Part I

Uncertain Times and Places
Located in the middle of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan’s capital, Ala-Too Square stands out for its immensity and emptiness. Created in 1984 to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), it was designed to accommodate oversized state spectacles and military parades. The square is traversed by two parallel roads and lined with buildings covered in marble: a massive cube that houses the National History Museum to the north; the presidential office building, or White House, behind a row of poplars in the northwest; arched white buildings along the square’s east and west flanks; and, to the south, the robust Ministry of Agriculture, behind which the snow-covered Ala-Too Mountains can be seen on clear, smog-free days.

If a time-lapse video had been made of the square between 1984 and the present day, it would reveal meaningful details about the political rhythms and their transformations in Kyrgyzstan over those three decades. During the first seven years of coverage, the video would draw attention to the yearly Victory Day celebrations and October Revolution
parades that punctuated time in what was then a quiet, Soviet provincial backwater. Those expecting to see turbulence in the period directly before or after Kyrgyzstan gained independence, on August 31, 1991, would be disappointed—the square remained eerily quiet, a visual indicator of the reticence and wariness with which the political elite and the population at large greeted the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.\(^1\) The economic crisis of the 1990s caused the square to deteriorate, leaving the fountains waterless and causing the pavement to crack open, which even the colorful new state spectacles such as those on Independence Day could not conceal. It was not until the turn of the century that the square began to play a more active role in the public life of the newly independent country. Collective prayers started to fill the square at the end of Ramadan (orozo ait) and the Feast of the Sacrifice (kurban ait), marking the return of Islam to public life and triggering debate about the proper place of religion in an ostensibly secular state. In this period the square also became an important site for expressing political discontent, featuring frequent demonstrations and meetings, and forming the center stage of two revolutions. During the largely peaceful Tulip Revolution of March 2005, the square was occupied by students and others dressed in pink and yellow shirts, before groups of young men stormed and occupied the White House (Lewis 2008, 142). Similarly, in April 2010 the square filled up just before the grand finale, when demonstrations culminated in an open clash with security forces, resulting in a battle in which at least eighty-six people lost their lives and numerous buildings around the square were burned down.

These public events are suggestive of the rhythms of Kyrgyz political life, and the issues that fueled collective action. We will return to these events, but not before considering the more slow-paced ideological currents that informed them. To gain an overview of these slower trends we could do worse than to take our time-lapse video camera and zoom in on the three statues that successively occupied the square’s central fifteen-meter-high pedestal. In 1984, the first statue to adorn what was then still named the Lenin Square was, unsurprisingly, a statue of Lenin, ten meters tall and with his outstretched right arm pointing southward toward the Ala-Too mountain range. What is unique about this Lenin is that he remained standing on his pedestal long after 1991. While in the following months and years Lenins were being removed from the central squares of most Soviet successor state capitals, Bishkek’s Lenin ended up
having a longer post-Soviet than Soviet life by the time he was moved in 2003. Then, at midday on August 16, Lenin was carefully lifted from his pedestal, watched in silent protest by only a handful of people waving a flag of the USSR. But instead of being destroyed, Lenin was reinstalled only a hundred meters away behind the National History Museum, placed on a lower pedestal, faced northward, with his outstretched hand pointing to the Jogorku Kenesh (parliament) and the American University of Central Asia.

Back on Ala-Too Square, the statue replacing Lenin was the Erkindik (Liberty) statue, modeled after the Greek goddess of liberty but given a Kyrgyz face and holding in her outstretched hand not a torch but a tunduk, the wooden centerpiece of the roof of a yurt and symbol of the Kyrgyz nation. It might be fitting that Erkindik oversaw two revolutions (in 2005 and 2010), but this was a “liberty” quite different from what Akaev, Kyrgyzstan’s first president, had envisioned when he commissioned the statue. Erkindik had been designed to underscore the values of democracy and
sovereignty that Akaev’s government had promoted since independence, and which had earned the country the international reputation as an “island of democracy” in the mid-1990s. However, as soon as Erkindik was placed on her pedestal, she started to draw criticism, ranging from objections to her short-sleeved dress that revealed too much bare bronzed skin and was therefore deemed non-Kyrgyz and un-Islamic, to the complaint that holding the tunduk is a sacrosanct act reserved for elderly men, and suspicion that the president’s wife had been the model for Erkindik’s face (see Cummings 2013, 612–13).

Plans to replace Erkindik were made under the authoritarian presidency of Kurmanbek Bakiev, who had come to power after the Tulip Revolution of 2005 and was ousted in Kyrgyzstan’s second revolution, in 2010. Bakiev had consulted with advisers and artists about the construction of a new statue, but “most of the concepts put forward were too local or marginal, and thus unsustainable and unworkable at a national level” (Morozova 2008, 19). As a result, Erkindik remained on the square until 2011, when she was unceremoniously removed and replaced by the solid national hero Manas, who was seated in full armor on his mighty stallion.

Manas was a legendary medieval king who had united the forty Kyrgyz tribes to lead them to victory on the battlefield, as narrated in the Epic of Manas. This epic poem developed over centuries, and although several versions have been written down since the late nineteenth century, it continues to be recited orally by narrators called manaschi. Since independence, the epic and its hero have become a key symbol of the nation-building effort, increasingly presented as the epitome of Kyrgyz culture (van der Heide 2008). Despite official attempts to boost Manas’s internationalist credentials, this Kyrgyz symbol was ultimately exclusionary for many of the republic’s non-Kyrgyz citizens (see also Wachtel 2013, 977). The Manas statue, designed by a Kyrgyz sculptor and cast in bronze in Moscow, was said to have arrived in Kyrgyzstan in 2011 on Kadyr-tun (the holy night of the Ramadan) and was unveiled during Orozo ait, cleverly tapping into a combination of religious and nationalist sentiment that had become increasingly prominent during the preceding years.

