Fragile Conviction
Pelkmans, Mathijs

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Fragile Conviction: Changing Ideological Landscapes in Urban Kyrgyzstan.

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A middle-aged Kyrgyz man, dressed in worn-out clothes, was walking through the park, looking around with apparent incredulity. He noticed me sitting in the shade of a tree, and called out: “What is this place? This looks like Afghanistan. It’s one fucking war zone.” We had a short conversation. “I used to live here,” he explained, “but everything has vanished. I still recognize the park because it has Lenin standing over there, but that’s all.”

He had returned (in 2008) after an absence of almost twenty years, having worked in construction throughout Russia. On his last assignment, just after he and his working party had started on a construction project in Sochi, his possessions, including his passport, were stolen. Left with just a minimal sum, he had barely made it back to the hometown he no longer recognized.

Between 1960 and 1990 Kokjangak had approximately twenty thousand inhabitants, many of whom worked in the coal mine (up to four thousand employees) and the sewing and radio-parts factories (together fifteen hundred employees). But with the scaling down and eventual closure of the mine and factories after the collapse of the USSR, half its population moved away, until stabilizing at around ten thousand by the late 1990s.1 Kokjangak came to be known as one of the poorest settlements in Jalalabad Province, a town where the remaining population struggled to make ends meet. They mixed small-scale urban-based agriculture and animal husbandry with informal mining activities and jobs in the service sector, and relied to a significant degree on state benefits and remittances sent by relatives working in Russia.

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Amid these overwhelming changes the only constant appeared to be uncertainty. The crumbling of the socialist welfare state and the unwieldiness of the “wild market” economy had the effect that inhabitants could neither rely on state provisions nor be confident that their private initiatives paid off. This “post-Soviet chaos” (Nazpary 2002) should not, however, be understood as the absence of order but rather as a structured disorder that allowed for predatory accumulation by those in power. The residents shared this predicament with most other ordinary citizens of Kyrgyzstan, who all experienced the painful postsocialist “transition,” the destabilizing effects of two revolutions, and continuing political instability. But in Kokjangak this uncertainty was exacerbated by the unraveling of social networks (due to massive outmigration) and the complete disappearance of industry. The uncertainties were intricately connected to the decaying urban landscape. As inhabitants projected their frustrations, fears, and hopes onto their surroundings, the landscape impressed itself onto them, meshing with existential and ontological concerns.
Residents who continued to live in Kokjangak through the 1990s may
never have experienced the sudden shock of bewilderment expressed by
the returnee quoted above; yet the city’s downfall continued to confront
everyone who had known Kokjangak in its Soviet glory. Residents were
reminded of those better times on a daily basis when passing the remain-
ders of what once were buildings, or when dealing with the absence of
drinkable tap water, garbage disposal, and public transportation. In con-
versation they used indicators of places that had ceased to exist: they said
“behind the office building [za kontoroi]” when referring to the coal mine’s
headquarters, where nothing but the concrete foundations remained;
“near the bus station [vozle avtovokzala]” referred to a place from which
no bus had departed since the mid-1990s. When they described their city
to outsiders, key words included “war zone,” “devastation,” and “death.”
Kokjangak was a “dying city” (umeraiushchii gorod) or, in the words of
a newspaper reporter, a “lifeless stovehole” (potukhsiaia kochegarka).³ To
add insult to injury, in the early 2000s Kokjangak was administratively re-
classified, losing its status of “city” (gorod) to become a “settlement of urban
type” (poselok gorodskogo tipa).

Aiming to capture the process of decline, an article titled “Dying City”
in the national newspaper Vechernii Bishkek wrote about Kokjangak: “It
is not difficult to destroy a city. There is no need even to bomb it. All that
is needed is to take away hope and belief in tomorrow. Then the city will
destroy itself.”⁴ It is worthwhile to reflect for a moment on this presumed
absence of hope. Certainly, people’s dwindling confidence in the future
revival of their town played a role in their decision to leave. Kokjangak
was a “dying city,” a postindustrial wasteland, a ruin of Soviet modernity.
Its entire territory was covered with scars—reminders of a different and
better past, of the pain of recent rupture, and of the struggle to survive.
And yet, seemingly paradoxically but also logically, the hopelessness of
the situation and the collapse of grand ideology generated renewed hope
and triggered the appearance of new ideological visions. As Jarrett Zigon
has rightly argued, hope is not the product of good times but arises in
conditions of struggle (2009, 262). Moreover, it can never completely free
itself from that struggle. “Hope can never be fully divorced from hope-
lessness any more than hopelessness can be divorced from hope” (Cra-
panzano 2004, 114); they drive each other on and are in constant risk of
slippage.⁵
In this chapter, then, I examine both the absence of ideology and its hesitant return, offering a meditation on hopeless situations and the concomitant glimmering of hope. By focusing on the inhabitants of a destitute former mining town and urban wasteland, I aim to understand how political-economic transformation and urban decline affect how people engage with the big questions of existence: How to survive? What to do? Who and what to trust? What to believe? As we will see, in this instance the condition of uncertainty produced an apparent openness to new ideologies, yet an openness that was coupled with reticence, a curiosity matched with suspicion, all of which resonated with the landscape.

