Fragile Conviction
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Introduction

Ideational Power in Times of Turmoil

As we marched through the streets, I felt full of energy. It was scary when the riot police attacked us, but we managed to push back. Somehow I felt strong, and then stronger still when other groups joined us. There was a lot of cheering. I was like, Wow, I never knew that so many people were against [President] Akaev... At the time I was convinced [uveren] that what we were doing was important. For me it was about democracy and freedom, and about fighting against corruption. I was convinced that if we succeeded, things would be better... When I came home [to the shared flat] that afternoon, I found the other girls sleeping. I was amazed that they were not even aware of what was going on. [Later] they were critical of my involvement because they knew that my parents were against me being involved. But I was just amazed that they didn’t care... At that point I did not have doubts. My first doubt, as you call it, happened the day after the revolution [when shops were being looted]. We formed patrols to protect the shop owners; it was dangerous. Aigerim, who had joined [the youth movement] KelKel[1] at the same time as me, mentioned to me, “This looting was not supposed to happen.” That is when I started to doubt. Also because the atmosphere [in KelKel] had changed; it became clear that many [of its members] had joined for their own interests. For me it had been about discussing ideas and the future of our country... Maybe I was also trying to fill a void in myself; to be part of a group like this felt good. But for many of the others it was about something else, about supporting a family member or about pushing their own careers. We had these meetings [in the weeks after the Tulip Revolution].

The discussions were no longer about ideas. It was all about dividing up the trips [abroad], about who would speak where... I got fed up with it, and left. Later on I started to read about the problems with democracy [as a concept] and about NGOs and how they were financed from the West. And I was disappointed in [the new president] Bakiev. My KelKel acquaintances from back then would say, “Yes, Bakiev is terrible, but still it is good that the revolution happened.” Personally I don’t know if it was good or bad.
Mirgul’s account of her experiences with the youth movement KelKel and her involvement in the Tulip Revolution of April 2005 provides a brief reflection on a situation that was at first hopefully embraced as a means to the peaceful displacement of a corrupt government, but ultimately resulted in widespread disillusionment when the prevailing opposition leader, Kurmanbek Bakiev, instated a regime that was even more objectionable than that of his predecessor, Askar Akaev. The intensity of the event, as much as its ephemeral and ultimately disillusioning qualities, is reflective of Kyrgyzstan’s tumultuous post-Soviet political trajectory, a period in which political and religious movements and prophets thrived, usually only for brief moments.

Situated in this turbulent environment, Mirgul’s story directs attention to the mechanisms by which individuals become committed to a cause and gain certainty about the meaning and value of the ideas involved. For several weeks Mirgul had been convinced that the removal of President Akaev from office would result in more freedom and allow for a more democratic form of government, both of which were sacrosanct values to her at the time. Initially uncertain about the prospects for success, she was both surprised and emboldened by the realization that she and her fellow revolutionaries were supported in this struggle by a mass of people. In those moments she felt great clarity: the goals seemed clear and near, and motivation peaked. However, her certainty, commitment, and clarity turned out to be fleeting. When we first spoke about her experiences, three years after the revolution, she saw herself as having been terribly naive—still an undergraduate student—a young woman who had found herself caught up in the moment.

In this book I examine ideational power by focusing on the energy and momentum that are built into “flashes of conviction” like the one described by Mirgul. The focus is on the affective dimension of collective ideas, on the energy that both animates and exceeds societal structures. I analyze how ideas gain momentum when shared by a group of like-minded compatriots and the transformative potential these ideas can have when directed toward a clear goal or distinct enemy.

The brightness of the flash of conviction should, however, be examined in view of the flickering that came before and the afterglow left in its wake. That is, because conviction unfolds in real time, it needs to be looked at in relation to the doubts and hesitations that may precede or accompany
it, and the satisfactions or disillusionments that may succeed such a flash. Mirgul’s conviction was not diminished by her friends’ criticism or her parents’ disapproval. On the contrary, her sense of righteousness was intensified by their critique, just as the experience of warding off a police attack emboldened her. In fact, Mirgul’s belief in and commitment to the cause eroded only after an insider (a friend and fellow KelKel member) started to express criticism. This set in motion a series of nagging doubts that were fed by the egotistic attitude of other KelKel members and the disappointing conduct of the new government. In this process, the signifiers “freedom” and “democracy” changed meaning, now referring to careerism and disagreeable geopolitical agendas. These shifts and changes demonstrate the importance of paying due attention to the social, epistemic, and affective dimensions of the making and unmaking of temporary conviction.

