « sécularité ») ; et (c) peut nous aider à envisager une anthropologie de l'éthique radicale et politiquement engagée.

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