(Pre-)Historic Sketch

The name “Kokjangak” literally means “blue-green nut” and refers to the modest walnut forest that once covered most of the uphill valley where the city was built. Residents praised the location’s climatic features; located on a southern slope of the Ala-Too Mountains it is protected from the cold northern winds in winter, whereas its elevated location (between 1,200 and 1,400 meters) means that summers are not as hot as in the basin of the Suzak Valley (which is a branch of the Fergana Valley). In the early twentieth century the hills belonged, according to the Osmonov family tradition, to their grandfather Osman, who had been given the land by a powerful bey in appreciation of provided services. Some years later, however, he had to tolerate the presence of Russian explorers (geologists). Osman’s contempt for and distrust of these Russians reputedly was such that he forbade his children to talk to them or eat their “heathen bread,” and eventually he moved his household a kilometer downstream to what is now the neighborhood kölmoulder (the Kyrgyz word for sovkhoz, state farm).

Coal-mining activities started in the 1910s (Kashirin 1988) but were interrupted after the Russian Revolution and the ensuing struggle for power (1918–22) between Bolsheviks and Basmachis, with the latter allegedly responsible for blowing up the mine. Mining activities expanded in the second half of the 1920s. A Russian communist who was sent to Kokjangak to organize labor reported that in 1927 there were “approximately seventy miners who extracted the coal with primitive means, primarily by hand,” and who in their free time would carry out voluntary work to speed up the
Urban development accelerated after Kokjangak became connected to the provincial city of Jalalabad by train tracks and a gravel road in 1932. By 1939 Kokjangak had developed into a sizable town with eight thousand inhabitants, of which 1,009 were employed in the mine (ibid., 123, 129).

As elsewhere in the Soviet empire, the rapid urbanization and industrialization of the Stalinist era were accompanied by coercion, severe shortages, and other excesses (cf. Kotkin 1995; Fitzpatrick 1999). The plateau just above the city center is a reminder of this coercive past. Called Zona (the zone), it refers to the labor camp that was located there until the 1960s. It had been created for German prisoners of war and was subsequently used for other convicts, both categories of which were deployed in labor-intensive infrastructural projects. People who came to Kokjangak on their own accord during the 1930s and 1940s encountered conditions that were hardly more favorable. An elderly Kyrgyz man told me: “When they arrived, there often was not even a place for them to sleep. During the first nights many ended up sleeping on the warm coal waste, but this was warm because [poisonous] gas was still burning inside. One morning twenty dead bodies were found. All had died in their sleep.” Despite such tragedies, moving to town was often preferable to the impoverished life in the villages: in Kokjangak, at least, “they paid workers in products and in money.”

The same man also spoke to me about the arrival of deportees from the Caucasus, mostly Kurds and Chechens, and the ensuing tensions with the established population:

They are also Muslim, but they are different. They wouldn’t sleep at night. Instead they roamed around, stealing our cattle and other possessions. We tolerated it for a while, but then one night our men gathered, mounted their horses, took clubs with them, and beat up [the Chechens]. That was justified, because back then there weren’t enough men around to protect each household—so we had to teach them a lesson.

Built on a foundation of coercion and tension, Kokjangak gained city status (it became a gorod) in 1943 and retained its position as a small yet regionally important industrial city throughout the Soviet period. Mining towns such as Kokjangak were purposely designed as modern socialist
cities, showcases of Soviet progress, as described in the following text about the history of mining in the Kyrgyz SSR:

Former poverty-stricken mining settlements transformed into comfortable and well-equipped *blagoustroennye* socialist cities . . . which please the eye with their multilevel architectural ensembles, their paved [asphalted] roads, green gardens and parks, their houses of culture, schools, stadiums, and much else that beautifies the miner’s life *[byt]*. (Chormonov and Sidirov 1963, 162–63)

This description captures the Kokjangak that continued to occupy the collective imagination after its demise—a modern city with a diverse population, with abundant work in its coal mine and factories. Stories about these heydays will feature throughout this chapter, but the following (slightly edited) excerpt from a document produced by the city administration in the year 2000 offers a usefully detailed reflection of this image of modern urbanity:

The city of Kokjangak has a developed infrastructure for electrical power, a communal hot water and central heating system, drinking water supply and a sewage system . . . There are four post offices with sixteen employees providing telecommunication services . . . The House of Culture, built in 1948, has a capacity for 600 visitors . . . There is also a disco-club, a cinema called *shakter* [miner] and a city radio broadcasting center . . . The city newspaper *Kokjangak Kabarlary* has a circulation of a 1,000 copies. A children’s recreational center called *Barchyn* is located two kilometres outside the city and was constructed in 1976. It has eighty beds and is visited annually by about 250 children in three shifts. There is a central city stadium, built in 1958, with capacity for 2,000 spectators. (http://www.citykr.kg/en/kokjangak.php)