By using the concept of conviction I aim to draw attention to the fluctuating intensity and quality of attitudes, motivations, and beliefs. So how does this instance of momentary political clarity compare to other forms of conviction? I could equally have started this introduction with some of the other flashes of conviction that feature prominently in this book. For example, the account of a miracle at a Pentecostal church in southern Kyrgyzstan would have illustrated the affective energies released by collective prayer. A description of the application of rhythmic sound and touch by spiritual healers would have made the bodily sensations experienced by patients palpable. A sketch of the “inspired fellowship” (Turner 2012, back cover) among Tablighi Muslims during their proselytizing trips would have provided insight into how fantastical images become experienced as real. An account of the arrival of international aid workers in a destitute mining town would have illuminated the vital connections between hope, conviction, and disillusionment.

These instances of conviction have varying intensities, rhythms, and scopes, the documentation and comparison of which will serve to bring to light the various dimensions of ideational power. But the point is also that the described pattern—the swelling of momentum, the flash of intensity, the release of energy—points at a dynamic that exceeds the particularities of each instance of conviction. Referring to this dynamic as “pulsation,” I theorize how ideational power is produced and released, and with what effects. Pulsation describes the trajectories of collective ideas whose intensity waxes and wanes over time. Moreover, as a sensitizing concept, pulsation
indexes different aspects of ideational power: the assertion of ideas (the impulse), their traction within social fields (pressure), and their rhythmical patterns (throbbing). By taking this approach I aim to understand how people become convinced, and how they cease being convinced, of concrete assertions of truth. By analyzing different examples of conviction with a focus on the impulses and resonances generated by these assertions of truth, I will explain the strengths and weaknesses of collective ideas.

These topics are explored in the context of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan at a time of economic collapse and political turmoil. The unsettling effects of “post-Soviet chaos” (Nazpary 2002) were felt with particular intensity in the mining town of Kokjiangak, where most of the fieldwork for this book took place. Located in Jalalabad Province in southern Kyrgyzstan, it had largely been built between 1930 and 1950. Kokjiangak had been a paragon of Soviet modernization, a frontier town in a largely agricultural and underdeveloped region, its inhabitants depicted in official discourse as pioneers in the establishment of a new civilization. This formerly vibrant town had fallen hard after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Half of the population emigrated, many of its buildings were dismantled, and the remaining ten thousand residents tried to make a living through informal mining, limited agricultural activities, and circular migration. Kokjiangak had come to resemble what Anna Tsing conceptualizes as chaos—“a frontier spun out of control, its proliferations no longer productive for the authorities” (2005, 43).

In these destitute conditions, new visions and ideas were actively asserted and hopefully embraced. Right after the Soviet collapse, neoshamanic practices boomed, and even two decades later there was still an impressive network of spiritual healers and visionaries in the town. From the mid-1990s onward, a range of development organizations initiated projects in Kokjiangak, but despite being enthusiastically welcomed, they often produced more disappointment than satisfaction. In the early 2000s the Pentecostal Church of Jesus Christ set up a congregation that attracted a significant following. Not much later Deobandi-inspired versions of Islam gained ground, especially among the male youth. And in 2005 there was real excitement in the weeks before, during, and after the Tulip Revolution, especially because the opposition leader (and later president) Kurmanbek Bakiev had previously lived and worked in Kokjiangak and might thus direct funds toward the town (a hope that never materialized). While new political and religious movements proved attractive in this context of
economic hardship and social fragmentation, their failure to fulfill their own promises meant that “conversions” were often temporary. By documenting and describing how people in Kokjangak specifically and Kyrgyzstan more generally encountered and engaged with a range of charismatic and millenarian movements, in this book I offer an ethnographic tribute to the post-Soviet condition of uncertainty in Central Asia.