The passing away of the communist Lenin, who made way for the liberal Erkindik, who in turn was replaced by the national hero Manas, provides one glimpse of the ideological shifts that unfolded in Kyrgyzstan. But while the succession of statues reflects broader ideological currents, it
does so in a rather out-of-sync manner. Thus, Lenin entered the square at a moment when the Soviet Union was already in decline, and he outlived the USSR by more than a decade. Likewise, Erkindik was erected in 2003 when the “freedom” buzz of the 1990s had lost its allure and “democratic” president Akaev had become increasingly autocratic, only two years before he was ousted in the Tulip Revolution. Finally, although the medieval Manas with his message of Kyrgyzness was supposed to be timeless, he entered the square after Kyrgyz nationalism had shown its dark side during clashes with the Uzbek minority in June 2010, and after the new government had pledged to promote an inclusive model of statehood.3

Statues, and certainly statues on the central squares of capital cities, carry significant symbolic weight. They are designed to root state ideology in territory (literally anchoring it to the soil), to make abstract ideas concrete (even give them a face), and to allow otherwise fleeting messages to transcend time (by making them immemorial). These are some of the reasons why the toppling of prominent statues—Saddam Hussein in Baghdad, Lenin in Kiev—are powerful symbolic gestures that mark the end of epochs, bold
acts that desacralize former leaders or ideologies (Verdery 1999; Grant 2001). Similarly, the erection of a new statue can be a powerful act of inaugurating a new beginning or marking a passage. Clearly these potentials informed the rotation of statues on Ala-Too Square; they were erected and removed to signal ideological change and to legitimate state power. However, the delays in the removal of Lenin and then Erkindik, and the belatedness, whether in arrival or departure, of all three statues, illustrate the difficulties that successive regimes experienced in gaining and maintaining symbolic hegemony. If we agree with Philip Abrams (1988) that the “nature of state power lay first and foremost in its ideational force, as a discursive effect of political discourse” (Grant 2001, 336; see also Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, 322–23), then the awkward dance of statues on Ala-Too Square revealed the difficulty of producing a “state idea” able to infuse a sufficiently sacred aura, one providing the legitimacy and authority necessary for effective government. Indeed, Lenin’s belated removal and the ridiculing of Erkindik, as well as Erkindik’s and Manas’s untimely arrivals, highlighted the precariousness of producing symbols sufficiently encompassing and powerful to connect with the population at large and instill a sense of inclusion and purpose.

So what was being symbolized? I already noted that the succession of socialist, liberalist, and nationalist statues reflected real changes in the larger ideological landscape, even if the timing was off. But there is more to it. Lenin’s gaze projected a communist utopia onto the Kyrgyz horizon, his arm gesturing the people toward this bright future. By contrast, Erkindik’s message of liberty failed to outline a future, relying instead on the universal trope of “freedom” that was as detached from the local reality as she herself was floating through the air. And Manas—well, he stands firmly on the ground, but his gaze is primarily directed into a mythical past determined by kinship relations. The succession of statues, then, suggests the gradual loss of political vision, the erosion of progressive civic ideology. Moreover, while Lenin reached out to all nations, such an encompassing stance remained unrealized by his successors. Erkindik mixed Kyrgyz particularity with a universal vision of freedom but did so unsuccessfully, while the archetypal Kyrgyz hero Manas represented an ethnic world with which few Russians, Uzbeks, or representatives of other minorities identified. The statues seem to have become not only increasingly shortsighted but also exclusionary, changes that, as we will see, have had real-time parallels in Kyrgyzstan’s recent political history.
Obviously none of the above claims, which are based on a reading of just three statues, should be taken at face value. Instead they should be seen as hypotheses to be examined by following the trajectories of socialism, (neo) liberalism, and nationalism in the post-Soviet period. In the remainder of this chapter I explore how these ideologies translated into political practice, and analyze the tensions between rhetoric and reality that has characterized Kyrgyzstan’s so-called transition. Moreover, by connecting the succession of statues to the political events unfolding on the square and beyond we can see how Kyrgyzstan’s unraveling transition became interspersed with recurrent eruptions of political turmoil. This complex relationship provides insight into the reconfigurations of political and social space in the decades that followed the Soviet collapse.

Projections of Transition

“Transition” has the dubious honor of being one of the terms used most frequently to characterize post-Soviet trajectories, both by those who lived through the period and by those who observed and wrote about it. Although the dictionary meaning of “transition” is simply a period of change from one to another relatively stable situation, in its application to post-socialist countries, “transition” obtained distinct teleological qualities, that is, the observed changes were all viewed in relation to a predetermined final endpoint. As others have noted, transition ideas were essentially a slightly modified version of modernization theory, both of which convey a linear progressive and teleological kind of thinking, assuming the final stage to be a version of market democracy (e.g., Carothers 2002).

These assumptions drove the reform agenda of the first independent government of Kyrgyzstan headed by President Askar Akaev. In the early 1990s, when the country was on the brink of economic collapse, Akaev’s government opted for a transition strategy of “shock therapy” and closely cooperated with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and various multilateral development institutions to carry out a comprehensive structural adjustment program. The reforms included the liberalization of markets, the privatization of property, and the reduction of welfare programs. Kyrgyzstan introduced its own currency in May 1993, and by mid-1997 it had privatized approximately two-thirds of the state
sector (Anderson 1999, 71). Preparations for this comprehensive restructuring of the economy were carried out in close cooperation with international organizations. To illustrate, over 50 percent of bills passed through parliament in the 1990s were drafted by international organizations and international NGOs (Cooley and Ron 2002, 19). No surprise then that Kyrgyzstan became essentially the poster child for the Washington consensus. For example, a high-ranking Western diplomat commented in 1994 that “politically, Kyrgyzstan is light-years ahead of the other new republics. Economically, it is carefully and methodically preparing the way for a market economy.”

Although international pressure on Kyrgyzstan’s government to adopt the structural adjustment package was significant, it would be wrong to see the Akaev government as merely a passive recipient of an externally imposed neoliberal agenda. In fact the president was a very vocal spokesperson of (neo) liberal ideology (Anderson 1999, 81). Possibly his rather excessive references to former US presidents such as Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson (Akaev 1993, 9, 18; see also McGlincy 2011, 87; Cummings 2013) were intended to impress US donors, but they were also indicative of the kind of future society he envisioned. A good example is a published speech from 1993 in which Akaev presented a straightforward view of the direction of transition. He started by positing that Kyrgyzstan would have been prosperous if not for “some irrational path in history” due to which the country spent “seventy years . . . in the grip of a totalitarian system” (1993, 10–11). The way to rectify this perceived historical travesty was full-out liberalization: religious freedom, political freedom, economic freedom (1993, 11–12). This was neoliberalism in almost its purest form, which optimistically hoped (or naively assumed) that when given “freedom,” society would rid itself of the imposed “irrationalities” and be guided by a natural or intrinsic drive toward the final destination of liberal modernity.