In short, Kokjangak had everything that one might expect of a small Soviet industrial city. But reading these features described in the present tense in a document written long after the USSR collapsed is surreal, not only because some of these modern features come across as anachronistic, but also because many of the services and venues had either stopped working or ceased to exist. As the document proceeds:

The House of Culture requires a complete overhaul and renovation of its equipment . . . The city printing house no longer operates due to the
deterioration of the printing presses. . . . The children’s recreational center has not functioned in the last two years. . . . 1,500 m³ of solid waste have accumulated over several years, which creates the conditions for the spread of infectious diseases. (www.citykr.kg/en/kokjangak.php)

The list could have been longer, because the mentioned cinema and disco-club had been reduced to rubble, the stadium had become pasture-land for cows, and the central heating system was no longer able to heat the schools let alone the apartment buildings that also used to be connected to the system. When I first visited Kokjangak in 1998, the contours of the modern Soviet city were still distinctly visible, but they rapidly faded in subsequent years.

By 2008 the Soviet past had become a chimera, with even returnees failing to recognize their hometown. In the context of such encompassing transformation, in which the city’s infrastructure had collapsed and half its population had left for good, the connections between past and present were tenuous. Kokjangak was a city that was being undone. Even the documents detailing its history had vanished. When I asked the mayor about the books, reports, and newspapers produced in and about Soviet Kokjangak, he told me, only partly in jest, that these had all disappeared in toilets. Whether this was literally true or not, written proof of the town’s Soviet history had largely vanished. It is this apparent disconnect and absence of written documents that prompted me to use the label “(pre-)history” in this section’s heading. However, this “prehistoric” Soviet past cast a heavy shadow on how residents engaged with the present, and it also channeled and directed hopes for the future. As we saw, the ghost of the Soviet past had come to life even in documents of a “city” administration that was administering a “settlement of urban type.”

Destabilized World

You should have come here ten years ago! Do you see this bank note? [I am being shown a bank note that is perfectly folded into the shape of a shirt.] These ten rubles used to be enough to buy a man’s shirt! Our shops were the best in the region. They always had meat and fish, and sometimes even Dutch cheese! You know, back then we had Moscow provisioning [moskovskoe obespechenie]. Now we have nothing.

Kyrgyz man, former miner, in his forties
When there was the Soviet Union our city was prestigious. We lived proudly; we had Moscow provisioning. We didn’t worry about tomorrow. We had everything. Health care and education were for free. On Sundays we would rest in the city park. We were all equally rich, and happy. But now, when we go out it is like stepping into a nightmare.

Kyrgyz woman, teacher, in her fifties

These voices from the second half of the 1990s were typical of the immediate post-Soviet period, when comparisons with the Soviet past were on everyone’s mind. The most frequently invoked term in such comparisons was “Moscow provisioning.” Literally, this referred to the privilege enjoyed by industrial towns of strategic significance to be directly provided with consumer goods from Moscow, instead of having to rely on slower, longer, and leaner distribution channels that passed through two retail divisions, republican (SSR) and provincial (oblast). In practical terms this meant that the state shops in Kokjangak had a greater variety of food than those elsewhere, and that consumer goods ranging from shoes to furniture were more frequently available. Town dwellers were envied for this privilege, and would often act as brokers to secure scarce goods for relatives in less privileged places.

It might seem odd that this Moscow provisioning occupied such a central place in the collective memory given that after 1991 consumer goods became much more widely available. The significance of Moscow provisioning, however, was that it highlighted two valued aspects of Soviet life, and in so doing also symbolized the post-Soviet downfall. The first is that during Soviet times, the goods and services that were available had always been affordable. In fact, well-paid workers such as miners and engineers were often unable to spend their entire earnings, because housing, transportation, and basic food items were subsidized and available at little cost, while luxury items were hard to come by. This situation was reversed in the 1990s when affordability instead of availability became the primary concern. The reference to Moscow provisioning was thus also a critique of a situation in which goods and services had become more expensive and prices less predictable, a period in which living standards had plunged. Second, apart from strictly economic concerns Moscow provisioning indexed a “cultural and aesthetic connection—of the ‘center in the periphery,’” as Reeves (2014a, 114) has helpfully suggested. To receive Moscow provisioning was an indicator of significance and privilege within the
Soviet political economy. It conjured a sense of modernity, of being cultured, educated, and Russophone, and in doing so it produced a sense of distinction from, and superiority over, other settlements in the region. As will be shown below, the loss of this privileged position contributed to a sense of existential and epistemological anxiety.

* * *

After finishing education, you were expected to arrange your employment within a few months. If not, the police would call on your house. . . . It turns out that back then we lived well but didn’t want to work, whereas now there is no one who forces us to work, and we end up sitting at home, which turns out to be very bad. (Nurbek, Kyrgyz man in his late forties)

Surely not everyone cherished memories of police checks on slackers, but the underlying positive valuation of order was a common theme. When we talked, in 2008, the memory of compulsory work must have looked particularly attractive to Nurbek, because apart from infrequent casual work as a driver he had indeed been “sitting at home” for several years, in sharp contrast to the stable employment and sufficient income he had enjoyed during the first ten years of his adult life. Unemployed and in his late forties, in 2008 he was living with his two teenage children, dependent on remittances sent by his wife, who was working in the Russian city of Novosibirsk and had not been home in eighteen months.