It could be objected that the theoretical focus on fragile instances of conviction, based on research in an unstable social field, presents an atypical case that has little value apart from being an exotic curiosity. But this would be missing the point. Rather, the “extreme” features of this study throw into high relief processes that have much wider resonance. In a world where power is “no longer routed so centrally through the state” (Ferguson 2004, 394), and which is characterized not only by transnational flows but also by isolation and disconnect, the workings of ideology are changing as well. There is something suggestive about Arjun Appadurai’s argument that we are shifting from a “vertebrate” world of nation-states to a “nonvertebrate” or “cellular” world in which global flows rely on the infinite reproducibility of minimal ideological and functional principles (2006). If anything, this shift has made ideological processes less predictable and more volatile. As I have argued elsewhere, precisely because nationalisms, populisms, and fundamentalisms have become so conspicuously present over the past two decades, “it is essential not to take their strength for granted, but to examine the dynamics of conviction and doubt through which their efficacy and affective qualities are made and unmade” (Pelkmans 2013, 1). That is, the focus on the making and unmaking of conviction in a context where the state-system has come undone and its ideological framework imploded provides a valuable vantage point from which to gain deeper insight into the workings of ideology in the contemporary world more generally.

In this book, the key question is how systems of ideas become animated, that is, how they come to matter in the lives of people. The concept “ideology” refers to such systems of ideas and forms the larger conceptual backbone of the book, but this is approached through “conviction,” a useful lens for studying how ideologies are animated. “Conviction” is used to draw attention to the affective dimensions of belief, knowledge, and attitude, and suggests variation among subjects and fluctuations over time. “Ideology” foregrounds the issue of power, and thereby opens up possibilities for a political-economic analysis of ideation. Let me outline in more detail how
I employ these two contested concepts in order to lay the foundations for the conceptual framework that I develop in this book.

**Ideology: Ideas and Power**

The concept of ideology is a slippery one that has frustrated generations of scholars. A central problem is that because ultimately *all* ideas are bound up with power, the term is often considered too general to have analytical purchase. The problem can be detected even in the work of those who employ a concrete and straightforward definition of the term. Eric Wolf, for example, defines ideology as “unified schemes or configurations [of ideas] developed to underwrite or manifest power” (1999). When Wolf then applies the term to the cases in his book *Envisioning Power*, it becomes clear that he uses “ideology” at times to refer to “unified schemes” or doctrines that are actively propagated by elites, while at other times he employs it much more loosely to refer to ordered “configurations” of collective customs, practices, and ideas that indirectly “underwrite” the order of society. This is no critique of Wolf’s work but rather an observation about the different ways in which ideas and power can be woven together. After all, dominant ideas not only are advanced through explicit doctrine, but they have a material existence in state institutions or rituals, and unwittingly filter our perceptions of reality. However, the result is that “the term ideology threatens to expand to vanishing point” (Eagleton [1991] 2007).

Intriguingly, while these reflections may suggest that ideology is too pervasive to be analytically useful, a contrasting view suggests that we are living in a post-ideological era. This “end-of-ideology” position was first voiced over half a century ago, when scholars in the United States (e.g., Bell 1960) declared that “ideological distinctions” had become “devoid of social and psychological significance for most people” and that the existing abstract political ideologies “lack motivational potency and behavioral significance” (Jost 2006, 651). More recently, and more relevantly to the geopolitical context of this book, it was the erosion and then collapse of Soviet socialism that inspired ideas of the end of ideology, even “the end of history” in the sense that with the victory of capitalism there would be no longer any credible alternative ideologies left (Fukuyama 1989). Such end-of-ideology visions dovetailed with the frequently offhand depiction
of the post-Soviet era as constituting an “ideological vacuum” (Buckley 1997; Karagiannis 2009, 93). This perceived vacuum was seen as problematic and dangerous precisely because it seemed to indicate the absence of collective values, which also translated into ideas of a “spiritual vacuum” (Vorontsova and Filatov 1994) and a “moral vacuum” (Wanner 2011, 214).