The labels by which Kyrgyzstan came to be known, such as the “Switzerland of Central Asia” and “island of Democracy,” referred not just to the economic sphere but also to the promotion of “freedom of information, a free press, and freedom of association” (Akaev 1993, 22), which had resulted in a significantly more pluralistic media landscape than existed in neighboring countries, and the emergence of a range of nongovernmental organizations. Attracted by this liberal environment were not only
numerous (secular) development organizations, but many organizations with political and religious agendas as well, creating anxiety among the political establishment and the population at large, and triggering calls for regulation. It soon became clear to the political elite that the challenge was to ensure that this emerging “civil society” would indeed remain “civil” and make a positive contribution to the common good. The government was particularly concerned about interethnic stability and cooperation, a sensitive topic because of recent clashes (in 1990) between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks and because of the “brain drain” of emigrating Russians and Germans. The topic became a central tenet of Akaev’s political ideology, and was reflected in his slogan “Kyrgyzstan—our common home,” which was meant to convey that all inhabitants of the republic, irrespective of their ethno-national and religious background, were an integral part of the newly independent country:

I would propose the following philosophy. Your country is your home. Thus, our Kyrgyzstan is our common home. Indeed, it has been built by all of us, including Kyrgyz, Russians, Uzbeks, Germans, Jews, Uyghurs, Koreans, and Karachays. They built it without any doubt that they will live in this home as a single family in friendship and harmony, for eternity. (Akaev 1995, 97, in Murzakulova and Schoeberlein 2009, 1238)

This idea of a “common home” in which all nations contribute to the development of a harmonious society bears a strong resemblance to Soviet internationalism. As Asel Murzakulova and John Schoeberlein have pointed out, this was a “vision of a civic nation in the good traditions of the Soviet intelligentsia” (2009, 1238). In fact, ten years earlier Mikhail Gorbachev had used the exact same phrase to refer to the USSR. But if Gorbachev had invoked “our common home” in order to smooth over ethnic tensions that erupted in the mid-1980s in the Caucasus and the Baltics especially, in Akaev’s case there was an built-in tension. His internationalist references coincided with the particularistic effort of building an ethno-nation around the Kyrgyz majority, not least by elevating the mythical figure Manas as the key symbol of Kyrgyz nationhood.

Kyrgyzstan’s secular leaders had expected that in the “postatheist” era, the return of religion would serve to strengthen the moral fabric of society and underpin the cultural historical traditions of the population. In
one of his commentaries on the topic, Akaev summarized his views on the position of Islam in Kyrgyzstan as follows: “Here in Kyrgyzstan Islam was assimilated in a rather untraditional form. What we see here are the outward trappings of Islam without the exalted religious fanaticism and ideology. On the other hand, our brand of Islam absorbed many of the cultural traditions of the peoples in the region. . . . Our brand of Islam can play a stabilizing, consolidating role.” As we will see, however, this view was to be shaken as the years progressed, when it turned out that interest in “traditional” versions of Islam (and Christianity) remained subdued, while new religious movements quickly gained in importance and visibility.

It is important to remember the distinct spirit of optimism and possibility that existed in the early 1990s, as also David Lewis (2008) has observed. For a few years there was a real sense that things would improve quickly. In 1995, many of my acquaintances did not doubt that the transition to capitalism and democracy would be completed, even if they quibbled as to whether it would take five, ten, or as long as twenty years. But as time progressed, not only did the imagined endpoint recede further into the future, the country turned out to be moving in a very different direction. Despite economic liberalization, the anticipated (and promised) foreign investments never arrived. The loss of jobs was presented as a temporary setback, a side effect of the transition, but the reality was that stable formal employment remained rare even twenty-five years later. And although the Akaev government presented Kyrgyzstan as a “common home” for all nationalities, approximately half the population belonging to its minorities left the country for good.

One of the key problems with the economic reform programs, as also Janine Wedel has observed (2001), was that the Washington consensus did not sufficiently take into consideration the preexisting power relations, pretending instead that one can build a market economy through deregulation. Ignored were the tensions unleashed by privatization and the deep inequalities that the “free market” produced. And to assume that a cooperative heterogeneous population would emerge on the basis of an ideal of “international citizenship” was to ignore the tensions that afflict nation-state building. What thus needs to be analyzed is how former Soviet reality became refracted through the prism of the two grand narratives that were advanced in the 1990s and the 2000s: liberalism and nationalism. Crucially, the tropes of liberalism and nationalism became interwoven
with the policies and laws of independent Kyrgyzstan, and affected how citizens experienced their own position in relation to the Kyrgyz state.

Privatization Chaos

When Kyrgyzstan embarked on a path of radical reform, the aim was to become an affluent market democracy in five to ten years. But while in the mid-1990s Kyrgyzstan counted as a hope-inspiring (neo-) liberal beacon in the region, twenty years later it had become an example of transition gone hopelessly wrong. Although it had been “doing everything right” from the perspective of the international community (Connery 2000, 4), the “shock therapy” strategy failed to attract major investors or result in sustainable economic growth. Poverty levels remained high despite a slow recovery in macroeconomic terms since the late 1990s; in 2003 real GDP was still only 78 percent of what it had been in 1989 (Pomfret 2006, 108). The accumulation of foreign debt during fifteen years of “transition” was staggering, to the extent that in 2006 the country met the criteria for access to the IMF and World Bank’s Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative. Two decades after gaining independence, Kyrgyzstan was at the bottom of former Soviet republics in terms of economic indicators, ranked among the most corrupt countries in the world, and had become politically volatile.

The reasons for this turn of events were many, but the most important ones can be illustrated by returning to the problematic assumptions of transition. Of the many critics of transition thinking, Thomas Carothers (2002) has been the most systematic in documenting the assumptions on which transition thinking was based, including, first, that the starting conditions and other specifics of “transitional countries” matter very little for the onset or the outcome of the transition process (8); second, that these transitions “are being built on coherent, functioning states” (8–9); and third, that fast reform is superior to gradual reform (see also Spoor 1995, 54, 61; Wedel 2001). The case of Kyrgyzstan dramatically illustrates the problems with these assumptions, which together demonstrate the fallacy of the overarching assumption, namely that “any country moving away from dictatorial rule can be considered a country in transition towards democracy” (Carothers 2002, 6), to eventually become a market democracy modeled on the North American example.
As has become more than obvious since, the starting conditions of individual countries have massively affected their post-Soviet trajectories. In fact, the economic prospects for an independent Kyrgyzstan had never been good. During Soviet times its economy had been based largely on agriculture and animal husbandry, coupled with coal and metallurgic mining activities as well as the production of components for the military industry. It lacked the natural riches of its neighbors such as oil and gas and had relied on a steady flow of subsidies from Moscow throughout the Soviet period. After independence, not only did the subsidies stop, but the mostly Russian markets for several of Kyrgyzstan’s main commodities—meat, wool, machinery components, refined sugar—imploded with the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It is no big mystery why “transition countries” with close proximity to the European Union (such as the Baltic countries) fared considerably better, and why in the Central Asian context, the two countries that lacked substantial natural resources (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) became not only the poorest post-Soviet republics but also the ones with the weakest state structures.