During Soviet times, Kokjangakians largely relied on salaried income (more so than collective farmers in the neighboring villages, who had private plots and livestock) and were thus greatly affected by the loss of coal-mine and factory jobs. Diversifying the income base was difficult because the possibilities for animal husbandry and cultivating crops were limited in this urban environment. Households initially resorted to reductive strategies (saving on food) as well as depleting strategies, which involved the selling of furniture and other household items. The most common regenerative activities during this period were petty trading and circular migration, but these activities often failed to generate sufficient profit and sometimes even resulted in further indebtedness (Howell 1996, 68–70). Access to state benefits became more important from the mid-1990s onward, but the amounts would cover only a small part of household needs. The selling of construction materials from abandoned houses and other
buildings was an important regenerative activity for as long as it lasted (roughly 1995 to 2005). Small-scale mining started to develop when the coal mine was closed entirely in 1999. Increasingly, remittances sent by a spouse or child working abroad (usually in Russia) were critical to many households.

What the new sources of income had in common was that they were unpredictable in terms of availability and reward, in stark contrast to bureaucratically organized Soviet industrial labor. The case of coal mining is instructive. Nurbek often emphasized the “order” (порядок) of work in the mine. Work back then had been tough but also honest (честная), with its ten-hour shifts, regular payments, and prospect of early retirement. He shared stories about the family feel of his work party (команда), his “stern but just foreman” who he had admired as a young man, about the expertise of specialists who were responsible for planning and safety, and the authority of the (Russian) director. This bureaucratic and patrimonial structure had caused its own frictions, but nevertheless stood in marked contrast to the informal mining activities that had come in its stead. The men involved in these new small-scale mining activities rarely had access to air drills or other power equipment, instead using crowbars, pickaxes, and shovels to dig mine shafts into the hills, often working for weeks underground without protection, and without knowing whether they would hit a coal layer.

* * *

During Soviet times, each neighborhood was different. The center and the Twenty-Third Quarter were mostly Russian, [Neighborhood] Forty was a mix of Uzbeks, Tatars, and others. The Kurds and Baptists each lived closely together [at the outskirts] as if in their own village. We would rarely go there; it felt strange. We Kyrgyz lived almost everywhere, but hardly in the center. Somehow that was considered to be too European. (Nurbek)

The sketched pattern suggests an ethnic mosaic rather than the kind of melting pot that Soviet texts proudly proclaimed when mentioning the number of nationalities coexisting and cooperating in its cities. The mix was diverse, but inhabitants tended to cluster together on the basis of origin, ethnicity, and religion. In everyday speech, the category “Russians” included Ukrainians but not the Russian Baptists, who were categorized
separately on the basis of religious affiliation. The Kurds, who had been deported from the Georgian border region with Turkey to destinations across Central Asia in 1944, all lived together in a couple of streets, whereas Tatars lived interspersed throughout the town. Interethnic marriages were not exceptional. They were fairly common between Tatars and Russians, as well as between Tatar and Russian women and Kyrgyz men, but several of the other groups, such as Kurds, Baptists and Uzbeks, observed more strictly the norm to marry among “one’s own.”

Positive references to the former heterogeneity abounded and usually glossed over the coercive roots and persistent inequalities of the mix. Thus, when talking about some of the architectural highlights of the town, it was pointed out that they reflected the skills of their German constructors, without mentioning that these Germans had been prisoners of war working in forced-labor projects. And when discussing the rapid expansion of town, it was rarely mentioned that this was achieved in no small measure through the forced labor of deported groups from the Caucasus. Others spoke approvingly of the many “cultured” (kulturnye) and “learned” (uchennye) Russians who occupied the top ranks of the mine and factory management, without reflecting on the inequalities between “Europeans” and “Asians” in the Soviet economy. But whatever the imperfections and underlying tensions of the Soviet internationalist ideal, the diversity of the population was remembered positively as having made Kokjangak a “real” (nastoiashchii) city, and one that was “cultured.”