Announcements of the death of ideology have always been rather contradictory, possibly because a vacuum easily becomes a site of turbulence, or, as Clifford Geertz put it, “It is a loss of orientation that most directly gives rise to ideological activity” (1973, 219). Not entirely surprising then is Terry Eagleton’s exclamation that “it is announced that the concept of ideology is now obsolete,” when in fact we are witnessing a “remarkable resurgence of ideological movements,” as he wrote in response to Francis Fukuyama’s claim about the death of ideology ([1991] 2007, xx). Writing about ideological activity in Russia during the 1990s, Eliot Borenstein aptly commented that the post-Soviet condition is more appropriately described as one of ideological excess than ideological void, and provided “fertile ground for fantasies of an apocalypse” (1999, 439, 447). But this ideological excess, which refers to the conspicuous presence of nationalist, market, developmental, and religious visions, also suggests the fragility of each single ideology and the lack of a stable and dominant ideological framework.

What are we to do with these opposing stances concerning the ideology concept and the contradictory views about the role of ideology in the contemporary world? To clarify the discussion it is useful to momentarily adopt Slavoj Žižek’s distinction between three modes of ideological operation: ideology in-itself, ideology for-itself, and ideology reflected into itself. The first, ideology in-itself, is the most explicit incarnation of ideology, which refers to the active assertion of “a doctrine, a composite of ideas, beliefs, concepts and so on, destined to convince us of its ‘truth’” (Žižek 1994, 10). Second and somewhat more indirect are the “institutions, rituals and practices” that give “body” to ideology, rather similar to what Althusser ([1971] 2008) refers to as “ideological state apparatus” and includes all institutions (such as schools, museums, courts, regulatory bodies, etc.) that play a role in reproducing state ideology, whether directly or indirectly. Finally, ideology as “reflected into itself” refers to the “quasi-‘spontaneous’ presuppositions and attitudes” of self-declared non-ideological practices (Žižek 1994, 15). This ideological mode of operation is more or less what Bourdieu refers to as doxa, as that which “goes without saying because
it comes without saying” (1977, 167–69). The point of bringing up these distinctions is to suggest, not only that those who speak about the absence of ideology and those who speak about its omnipresence might actually be talking about different modes of ideological power, but also that the relative weight of these different modes depends on the nature of society and the position of the relevant collective ideas within it.

In stable and well-integrated political systems the dominant ideas tend to be internalized and naturalized, making ideological work less conspicuous. For example, Žižek argues that in late capitalism the weight of “ideology as such is diminished: individuals do not act as they do primarily on account of their beliefs or ideological convictions—that is to say, the system . . . bypasses ideology in its reproduction and relies on economic coercion, legal and state regulations, and so on.” But although “ideology has moved to the background [it] has by no means disappeared” (1994, 14–15). Rather, precisely because the dominant ideas have become part and parcel of people’s common sense, they can be reproduced almost invisibly through the ideological state apparatus. Thus, what Daniel Bell (1960) and Fukuyama (1989) referred to as the “end-of-ideology” could also be seen as the epitome of ideological efficiency, of the temporary hegemony of a specific set of ideas within a particular sociopolitical configuration. In such a situation “dominant power” does not need to rally a population behind a greater cause or convince people to defend “the truth,” but instead can rely on their pragmatic acquiescence.10 The flipside of this is that the more ideology is naturalized—the more it comes to be taken for granted—the less it is able to directly motivate the sentiments and actions of people. Therefore, despite all the problems of Bell’s end-of-ideology thesis, there is value in his implicit suggestion that there are situations in which ideologies no longer act as sets of belief capable of being “infused with passion” (1960).