This brings us to the second point, the assumption that transition was built on functioning states. In reality, Kyrgyzstan’s state system crumbled and fragmented under the weight of “transition.” Talking about the upper echelons of Kyrgyz politics, Eric McGlinchey writes that “Kyrgyzstan’s political mess is one of chaos” (2011, 2). He argues that because Kyrgyzstan lacked sufficiently large economic resources, the government was unable to buy the loyalty of its fragmented elite, resulting in considerable political instability (80–113). Actually, the problem extended far beyond the elite groups that McGlinchey focuses on. During much of the 1990s, the state was unable to pay its employees in health care, taxation, education, policing, and administration the kind of salaries that would meet minimum living costs, and often failed to pay out salaries for months on end. As Catherine Alexander (2009) has argued, for Kazakhstan in the 1990s this had the effect of the social contract coming undone, with the state losing its legitimacy. This resulting erosion of civil service was counteracted by a strengthening of informal ties, which increasingly personalized the state.

An interesting illustration of these processes is in Aksana Ismailbekova’s book Blood Ties and the Native Son (forthcoming), which gives a detailed analysis of the political trajectory of Rahim, an aspiring leader in northern Kyrgyzstan. For Rahim to advance his political career the key issue is to
extend his kinship-based support network by becoming regionally seen as a “native son,” that is, as someone who will respectfully honor and reciprocate the support received from his home base. Perhaps ironically, these bonds of kinship and locality were solidified at moments that also symbolized capitalism and democracy: in the course of privatizing a factory, as the result of grants received from international development organizations, and especially on election days. Showing how these processes unfold in the context of “transition,” Ismailbekova argues that kinship-based patronage practices should not be seen as the antithesis of democracy but rather as part of the development of *vernacular democracy* with specific Kyrgyz features.

Finally, there is the issue of “fast” versus “gradual” reform. In Central Asia and more widely across the former Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan counted as a fast reformer. But when in 1995 I talked with a group of Kyrgyz farmers about privatization, they told me: “If they [the government] would have privatized [all the assets] right away in 1991, we would have had thriving farms, but instead they waited, then they changed their minds, and in the meantime everything fell apart.” These farmers were probably right in some respects, but the point is that a fast reform was never going to succeed in a situation in which the state system lacked the strength, coherence, and will to pull off a massive overnight transformation. Moreover, while the state system lacked willpower, the uncertainty and confusion about the direction of change fostered short-term rent seeking by those ordinary citizens and power holders with access to state resources. The result was catastrophic. As John Farrington (2005) documents, 57 percent of the livestock simply disappeared between 1989 and 1999. Industrial production did not fare any better, with most of the (coal) mines and textile and food-processing factories closing their doors during the 1990s. In a situation where starting conditions are already unfavorable, and where the political structure lacks muscle to enforce its decisions, attempts at fast reforms are likely to be, in the words of Max Spoor (1995, 61) “hasty reforms” with disarticulating consequences.

In *The Anti-Politics Machine*, James Ferguson points out that development projects typically fail in reaching their objectives, in part because they are based on faulty assumptions and blueprints. Instead of focusing on failure, he proposes to focus on what failure produces, because, he says, “important political effects may be realized almost invisibly alongside . . . that
‘failure’” (1990, 255). Analogously, we may ask: If in Kyrgyzstan neoliberal reform failed to produce a free market and a stable democracy, what did it produce instead? How was the political economy reconfigured as a result of neoliberal failure? It is important to keep in mind Joma Nazpary’s observation that in Kazakhstan in the 1990s “privatization of state property [was] considered by the dispossessed as the root of chaos” (2002, 60). Beyond reflecting widespread frustration, this view rightly points at the affinities and interlinking of privatization, destabilization, and predatory accumulation. What had happened, in effect, was that economic liberalization allowed Soviet-rooted informal orders to assume new prominence and become the de facto regulating mechanisms. Moreover, as the country entered a situation that depended on access to money rather than access to resources (Verdery 1996; Ledeneva 1998), Soviet forms of clientelism were transformed into post-Soviet “corruption,” a process by which informal practices became monetized.

This dramatic development was, in many ways, the logical outcome of a poorly thought-out concept of “transition,” which failed to acknowledge that political, economic, and other spheres of life are thoroughly interconnected, that therefore markets don’t exist in vacuums, and indeed that “the economy” does not exist as an independent entity or separate sphere. The actual outcomes of “liberalization” could have been anticipated if “power” had been inserted into the equation. In fact, several prominent sociologists and anthropologists, most notably Caroline Humphrey (1991), Katherine Verdery (1996), and Michael Burawoy and Pavel Krotov (1992), very early on predicted that informal orders based on kinship, friendship, and locality would become the de facto ordering principles.

This turn of history was not entirely unanticipated within Kyrgyzstan either. Ironically, President Akaev seems to have been aware of the problems (as well as the possibilities for self-enrichment) even while upholding his image as a staunch believer in “transition” when he wrote in 1993 that the transition “has occurred somewhat illogically.” Specifically, he noted that on the economic front “we enact economic freedom, while lacking developed property relations, primarily private property” (Akaev 1993). This illogicality, in a weak state, produced disastrous effect for the economy overall, while allowing well-placed political entrepreneurs (including Akaev) to appropriate large chunks of the economy.
This conjunction highlights the conceptual affinities between corruption and privatization. The classic definition of corruption as the “use of public office for private gain” may be reconfigured to hypothesize that the transformation of the public sector after socialism entailed an alternative mode of privatization—the “privatization of public offices and assets” by (groups of) well-placed individuals—without significantly changing the political culture, and without erasing existing networks of power. This process excluded the majority of citizens, while creating uncertainty for everyone (McGlinchey 2011; Shishkin 2013). Ultimately, then, the Kyrgyz “transition” revealed in tragic detail how privatization and corruption feed on each other. Neoliberal policies had produced not an ideal-typical “free market” but rather, to use the local vocabulary, a “wild market” (dikii rynok).

**Divisive Nationalism**

In a landmark publication, Yuri Slezkine demolished the popular notion of the Soviet Union as a “breaker of nations” by documenting and boldly asserting that “Soviet nationality policy was devised and carried out by nationalists” (1994, 414). In the context of Central Asia’s history, it is tempting to combine this perspective with the even bolder statement by Ernest Gellner that nationalism “invents nations where they do not exist” (1983). Indeed, in this region nations had not been in existence before the Russian Revolution. Its population had drawn lines of differentiation on the basis of religion, locality, tribal affiliation, language, and mode of livelihood, but these lines crosscut each other in numerous and often inconsistent ways and certainly did not congeal into coherent national categories. In fact, the labels “Kyrgyz,” “Kazakh,” “Uzbek,” “Tadjik,” and “Turkmen” were announced as national categories only in the 1920s, and they obtained substance in the decades that followed (Roy 2000, xvi).