The exodus of the 1990s not only sliced the population in half but also radically altered its composition. Whereas up to 1990 Russians and other “Europeans” made up approximately 50 percent of the population, this dropped to a mere 9 percent by 2004 when 75 percent of its population was ethnically Kyrgyz. The first to leave had been those with good prospects for resettling elsewhere, among whom the vast majority of residents with professional and family connections in Russia and Ukraine. Notwithstanding the overwhelming out-migration, the town saw a few newcomers as well, mostly recently divorced women who came to Kokjangak because apartments could be bought at prices close to zero. Although the size of the population stabilized in the mid-1990s at around ten thousand, this was only a deceptive stability, with many remaining residents using Kokjangak as a resting point in their increasingly migratory lives.
In short, Kokjangak’s population became much more homogeneous in terms of ethnic and educational indicators, and in the process became increasingly similar to neighboring rural settlements. Possibly because of this flattening, some inhabitants became even more inclined to stress the distinctiveness of urban life. Thus, the town’s Kyrgyz inhabitants often prided themselves on having a better command of Russian than Kyrgyz people living elsewhere, and many Kyrgyz parents tried to get their children placed in the one remaining Russian-language school.\textsuperscript{12} When in 2010 conflicts erupted between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the nearby city of Jalalabad and in several smaller settlements in the region, my Kyrgyz acquaintances told me that such violence would not happen in Kokjangak because its inhabitants were more “civilized” (\textit{tsivilizovanne}). It had, after all, been a mining town.\textsuperscript{13} This urban legacy was particularly treasured by the older generations, those who had invested most in the Soviet ideal of modernity. But despite their best efforts, the downfall of the town was unstoppable, and outsiders had come to associate Kokjangak with poverty, crime, and disease.

* * *

These [five-story apartment buildings] used to be the most prestigious living quarters—they had all the amenities [\textit{udobstvie}]. They are no longer prestigious, of course. About half the apartments are empty. Did you hear this joke about “going to the fifth floor”? . . . No? Well, it is better that way [Nurbek says with a knowing smile].\textsuperscript{14}

The amenities in these centrally located apartments (built in the 1970s) were running water, central heating, electricity, gas, and built-in kitchens and bathrooms with plumbing. That is, they had the amenities that were lacking in most freestanding houses and older apartment buildings (such as the \textit{barak} and the \textit{kommunalka}). The first tenants of these apartments belonged to the privileged layers of society; they were employed in managerial and engineering positions, or had good jobs in the city administration. However, none of these positive connotations still held. The roofs had started to leak, the central heating and gas had long been disconnected, and water had to be carried with buckets to the top floors because of low water pressure in the pipes. Moreover, former occupants had often stripped their apartments of window seals, doors, and floors on departure, leaving gaping
holes in the buildings. A clear indicator of decline was that in 2004 apart-
ments were sold for as little as forty dollars.¹⁵ The city center was not only
being emptied out in a material sense, it also became perceived as a black
hole in moral terms, as already suggested by Nurbek’s comment above. Singu-
lar mothers occupied the least desirable top floors, and residents of all
floors were those with few other options, among whom were many elderly
Russians. It had become a place of last resort, known for its frequent scan-
dals related to domestic and other violence, drug abuse, and alcoholism.

In the center of town it was not just the high-rises that were collapsing; most freestanding houses were vanishing altogether. These houses were
bought up by middlemen who were primarily interested in the construction
materials, leaving nothing behind but the concrete foundations. But while
the formerly prestigious city center was emptied out, the outlying neigh-
borhoods experienced a different dynamic. These had been less prestigious
because of their distance from shops and workplaces as well as their lack
of amenities. But given the collapse of urban infrastructure, such consid-
erations had lost their relevance, while at the same time the advantages of
living in the outskirts had grown in significance: the larger backyards allowed for cultivating vegetables, growing fruit, and keeping some cattle, while their location provided better access to pastureland. Certainly, the outlying neighborhoods also lost a significant part of their population, but many of the abandoned houses (including a few two-story apartment buildings) were being reused as stables or storage places. Kadyr, for example, had gone to some length to register his neighbor’s property under his own name. He then transformed the neighboring house into a stable for raising bulls and for storing hay and wood, and merged the two yards into a sizable vegetable plot.

The result of these processes is a town with a hole in the middle—a couple of largely empty administration buildings in the midst of ruins and decaying apartment buildings—with life continuing in the increasingly village-like neighborhoods. This centrifugal dynamic was not contained within city boundaries; the loss of city status and reclassification as “settlement of urban type” meant that residents were now required to travel to the district (raion) capital (thirty-five kilometers to the south) for many administrative issues. Moreover, as mentioned, residents increasingly depended on “the beyond” for work and for remittances. In the 2000s most families had one or several members who were engaged in ongoing circular migration to Russia, in particular to Ekaterinburg and Novosibirsk. Inhabitants felt that while in previous times they had been living in a place that mattered, they had ended up on the margins of even their own networks. No longer the pinnacle of Soviet modernization it had been in the past, Kokjangak started to blend in with the rest of the region.

To recapitulate, the memory of Moscow provisioning was so powerful because it gave voice to the experience of deprivation in the present: the disappearance of Soviet industry and its supporting economy; a demographic transition that signified severance from the centers of power; and a spatial inversion that indicated the town’s growing irrelevance and moral downfall. Life in Kokjangak had not only become bleak in purely economic terms; the pain was intensified by a sense of disorientation, and the loss of relevance and status.