By contrast, in situations of sociopolitical fragmentation and rapid societal change “ideology” moves to the foreground. This means that existing ideologies become denaturalized, first because in unstable situations the dominance of dominant power cannot be taken for granted, and second because ideology-infused common sense is challenged by changing circumstances. This may easily lead to the explicit defense as well as radicalization of dominant ideas.11 Post-Soviet Central Asian corollaries are easy to point out. A good example of the intensification of dominant ideas would be the Stalin-style cult of personality that developed in Turkmenistan in
the 1990s, in which the country’s first president appeared as a latter-day Islamic prophet leading his chosen nation (see Hann and Pelkmans 2009). Different but equally conspicuous is the futuristic redesigning of Kazakhstan’s capital, Astana, sometimes described as the “Dubai of the steppe,” a glorification of ideas of modernity that are firmly rooted in the Soviet project (Buchli 2007; Laszczkowski 2011).

Similar state-directed tendencies toward “extreme expression” have been present in Kyrgyzstan, but none obtained semihegemonic status. Instead, the ideological landscape became more radically fragmented and was therefore frequently depicted as an “ideological vacuum,” which, as we have seen, is simultaneously the terrain of ideology par excellence. That is to say, Kyrgyzstan essentially developed into a laboratory for testing out ideologies. Indeed, it was seen as a frontier and “mission field” by evangelicals, pious Muslims, and (secular) development specialists. Precisely because none of the advanced visions could rely on a stable ideological (state) apparatus, they became at once more conspicuous and volatile. The most disturbing example of this in Kyrgyzstan’s recent history is the 2010 conflict, when ideas of ethnic purity, feeding on political and economic tensions, radicalized with such speed that towns and cities across the south of the country erupted in massive violence, resulting in hundreds of casualties (see chapter 1). In other words, when power fields are unstable, ideology becomes denaturalized, but this fragility of ideology simultaneously triggers its reassertion resulting in an ideological excess. From this perspective, Kyrgyzstan is a particularly interesting case in which to observe the workings of conviction in a “post-ideological” world and to draw attention to conviction’s fragility.

Conviction: Power of Ideas

The concept of ideology is usually associated with dominant power, but dominance is not what makes ideas powerful in the sense of potent or effervescent. In fact, there appears to be a partially inverse relationship between the “strength” (or tenacity) of ideology and its “potency” (as the ability to move people to action). This tension needs to be kept in mind when focusing on conviction. The “energized state” that I am trying to capture has been explored by many others, through the perspectives of charisma, collective effervescence, communitas, and affect. In their own
specific ways, each of these terms tries to capture the emotive “energy” that is produced in the connections between individuals (such as leaders and followers), within liminal groups (made up of equals), and between humans and their environment. In this book I will make use of the insights generated through these approaches while applying them to the relationship between subjects and collective ideas.

There are several reasons why I propose *conviction* as the conceptual focus for a study of ideational power instead of using the more common alternatives. The first is that conviction connects the fields of religion and politics better than related terms such as “belief” or “opinion.” Second, more so than opinion, disposition, attitude, and knowledge, the term “conviction” makes the affective dimension of the relationship between subject and ideas palpable. It is for this reason that I avoid the term in the plural, because to speak of people’s religious or political convictions would be a labeling exercise characteristic of “topographic approaches” instead of an approach that is able to capture “processes” (Crapanzano 2004, 8). It is in the singular that the affective dimension comes to the fore, as conveyed when we refer to someone as being “full of conviction,” another one as “lacking conviction,” and a preacher (or politician or car salesman) as “speaking with conviction,” that is, with clarity and purpose. The goal of this book is to understand how this quality of conviction is gained and lost, and to which actions or inactions this may lead.

In exploring the connections between people and collective ideas, Althusser’s theory of interpellation ([1971] 2008) is a useful point of reference. His famous example, or “theoretical scene,” of interpellation is that of a police officer who hails (interpellates) a person in the street by calling out “Hey, you,” on which the person recognizes being addressed and turns around. In the moment of turning, that is, in the submissive response to the voice of ideology, the person is (re)produced as a subject through a process of mutual recognition. Althusser depicts interpellation as an internal process in which individuals “are always-already subjects” (46, italics in the original); that is, he presents ideological interpellation as an unfailling mechanism in the production of subjects. This suggests, quite clearly, that Althusser works with a concept of society in which different tenets of ideology form a coherent whole that is durably integrated with the socioeconomic fabric of that society. Unfortunately, this seamless depiction of interpellation is unhelpful for understanding of ideational power in
fragmented ideological landscapes, where the ideological state apparatus has collapsed and/or where new ideologies assert themselves. The question, therefore, is how can we make productive use of the idea of interpellation (without necessarily clinging to the term itself) and apply it to fragmented ideological landscapes?