The people who were categorized as Kyrgyz initially hardly identified with that label, referring to themselves primarily in terms of kinship, as member of a tribe or tribal segment, as pastoralists in contrast to the agriculturalists of the Fergana Valley, and as Muslims in contrast to the Russian administrators and settlers. But as Francine Hirsch (2005) and Olivier Roy (2000) have argued, by delineating ethno-territorial boundaries,
developing administrative structures within those territories, and relegating power to local elites, the Soviet regime provided the incentives that infused ethno-national categories with a social and political life.\footnote{These categories gained further substance through the introduction of modern schooling in standardized national languages, and the promotion of cultural repertoires that included national cuisine, dress, music, and, in the case of the Kyrgyz, a national epic. As all successful inventions are, these were rooted in existing cultural material, but this was standardized and generalized to fit the needs of nationhood.}

The national projects of the newly independent states were in many ways continuations of the nationality policies of the Soviet Union, while entering a context in which the supranational civic structure of the Union of Soviet Republics no longer existed. Indeed, after 1991 no one has seriously doubted the legitimacy of the five Soviet-produced Central Asian nations, nor were there serious attempts to create a pan-Turkistani state. When in 1991 Benedict Anderson wrote a new foreword to his famous book on the logics of nationalism, it may well have been that he had the new map of Central Asia in mind when stating that “history seems to be bearing out the ‘logic’ of *Imagined Communities* better than its author managed to do” ([1983] 2006, xi).

Though the Central Asian experience thus fits the general contours of the grand narrative of modern nationalism, the devil is in the details. Although these nations were either “invented” or solidified in the early twentieth century, this happened as part of the politics of the Soviet “affirmative action” empire (Martin 2001). That is, the national categories were produced before the territorial units to which they corresponded gained their own independent political life. Moreover, because of the (unavoidable) incongruence between territorial divisions and ethno-national categories (and because of the forced and voluntary labor migrations), each newly independent post-Soviet country contained significant preformed minorities with their own designated homelands elsewhere. The Kyrgyz SSR is a case in point. In the last Soviet census, of 1989, only a slight majority, 52 percent, of its population was classified as ethnically Kyrgyz (Anderson 1999, 42). Additionally, the republic was home to a large contingent of Russians (21%) and Uzbeks (13%), as well as many smaller minorities, of which Tatars, Uyghurs, Germans, and Ukrainians were the most numerous.
These ethno-national categories gained new significance when the overarching Soviet civic administrative structure made way for sovereign national territories, often with negative consequences for minorities. As Rogers Brubaker has pointed out, while the age of nationalism appeared to be drawing to a close in other parts of the world, post-Soviet Eurasia was “moving back to the nation-state, entering not a post-national but a post-multinational era” (2011, 1786). To draw attention to the incompleteness of the nation-state project Brubaker proposes to speak instead of “nationalizing states” (2011). This is a useful perspective because even though the “nations” remained uncontested in the geopolitical arena, at the subnational level they competed with other frames of belonging. In Kyrgyzstan there was considerable tension between national, regional, and tribal components of collective ideology.

To illustrate these tensions it makes sense to return to the Manas epic and its hero, Batyr-khan Manas, whom we already encountered in the form of his statue. The epic had been treated with ambivalence by Soviet authorities, alternately being denounced as reactionary and celebrated as representative of native culture, in which case it was presented as “expressing the deepest moral aspirations of the masses” and reflecting the “working conditions of the people” (van der Heide 2008, 182–83). Plans to celebrate the epic’s thousand-year existence had been made since the 1930s, but were postponed time and again, most likely because the epic revolves around warfare between the Kyrgyz and Chinese-speaking Kalmyk tribes, a diplomatically sensitive issue. However, as soon as Kyrgyzstan declared independence, Manas was promoted as the cornerstone of the government’s nationalizing efforts, and his one-thousandth anniversary was celebrated in 1995. Manas came to be presented as “the embodiment of the Kyrgyz self-image” (Thompson et al. 2006, 178), and the epic as a model for moral and spiritual guidance to the Kyrgyz nation (van der Heide 2008, 272; Marat 2008). Schoolchildren were taught the seven lessons of Manas: patriotism, unity of the nation, international cooperation, defense of the state, humanism, harmony with nature, and the aspiration to obtain knowledge and skills (Akaev 2003, 420–24). Celebrated narrators of the epic (manaschis) were given prominent places in the new pantheon of national heroes. A flood of popular publications and public events further helped elevate the epic to the standing of a national ideology.
Notwithstanding the substantial strengths of Manas as a national symbol, he also revealed cracks in the state-building effort. The first tension was that the principle of “genealogical relatedness” on which Manas worship was built did as much to divide the Kyrgyz into tribes as unite them as a nation (Gullette 2010). The figure of Manas, whose place of birth and death is believed to have been in the Talas Valley in northwestern Kyrgyzstan, found more resonance in the north of the country than in the south, where the epic and its hero had never played a prominent role. The second tension was that as an ethno-national mythological hero, the figure of Manas implicitly excluded all non-Kyrgyz, thereby reinforcing the notion that ultimately Kyrgyzstan is the home of the ethnic Kyrgyz rather than for its substantial non-Kyrgyz population.

The government was all too aware of the gravity of these issues. In the period between 1989 and 1999 the Russian population in Kyrgyzstan decreased by 313,000 (from 916,000 to 603,000), which represented a drop from 21.5 to 12.5 percent of the total population. In addition, some 58,000 Ukrainians and 80,000 Germans left the Kyrgyz Republic, mostly in the early 1990s. This exodus was particularly problematic because it constituted a significant brain drain, as Russians and other “Europeans” were more likely to have completed higher education and were strongly represented in the technical, managerial, and educational spheres. Although economic factors formed the main reason for this massive emigration (prospects were not good in Kyrgyzstan), it was also the case that many “Europeans” did not feel at home in an independent Kyrgyzstan, where the Kyrgyz language was replacing Russian as the main administrative language and where careers were increasingly dependent on being part of networks that followed lines of ethnicity and kinship (Kosmarskaia 2006).