What was lost in the midst of economic hardship was a sense of being distinctively modern, with “modern” here referring to the idea of being
advanced (in comparison to the past and in comparison to neighboring localities) as measured by education, technology, and consumption. These indicators had always been celebrated in official descriptions of the city and summed up in statistics detailing the metric tons of excavated coal, the number of hospital beds, the kilometers of paved roads, the capacity of the stadium, and the number of yearly visits to the cinema. This emphasis on numbers had produced a “quantified modernity” that functioned to smooth over the problems of the Soviet project. The strategy never succeeded entirely, and inhabitants had been painfully aware of the shortcomings of the Soviet modernist project and the coercion and contradiction on which it was built. Nevertheless, this quantitative surface had provided a semblance of modernity that continued to provide a compelling frame of reference. Moreover, this quantified modernity, with its always-increasing numbers, had been explicitly future oriented. As a “work-in-progress” (Hirsch 1997), as a past imperfect in which there was relative stability and hope of a better future, the Soviet project continued to nourish longing thoughts long after its decay.

This forward-looking Soviet “work-in-progress” was experienced as not only having come to a standstill but of moving in reverse. The references to a better past, of a city that had been modern and cosmopolitan, suggested a process of decline, as also seen in the use of descriptors of the present such as “primitive,” “loss,” and “dying city.” Moreover, inhabitants experienced the new situation as one of chaos in which the stability and predictability of the late Soviet period had given way to uncontrollable flux. In order to highlight this aspect of uncontrollability, it might be appropriate to refer to the changes not as a process of “demodernization” but as a process of becoming “postmodern.” In a short but insightful article, Unni Wikan (1996) presents the life story of a Buddhist nun in Bhutan, whose experiences with abuse, death, and oppression Wikan interprets as “an extreme example of a typical condition of things falling apart,” and suggests that this can be taken “as a prototype for postmodern life” when approached from the perspective of the dispossessed (1996, 279). In Kokjangak residents had been forced out of the relative comfort zone that their island of Moscow provisioning had provided. The world no longer came to their city, and so its inhabitants were forced to go out to the world, becoming in the process more cosmopolitan than they previously had been.

This tilting of perspective is not to dismiss or downplay the effects of impoverishment and dispossession but to acknowledge the flip side of this
process. In the words of Caroline Humphrey, “The dispossessed are people who have been deprived of property, work, and entitlements, but we can also understand them as people who are themselves no longer possessed” (2002, 21). Or, as Magnus Marsden shows, despite cosmopolitanism often being associated with affluent urbanites, conditions of marginalization and uncertainty may just as well foster an attitude of open-endedness, thereby enhancing “potentialities for engagements with others” (2008). But before moving to a discussion of the ways that inhabitants of Kokjangak held on to lost values and reached out to new ideas, let’s first explore in more detail how inhabitants navigated this uncertain terrain.

Navigating Post-Soviet Chaos

The closure of the coal mine had allowed the big shots to enrich themselves and had pushed ordinary people into poverty. That much was certain, but the reasons for closure and the techniques of enrichment were hotly debated and contested in the late 1990s, and into the early 2000s.

There were those who argued that the coal mine had had its days; the increasing length of the shafts indicated that the coal reserve was almost depleted and that coal mining had stopped making economic sense even in the last years of the USSR. “The thing is,” a former engineer told me, “metal and wood [for scaffolding] are expensive and coal is cheap, so when the coal is too deep it no longer makes sense.” The investments required for scaffolding, ventilation, and excavation had started to outweigh the value of the extracted coal, which led to collapse as soon as the planned economy was replaced with a market economy in which prices of commodities were no longer fixed at politically convenient levels by the central government. But there were others who argued that closure had been due to a tragic policy mistake. In the mid-1990s the Akaev government decided the country would switch from a coal-based energy supply to one based on hydroelectric energy, oil, and gas. The decision backfired when price levels of imported oil and gas quadrupled, and nationally produced hydroelectric power proved unable to meet demand. Undoing the mistake was complicated because by that point the coal mines had already deteriorated and required massive investments. In the case of Kokjangak such investment was not forthcoming, and several potential investors had
withdrawn after having expressed initial interest. Finally, and this was the most widespread opinion, there were those who said that it had all been intentional; directors and politicians had conspired in order to benefit from the bankruptcy and subsequent privatization.

Whether closure had been inevitable, a tragic mistake, or the result of conspiracy, it allowed successive directors—there had been four between 1991 and closure in 1999—to enrich themselves. The largest misappropriation took place in the early 1990s when the director and his associates, together with officials from Bishkek, pocketed a series of grants originally intended to secure the mine’s future. Next, while the mine’s scale of operation was being downsized, its inventory started disappearing. There was a persistent rumor about what happened to the relatively new and very expensive excavators (that had been purchased in the late 1980s). The official line was that they were irretrievable—buried inside a deep mine shaft following a gas explosion—but several insiders insisted that the explosion happened after the excavators had been removed, and only happened so as to cover up the stealthy sale of this equipment to buyers from China. Verifying such stories was complicated by the fact that each of the four directors left Kokjangak as soon as a successor appeared on the scene. Moreover, any paper trail—if it had ever existed—disappeared with the closure of the mine in 1999.