I argue that the three elements of interpellation—the voice of ideology, the response of the listener, and the mutual recognition—need to stay at the center of analysis, while rejecting the assumptions that permeate Althusser’s writing. Whereas for Althusser the “voice of ideology” is quintessentially that of the state, we need to look at concrete and nonhegemonic assertions of religious, political, and economic truths. While Althusser seems to assume that the listener’s response is conditioned by guilt and a concomitant desire for the law, this needs to be complemented with attention to the more immediate needs and desires that make subjects reach out to certain instantiations of ideology and ignore or reject others. And while for Althusser the outcome of interpellation is one of blanket submission, we need to ponder possibilities such as ideological ambivalence and rejection (by “bad subjects”) or enthusiastic embrace (by neophytes, for example), and study its variation within a population, as well as how this changes over time.

I use the concept of pulsation for exactly this purpose: to explore the instability of the links between these elements without presuming the effect of the configuration and moreover to draw attention to the generative capacity of ideology as opposed to assuming a finalized result. Pulsation is first of all about the impulse or the voice of ideology: the proclamations of a future of abundance through the neoliberal gospel; of health and prosperity for those who accept Jesus in their hearts; of peace and happiness for those who follow the ways of the Prophet. This also makes one wonder about the kind of impulses that were generated by assertions of “scientific atheism,” and how this may be related to the difficulties in producing devoted atheists (see chapter 3). As Thomas Csordas has argued (2007, 261), some messages are better transposable and certain practices more portable, something that has immediate relevance for the ability to bind and invigorate new and old subjects.

This brings us to the second aspect of pulsation, namely that the impulse needs to trigger a meaningful response. I argue that the voice of ideology can gain traction only when there is a productive tension. Whether we take Marx’s view that the articulation of protest starts with the “sigh of the
oppressed creature” ([1844] 2002, 171) or follow Foucault’s argument that “where there is desire, the power relation is already present” (1978, 81), for the voice of ideology to be heard there needs to be a gap between a desired horizon and a detested reality. The Tablighis and Pentecostals promised to release people from the bonds of slavery caused by addiction and illness; the development specialists proclaimed that they would end poverty; the revolutionary leaders that they would bring an end to corruption. Moreover, the voice of ideology can only produce commitment and conviction for as long as its utopian horizon is seen as realistic and in reach.15

Finally, pulsation refers to the rhythmic fluctuation (or resonance) that the mutual recognition may produce. This can be seen as a form of Emile Durkheim’s collective effervescence, in which people’s “very act of congregating [generates] a sort of electricity [that] launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation” (1915, 217–18). Or, to use Victor Turner’s term *communitas*, it is among equals who temporarily come together in situations of liminality that we find the highest levels of commitment and conviction (1969). While acknowledging the value of these older works, in this book I emphasize that the buildup and release of such affective energies is a precarious affair plagued by contradictions. Throughout the book, I explore the ideological fervor generated among church congregations, religious travel groups, and revolutionaries. Similar to Durkheim’s collective effervescence and Turner’s *communitas*, these intense experiences of togetherness tended to be limited in duration, as were the clarity of vision, the commitment to a goal, and the conviction of truth that accompanied the experiences.

Pulsation triggers many questions, including about what kinds of collective ideas are attractive under what conditions, and about how communal bonds may generate conviction. As has been pointed out above, not only do ideological voices assert themselves most explicitly and forcefully in contexts of fragmentation and crisis, it is also then that mutual recognition is particularly fragile. All this makes a comparative analysis of different ideological “voices” in such contexts particularly worthwhile.