Akaev tried to counteract these tensions during his presidency, from 1991 to 2005, by stressing the integrative elements of Manas, and the applicability of his wisdom to humanity as a whole. This is a recurring theme in his book *Kyrgyz Statehood and the National Epos “Manas,”* in which he writes that a key idea of the epic is “tranethnic consensus, friendship, and cooperation” (Akaev 2003, 283). Moreover, through his slogan “Kyrgyzstan—our common home” that we have encountered earlier, Akaev stressed that the Kyrgyz nation should be seen as a “polyethnic alloy,” one that is stronger than the “initial materials” (2003, 32). According to Murzakulova and Schoeberlein, this kind of recycling of “Soviet
internationalism” was meant to suggest continuity with the Soviet past and to appeal to Kyrgyzstan’s minorities, especially Russians, while the government’s use of nationalist symbolism was aimed at pleasing the Kyrgyz majority population. Both aspects were, according to the authors, aimed at obtaining “the solidarity and loyalty of different groups within the state and when one of them does not function, the other is deployed” (Murzakulova and Schoeberlein 2009, 1239). Although tensions remained, this two-track approach served the goals of simultaneously legitimizing power and softening the anxieties of minorities.

Things changed after the Tulip Revolution of 2005. As Madeleine Reeves points out, while President Akaev’s slogans had celebrated Kyrgyzstan as a common home for a multiethnic population, Bakiev’s rhetoric emphasized “patriarchal values and deference to political authority” (2014b, 69). In other words, while during Akaev’s presidency the government still used inclusive rhetoric to appeal to Uzbeks, Russians, and others, the absence of a civic ideology under Bakiev and more frequent use of nationalist rhetoric heightened the sense of insecurity among Uzbeks and other minorities (Cummings 2012, 86).

As mentioned above, attempts to create a civic nation rooted in a Soviet internationalist ideal had never been entirely successful. They had gone hand in hand with policies and a reimagining of the nation with which non-Kyrgyz were hardly able to identify. In northern Kyrgyzstan, most Russians who were able to return to Russia did so because they no longer saw a future. The ethnic composition was different in the south. There, the substantial Uzbek minority had never migrated to Kyrgyzstan, but had ended up on the wrong side of the border when the administrative boundaries between Soviet Socialist Republics were delineated in the 1930s. During the Soviet period this did not matter very much, and the Uzbek part of the population of the Kyrgyz SSR had oriented itself to the cities in Uzbekistan, where many followed secondary education and found marriage partners. These connections were maintained after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but this also meant that the Uzbek minority in Kyrgyzstan was caught between states’ borders, occupying a marginal position with regard to both countries (Liu 2012, 44).

To sum up, the ethno-national categories that were fixed and fastened through Soviet classificatory processes reflected previously existing lines of differentiation in economic activities, settlement patterns, and marital
relationships. But the categories had long been fluid and permeable, and continued to be so during the Soviet period. The categories Kyrgyz and Uzbek were infused with new relevance, however, after the demise of the multinational Soviet state. In conditions of uncertainty and fragmentation, the national categories achieved affective qualities that rendered them salient as a mobilizing force, around which ideas of “the people” could be rallied. During particular episodes this allowed for an intensification of “groupness” (Brubaker 2004)—a surge of populist nationalism, with destructive tendencies.

**Volatility in a Weak State**

On the morning of June 10, 2010, as I was sitting in a Bishkek office, news started to pour in about clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the southern city of Osh. I discussed the news with Elmira, the office secretary. At that point we knew very little about what was happening, but she was certain that things would remain quiet in the capital: “In the south they have a different mentality; here [in the capital] people are more civilized and educated.” Over the next twenty-four hours the conflict spread from Osh to several other towns in the south, including Jalalabad and Bazar-Korgon, two places I had previously lived and had many friends and acquaintances. I was on the phone with young Uzbek men from Bazar-Korgon who had tried to escape into Uzbekistan only to find the border gates closed to them. I talked to an Uzbek mother of an all-female household who was terrified, as she was listening to the approaching gunfire (which luckily never reached her street). I phoned a Kyrgyz acquaintance in Kokjangak who mentioned that, even though there were clashes in nearby Jalalabad (a mere thirty kilometers away), he was certain that nothing would happen where he lived because the mixed population in this former mining town had long been accustomed to interacting civilly across ethnic lines.

The conflict raged for three days, leaving hundreds of people dead, 80 percent of whom were Uzbek, and thousands of houses burned. More than one hundred thousand women and children temporarily fled to Uzbekistan, and approximately three hundred thousand people were internally displaced (Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission 2011). The police and military had done very little to stop the violence, and in some instances
actively aided Kyrgyz attackers, thereby significantly contributing to the
destructive force of the conflict (International Crisis Group 2010). Mass
violence did not spread to Bishkek, but for about a week people in the
capital lived in fear, with streets left deserted in the evenings, the territory
of young men with cars, ghetto blasters, and booze.

Since the mid-2000s Kyrgyzstan has experienced a series of tumultuous political events, of which the two revolutions, of March 2005 and
April 2010, and the above-described bloodshed between Kyrgyz and
Uzbeks in June 2010 were the most dramatic ones. The Tulip Revolution
of 2005 started after fraudulent elections had left several opposition leaders
out of parliament, creating unrest among significant factions of the political elite, which then started to merge with the frustrations of ordinary
citizens about a “transition” that was going nowhere. Still, no one expected
that the protests, which initially seemed a provincial affair, would travel
so quickly to the capital and remove Akaev from power with so little resis-
tance. As one of the main opposition leaders (and the later president)
Kurmanbek Bakiev reportedly exclaimed: “We did not expect this at all. It
was not part of the plan.”¹⁵ The sudden breakdown of state structures set
the stage for several chaotic days in the capital, but a sense of calm returned
after two days.

The background to the second Kyrgyz revolution, of April 2010, was
frustration about the cronyism and predatory practices of the Bakiev re-
gime. Frustration culminated with several increases in energy prices,
which were blamed on the malversations of the presidential family, and
after which people in the provinces started attacking government offices.
In contrast to Akaev in 2005, Kurmanbek Bakiev and his family did not
leave without a fight, resulting in clashes that left eighty-six people dead
(Matveeva 2010). In the chaos that followed the April 2010 revolution
several instances of intercommunal violence erupted, of which the earlier
described June 2010 conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks was the most
devastating.

These two revolutions as well as the 2010 bloodshed have been much commented on.¹⁶ Not only have these events been constitutive of the po-
litical landscape and should thus be prominently discussed in a contextual
chapter, they also powerfully illuminate the affective dimension of poli-
tics. Though each revolution had been long in coming, when actual fight-
ing broke out, it took people by surprise. Through these dramatic events,
rooted in messy realities, certainty was being produced. Indeed, it was during the days of conflict that the contours of “imagined communities” achieved frightening clarity (McBrien 2013, 259–60). And it was during the 2010 revolution that the notion of “the people” gained crucial importance (Reeves 2014b). In these events the slow-paced ideological shifts were interrupted by fast-paced contentious politics.