The exact history of accumulation and dispossession remains, and most likely will remain, unknown. In fact, if this history could have been documented in detail, it would never have taken place. The techniques of enrichment existed only because they were shrouded in a haze, the details remaining undocumented and knowable only by proxy. This fogginess was characteristic not just of the mine but more generally of the political-economic space that inhabitants navigated. As we will see, the condition of uncertainty had implications that pointed beyond the economic to ethical, epistemological, and ontological concerns.

* * *

Almaz was visibly annoyed: “Right when we finally reached the coal the officials [chinovniki] appeared, demanding their share. They haven’t given us a thing—no salary, no equipment, nothing. That is how things are here. They neither provide work, nor do they allow us to work.” We had a shot of vodka and the conversation switched to more frivolous matters, but
the issue must have continued to occupy his mind, because not much later Almaz added, “Actually we are helping lots of people. Some people plant grain, others tomatoes, and we dig coal. People need coal. That is how it should be, right? But our officials, they don’t care, they come when they want to fill their pockets. But when we need them, they say: ’We won’t give you anything.’”

A honking car arrived, and after quickly buying two more bottles of vodka, Almaz took his leave to join his friends, while I remained behind with Lola in her kiosk. “These guys don’t earn that poorly. Actually they are my best clients,” Lola commented. “But I wouldn’t want to be in their place, going into those holes not knowing if you will ever see daylight again.”

When I first got to know Almaz, in early 2004, he was nineteen years old and was in between things, quite literally. He officially lived with his parents but in practice spent most nights at one of his friends’. He somewhat studied for a bookkeeping degree as an external (zaocchnyi) student, the main activity for which, he told me, consisted of making the right payments. In any case, he did not think a degree would land him a job, it was just that his parents insisted he should have one. Since his final year in school (two years previously) he had been working off and on in small-scale mining as an apache. The name apache was used for the (mostly young) men who were engaged in the most informal of mining activities, and was based on similitude. In the words of an acquaintance, “It is because they run in the mountains like the Apaches, just as we know it from the movies.” Finding the coal layers was a laborious process of trial and error. With the aid of only shovels and picks, Almaz and his mates would dig narrow shafts into the mountain slope in search of coal, usually between ten and twenty meters deep before hoping to hit a thin layer of coal (eighty centimeters thick). Several times Almaz’s group had worked in vain for weeks.

Over the following months Almaz continued to work as an apache, but his attitude seemed to be changing. We talked a week after a tragic incident happened at a short distance from where he had been working. A young guy had been inside a shaft when it collapsed. He was dead by the time his mates managed to dig him out. Several men died from such accidents each year, but according to Almaz, “no one really knows because people don’t want to talk about it.” One reason for this silence was that public attention could very well bring an end to informal mining, thereby shutting
off the main source of income for many families. This particular tragedy had gotten under Almaz’s skin. Even though he rationalized the tragedy by saying that those guys had been working in a dangerous spot—a week earlier their shaft had partly caved in after rainfall—seeing this happen at such proximity made the risks of these kinds of mining activities very palpable. “When you are inside the mine it is OK, you just work like mad,” he said. “But waking up in the morning knowing that you have to go back in, that’s the worst.”

Almaz had been making plans to find work in Russia. In 2005 he traveled to Ekaterinburg in Russia, where he joined a group of Kyrgyz men from Kokjangak in construction. For the next three years we were out of contact, but when I returned to Kokjangak in 2008, Almaz was there as well, once again engaged in mining activities. He had worked in Russia for a year and a half, but preferred not to talk about his experiences, which had brought him very little of value, including financially: “You know, work in the mines is dangerous, but what are the alternatives? Our people also die in Russia.” Possibly his negative experiences in cold, faraway Russia had made him more accepting of the dangers of mining at home. But something else had changed as well. Almaz had started to become interested in Islam.

When I visited Almaz at his workplace in 2008, he introduced me to his foreman, who was also an active member of the conservative Islamic movement Tablighi Jamaat (see also chapter 4). We had a short conversation in which I asked him about his views on the dangers of mining and the troubles caused by the chinovniki. I did not manage to record a verbatim script of his words, but they were close to the following: “Look, in here we trust in Allah; the future cannot be known; we are earning money; we are able to provide for our families; Allah is really great.” Later, Almaz told me that his new work group (komanda) was very different from what he had experienced before: the men were all serious and supportive, and they had a responsible leader. Moreover, his own life had changed. No longer did he spend his earnings on alcohol, but instead he was making plans for marriage. Whether due to his experiences in Russia, his involvement with Islam, or both, Almaz came across as more mature and self-confident.

As all young people in Kokjangak, Almaz found himself confronted with numerous uncertainties and dangers, needing to navigate an
environment in which there were no good alternatives, only least bad options. Almaz’s complaints about the *chinovniki* at the beginning of this section had contained important hints for how to understand the post-Soviet condition. His statement about honest labor—“that is how it should be, right?”—suggested that he neither opposed “planned economy” nor “the free market” per se, but rather resented the decay of the former and the impotency of the latter, which had resulted in a “wild market.” The *chinovniki* were exemplary of this: they had been a necessary evil of the bureaucratic Soviet system, who in the new conditions had turned into parasitic predators backed by fake documents and a corrupt legal system. The sense of chaos was precisely this, not the absence of order—a free-for-all—but rather the unfairness and unreliability of the remnants of Soviet bureaucracy. In the midst of this chaos Almaz had been in search of justice and stability, which in 2008 he found not in the state or an economic ideology, but in the authority of an informal religious leader.