The Book

It is now more than twenty years ago that I first ended up in Kyrgyzstan. At the time of my first visit I was an undergraduate student in anthropology
who spent his summers traveling through Eastern Europe. One of those
was the summer of 1994, when a friend and I hitchhiked from Amsterdam
to Warsaw, took a train to Moscow, and there, although lacking the nec-
essary visas, bought tickets for a train that took us through Kazakhstan to
Kyrgyzstan’s capital, Bishkek, where we arrived seventy-two hours later. Kyrgyzstan had been independent for merely three years and was going
through a deep economic crisis. People were struggling, nostalgic about
the past, but also hopeful about the future.

Intrigued by the people I met and the challenges they faced, I decided to
return the following year to carry out five months of fieldwork for my mas-
ter’s thesis, which I did in the provincial city of Karakol in northeastern
Kyrgyzstan. Back then I was primarily interested in people’s adjustments
to, and interpretations of, the new market economy. This specialization
landed me a job with the United Nations Development Programme
(UNDP) in 1998, when I was tasked with setting up a poverty alleviation
program in Jalalabad Province (oblast’). It was during this one-year stay
that I also began to work in Kokjangak, the mining town that later would
become my primary field site.

When I realized that international development was not my calling,
I decided not to renew my contract and moved away from Central Asia
to conduct my PhD research in the Georgian border region with Turkey.
Chance had it that in 2003 I returned to Kyrgyzstan to study missionary
encounters and dynamics of religious conversion, as part of a Max Planck
Institute for Social Anthropology research program on religion and civil
society. Much of the research data presented in this book was collected
during this fourteen-month fieldwork period. However, the materials for
several topics (chapter 3 on atheism and chapter 4 on Tablighi Islam) were
collected during shorter research visits (totaling six months) between 2008
and 2013. In fact, it was only during those later years that my earlier in-
terests in (political and economic) uncertainty and my subsequent interests
in (religious) beliefs and practices came together in a project on convic-
tion, that is, in a project that connects the anthropology of politics and of
religion.

I recount my personal trajectory because it has contributed significantly
to the shape of this book. The relatively long duration of research has al-
lowed me to relate the events and encounters that form the empirical core
of most chapters to the slower-paced shifts and changes of Kyrgyzstan’s
ideological landscape (see especially chapter 1). My long-term involvement has also made it possible to make an informed selection of ethnographic cases to illuminate complementary aspects of the dynamics of conviction.

It would have been possible to present this book as a contribution to the study of religion, given the attention to changes in the religious landscape throughout, and the inclusion of two chapters about concrete religious movements—the Tablighi Jamaat in chapter 4 and a Pentecostal church in chapter 5. However, such a framing would push the chapter that focuses on neoliberalism and nationalism (chapter 1) to the margins, and leave those on atheism (chapter 3) and spiritual healing (chapter 6) hanging in an uncomfortable position. But the issue has ramifications beyond those of textual organization. The point is, as Maurice Bloch has argued, that “no valid theoretical distinction can be made between the transcendental social and the ‘religious’” (2013, ix). Setting it apart from what he calls the “transactional social,” the transcendental, for Bloch, refers to those aspects of life that draw on the imagination, whether we tend to categorize these as social, political, or religious (Bloch 2008, 2060). And that is ultimately what this book is about: documenting the ways in which people orient themselves to transcendental values and utopian horizons, following the trajectories of collective imaginations in uncertain conditions, observing how existential, epistemological, and ontological concerns merge in the struggle for a livable future.

This, then, brings us back to Mirgul’s story of the Tulip Revolution with which this introduction began. The story highlighted the role of the transcendental in political struggle and emphasized that conviction is ultimately about the epistemic, emotive, and social processes that propel the connection with a utopian horizon. When Mirgul reached out to the ideas of democracy and freedom, she did so by identifying with a group of like-minded others who attempted to realize a common goal. This utopian horizon receded, indeed revealed itself as a ploy for careerist and geopolitical interests, as soon as the revolution was won and the group of revolutionaries disbanded. The ideas of democracy and freedom turned out to be moving targets—“floating signifiers”—with increasingly disillusioning qualities. As such, this story was also about the volatile context, one in which political and religious movements emerged and receded, in which hope and disillusionment quickly followed each other. It is to this topic that I now turn.