It is not difficult to see how these dramatic political events were rooted in the murkiness of the “transition.” The last years of Akaev’s rule were characterized by dwindling hope that the transition would ever be completed. Kyrgyz society had been descending into a negative spiral of instability and anomie. Increasing frustration with the regime started to intertwine with the frustrations of important segments of the political elite. The years after the Tulip Revolution revealed a further worsening of the situation. Protests that focused on price hikes, administrative incompetence, and imprisonment of politicians had become commonplace in the capital as well as in the provinces. Tensions along ethnic lines became more visible (Tabyshalieva 2013) and often focused on land entitlements. Administrative offices had increasingly become dominated by Kyrgyz (and organized along regional and tribal lines), a process that intensified after 2005, thereby further marginalizing minority groups.

Even if in hindsight it is clear that the dramatic events were rooted in a failed transition, at the moment they happened everyone was taken aback. Ironically, even the leaders of the Tulip Revolution commented that they had not planned for revolution. And regarding the clashes of 2010, Julie McBrien argues that “no one imagined and no one anticipated the violence” (2013, 257). One reason is people’s tendency to distance themselves from violence and turmoil, preferring to attribute them to barbarism or uncivilized behavior (as in Elmira’s dismissal). Another reason is that the triggers that set off dramatic chains of events were seemingly minor: electoral fraud in 2005 (such fraud had happened before); a hike in energy tariffs in 2010 (painful but one in a row of hikes); a fight between young men (once again). What happened in each of these cases, however, was that these small triggers started to reverberate with other frustrations, fears, and anxieties. Within an already fragmented political landscape, these incidents symbolized a broken space that separated people from power, feeding into a “constitutive antagonism” (Laclau 2005, 85) that provided the impetus for group mobilization and radicalization.
In the case of the conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, the anxieties of the Kyrgyz majority were fueled by Uzbek calls for emancipation. Indeed, in the period leading up to the conflict, the “politically marginalized Uzbek minority had become increasingly involved in regional and national politics, and had made more vocal demands for equal treatment and opportunities” (McBrien 2011, 3). This was perceived in some Kyrgyz circles as an affront to the country’s sovereignty, imagined as an “ethno-national and popular institution,” as David Gullette and John Heathershaw (2015, 125) have pointed out. In the case of the 2005 Tulip Revolution the trigger was electoral fraud, which started to resonate with the suspicion that Akaev was consolidating the influence of the presidential family on the national political scene. Moreover, these practices were uncovered at a time when opposition newspapers published images of some of the family’s spacious residences along with a list of companies that belonged to, or were controlled by, the Akaev family. Outrage about these practices played an important role in the unrest—numerous reports noted that protesters were driven by a sense that Akaev and his family had “gone too far.” In the 2010 revolution it was the combination of the announced rise in energy prices together with the sentiment that the Bakiev family’s greed had spun out of control.

The trigger, far from being trivial, creates a focal point around which discourse “thickens” as it reverberates with accumulated resentment and frustration, which then becomes tied to the aspirations of temporarily marginalized elites, thereby kicking in a new and semiautonomous dynamic of violence. As Bruce Kapferer has argued, it is during conflict that political myths—fantasies of purity, justice, or supremacy—become “imbued with commanding power” (1988, 47). In a similar vein the 2010 revolution served to crystallize “the people” (el) versus the government, and moreover, as Reeves (2014b) astutely notices, the notion of “the people” obtained exclusivist ethnic Kyrgyz connotations, paving the way for episodes of violence against non-Kyrgyz minorities in the months ahead.

In Bishkek in the months after the April 2010 revolution a standard joke was that while other democracies have elections every four or five years, Kyrgyzstan has a revolution every five years. But whereas one could make jokes about corrupt politicians, and perhaps even celebrate the people’s ability to remove corrupt autocrats from power, similar jokes did not exist about the ethnic conflicts that occurred in 1990 and 2010 between
Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Don Kalb argues in his (2005) article “From Flows to Violence” that market-led development programs have destabilizing effects. In Kyrgyzstan, political turmoil was rooted in a disastrous transition that left people frustrated and hollowed out the state, becoming a shell to be captured and mobilized by rotating factions. In this fragile environment, seemingly small triggers could set in motion chains of action and reaction with transformative potential, but often resulting in further disillusionment and astonishment about the fragility of order. As one of my friends from Bazar-Korgon told me: “I had never expected that [these atrocities] would happen here, in our town.” But those violent events did occur, producing temporary clarity about who is friend and who is foe, yet blurring the future.

**Lenin’s Shadow**

I’m afraid that I don’t really know what capitalism means. I conceive of it as the development in the West. When someone uses the word “capitalism” I think about the United States. I think of a highly developed industrialized country. At the moment, Kyrgyzstan is moving in the direction of capitalism in all spheres of life. I don’t know what this means. We have a wild market and perhaps that is a first step on the road to capitalism, [but] I don’t think that Kyrgyzstan will become a capitalist country very soon.

These sentences were written by an undergraduate student at the Issyk Kul State University in northeastern Kyrgyzstan in 1995, after I had asked her and fifteen fellow students to write take-home essays on the topic of capitalism. Several students copied or paraphrased the contents of Soviet encyclopedias and/or their parents’ opinion, such as one who said that “capitalism is the socioeconomic structure that is based on private property and the exploitation of people,” and another that “money is the dominant factor in capitalism. You can buy everything with money, even labor force. People are divided into poor (the laborers) and rich (the capitalists).” Ironically, these lines described the post-Soviet reality of the times quite accurately. However, even the students who employed such communist language ended their essays in ways that radically departed from a communist or socialist perspective. The last-quoted student, for example, continued by writing that “although capitalism still has these and other problems [referring to poverty and inequality], I do think that it is a good system. After all, many of the highly developed countries have a form of capitalism.”
together, the essays appeared to reflect “minds in transition,” in which the
dominant theme was hope that the problems would be overcome and that
the country was treading a path toward prosperity. In the words of one stu-
dent, “Our country will become civilized and people won’t be unemployed,
but will instead work hard and receive high wages.”

What struck me in these essays was the students’ ability to continue
believing in a future affluent society despite living in increasingly impover
ished conditions. And crucially, the essays suggested two mechanisms for
how such hope could be maintained. The first involved denial that capital-
ism had already “arrived,” by stating instead that their society was “mov-
ing in the direction” or was still only in the “first stage” of what was going
to be capitalism, and that this would ultimately replace the despised “wild
market.” This response was understandable as the reality they experienced
was radically different from the capitalism that they imagined to exist in
“highly developed industrial societies.” This, moreover, points to the sec-
ond mechanism, which was to imagine capitalism as a return of the state.
Inherent in the dismissal of the “wild market” was the idea that the market
would be tamed by a proactive government. Similar sentiments surfaced
when I talked (we are still in 1995) with a teacher who had not been paid
his salary for months, yet who did not consider becoming an entrepreneur
a viable option:

If I would give up this job and become a trader, I would end up with noth-
ing. At the bazaar there are no pensions. And what happens when you get
ill? When everything goes back to normal in a few years, those traders will
be empty-handed: without work, without money, without anything!

As empty signifiers (Laclau 1993) capitalism and democracy were able to
signal the impending arrival of affluent society. Many conceptualized cap-
italism as a better functioning version of socialism, and only gradually real-
ized that the welfare state they had lost was not going to come back.

In the two decades that have passed since 1995, the “return to normal”
ever happened. In the end, the kind of advanced capitalism that could
guarantee affluence for most people did not develop, nor did the state step
back in to reign in exploitation and provide a safety net for its weaker
citizens. Liberal ideology did not come with a concrete vision of how to reorder society but closely followed the Washington consensus, which amounted to privatizing the state, a process favoring the well-endowed and well positioned, while leaving the majority of residents scrambling for survival. It produced a volatile situation ruled by money, one ordered along unstable lines of clientelism and patronage. When in the early 2010s my acquaintances reflected on the 1990s they would speak of hardship and confusion and emphasize that they had been in shock. But they would also say that the present was not much different; they had simply gotten used to their chaotic lives.

Although from an outsider’s perspective the neoliberal shift of the 1990s had objectively constituted a “passing of mass utopia” (Buck-Morss 2000), it took a while for this realization to set in. This was not in small measure due to the fact that “capitalism” and “democracy” were powerful empty signifiers that perpetuated hope, meanwhile narrowing political debate and thereby legitimizing the Akaev government. As such it was a convenient cover, or mask, for a reconfiguration of politics and economy that went on behind the scenes. Given the discrepancy between neoliberal rhetoric and chaotic reality, it was only a matter of time, though, for this mask to be revealed for what it was and for “transition” to come unstuck.

This unraveling of transition does not mean there are no utopian projects left. Rather, the downfall of the hegemonic state machinery for the production and distribution of hope produced anxieties and fears (cf. Hage 2003, 3), while providing a boost to other hope-generating mechanisms and movements. The shattered transition not only destabilized economic lives but also opened up a space in which a range of ideological movements could thrive. It was because of this that evangelical Pentecostals talked about Kyrgyzstan as a “ripe harvest field” (cited in Pelkmans 2006b, 29); and Islamic piety movements such as the Tablighi Jamaat saw Kyrgyzstan as a “clean slate,” and were able to connect with the sensibilities of young Muslim men (as discussed in chapter 4). Hence, the post-Soviet condition is more appropriately described as one of ideological excess than ideological void (Borenstein 1999). 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.

With the passing of two decades, the dream of a capitalist future of abundance turned out to be a mirage that could never be reached, while
the memory of socialist security and order receded into the past. The images of abundance and safety never disappeared but were reconfigured to become part of other ideologies, or indeed lingered on in the thoughts of those living through hardship. For now, let me give just one example, of a woman in her fifties who was fighting back her tears when we talked in 2013 in her flat in the small former mining town of Ak-Tiuz. Ever since she had lost her job eighteen years previously she had retained some hope that eventually she would be able to work again as a nurse. She was hopeful when, earlier that year, a Canadian company was recruiting a nurse to be based in her small town (not least because she was the only resident with an education in nursing), but in the interview she was told that her experience was out-of-date. A young woman from a neighboring town was hired instead. Angrily she said that in the past employers would have always looked first at whether locally skilled labor was available: “back then they cared about the community.” True or not, Mirgul’s hopes had been informed by how labor used to be organized in former times, a coalescing of the past and the future in the present that resulted in despair.

Lenin used to adorn not only Ala-Too Square but countless other squares throughout the country. These provincial Lenins do not have the same allure, but they have equally interesting things to say about the course of history. In post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan most of these Lenins remained in place even when their surroundings radically altered. A good example is the Lenin that stood in front of the entrance of the tool-parts factory in Kokjangak. The factory went bankrupt, the buildings were dismantled, and the construction materials sold, leaving behind nothing but a field of concrete waste. But in the middle of this rubble, Lenin was still standing. I cannot say if this Lenin’s survival was deliberate, but another Lenin in the same town suggested that this might well have been the case. This other Lenin had been standing in front of the city hall. When, in 2002, he was moved away from the entrance to be repositioned nearby, his legs accidentally broke off. Instead of discarding the maimed statue, a cast was built around Lenin’s legs, such that it would look as if he was leaning over a wall.

It is tempting to interpret this treatment as an act of “restorative nostalgia” (Boym 2001), but the people I asked about it were evasive, presenting
it as an artistic innovation or making jokes about their wobbly Lenin. Whether or not this Lenin offered comfort or acted as an anchor in lives of turmoil, destroying Lenin or leaving him injured would clearly have been inappropriate.
If these stories reflect nostalgia for a past in which there was order and purpose, a final Lenin story brings out the ambivalent aspects of this relationship with the past. Beside the main road in Ak-Tiuz, near the town hall, stands a silver-painted statue of Lenin. At first sight there is nothing remarkable about this Lenin; it is one of the “standard” Lenins, one in which he brings his left hand up to his chest while looking into the distance as if addressing an audience. But what is striking about this particular statue is that it bears saw marks—horizontal lines cut into his chest, waist, knees, and ankles. Reportedly, some men had made the cuts in order to find out whether Lenin’s insides contained anything of value, but on discovering that his insides contained nothing but air and concrete, they didn’t proceed with dismantling the statue. In its wounded guise, the statue appears symbolic of the ways in which past, present, and future have come together. In the Soviet past, the future was present in slogans and plans pointing to a utopian communism. However, this utopian vision turned out to be quite hollow when the Soviet Union started to descend, just as the statue turned out to be worthless when attacked with a saw.

And yet the hollow Lenin is still standing, twenty-four years after the demise of the Soviet Union. Lenin was no longer revered, and yet there was no symbol to replace him with. This in itself could be taken as indicative of the weakness of the state, and of the fragility of the new ideologies that were being advanced. Just like in so many other locations, there was no lack of visions for the future—in fact there was an excess of them—but their institutional backing was weak or absent, and many people had become doubtful of their promises of a better future. The turmoil of ideas that swept through Kyrgyzstan showed the fragility of each ideological vision, which in any case only addressed a part of the population. By contrast, even though Soviet implementation used to be chaotic (Kotkin 1995) and produced many excesses, its vision of a better future remained unwavering. Perhaps it was for this reason that this Lenin was patched up. His cuts were smoothed over and given a new lick of paint in 2014. What the fate of these Lenin statues appeared to signify was not so much nostalgia for a past that was lost as nostalgia for hope in a better future.