* * *

Lola had been charged with drug possession and spent three nights in jail, losing 20,000 Kyrgyz som (KGS) [which amounts to 400 USD] on her way to the judge. Eventually her case was dropped, but she still had to come up with an additional 5,000 KGS to cover procedural expenses, or they would reverse the process and put her on trial anyway. When I asked if these were legal payments she answered: “I don’t know, but they told me that it was according to the law and they showed me a document. Now I have to find 5,000 som. At home they scold me because of all these extra expenses.” Atyrgul commented dismissively that it was never about the law but about how much money they could squeeze out of Lola, and added: “If I would be president, everything would be different.” We all laughed.

Atyrgul was intimately familiar with these problems. In fact, her brother had been imprisoned just a few months previously, and was about to be transferred to a prison in the north of the country. The charges were drug possession and use of violence. Atyrgul acknowledged that her brother was sometimes involved in shady business, but she didn’t believe that to be the reason for his imprisonment, speculating that the police officers had planted the drugs on him. “I know these police officers. This is how they make money. They put someone in prison, wait for relatives to buy him out, and split the money.” Atyrgul herself had collected money from
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friends and relatives to buy her brother out of jail, but the required bribes turned out to be too high in his case. She had come back frustrated: “There is no good police, they are like mafia. The judges are the same. It doesn’t matter who the [accused] is, they will assume he is guilty. They only listen to the police.”

Three years previously, after she and her “good-for-nothing” husband separated, Atyrgul had moved to a fifth-floor apartment with her two children. She was not someone to complain, but confided that having to be “husband and wife at the same time” drove her to despair at times. When we talked in May 2004 she had held her job at the military office for about a year. She had found the job through an acquaintance, and in order to actually be appointed she only had to “throw in” (kidat’) the modest amount of 500 KGS (10 USD), plus a month of work without pay. Her main task was to contact the families whose sons were being drafted into the military. When she told me that her monthly salary was 1,050 KGS, an amount vastly insufficient to feed a family of three, I asked her: “But how do you actually live?” She replied: “I don’t know . . . well, sometimes I’m lucky at work.”

The following week I accompanied Atyrgul on one of her routes, contacting families with sons soon to be enlisted. At one point I waited on the street while Atyrgul was conversing with a woman inside a courtyard, and when she returned she reported that the woman had asked her to make inquiries at the military office in Suzak (the district center), and given her 500 KGS for this purpose, hoping that she would manage to return with the voennyi bilet (literally, “war ticket,” which provides deferral or exemption from being drafted). “Being lucky” meant running into a family that was prepared to go to some length to keep their son out of the army. In most cases she received only a small fee for assisting in getting a deferral, but some families aimed at removing their sons from the register altogether, a more complicated and lucrative procedure. “It’s not huge money,” Atyrgul explained, “my boss gets fifty and I get fifty [USD].”

Later that day, the town-hall cashier refused to release Atyrgul’s salary because her boss (in Suzak) had not been coming to work for over two weeks and thus had not signed off on her paycheck. Atyrgul made a scene, phone calls were made, and she was promised that her paycheck would be available for collection the following day. She commented to me that she
hoped her boss would be made redundant, which would give her a chance to get his job instead. Sure, she would have to hand money to the army officer (polkovnik) in Suzak, but she was optimistic that she would be able to collect the amount needed. Atyrgul always talked matter-of-factly about these realities, thereby indicating that harboring any (Weberian-style) ideal-type notions of bureaucracy would be entirely out of place. She navigated this messy reality by presenting herself as a strongheaded woman, a fighter (boevaiia zhenshchina) not afraid of anyone. The arrest of her brother, as much as it affected Atyrgul negatively, had at least the mildly positive effect of strengthening her tough image, as someone from a scandalous family (skandal’naia sem’ia) who was not to be messed with.

Atyrgyl actively worked the tensions between corrosive bureaucratic structures and flexible informal arrangements. As a skilled and self-conscious actor she managed to survive, making small sums of informal money every once in a while. But ultimately this “chaotic” system worked against people like her, against those who lived on the margins of society and were unable to mobilize strong support networks. In fact, when I tried to get in touch with her in 2009 I failed. Lola told me that Atyrgyl had lost her job the year before, and had taken her two children to Bishkek in search of work and a better future.

* * *

Lola and her friends Chinara and Atyrgul were discussing the local Peace Corps Volunteers. Lola suggested that they were spies, but Chinara interjected: “What spies? There is nothing here that can be of interest to their government.” Atyrgul replied that she had heard that the volunteers were sent over by the US government as a form of punishment, because why else would someone come to Kokjangak? Without reaching consensus, Chinara concluded: “Anyway, they have their own businesses. Take Carrie, she made a deal with Khatamov [director of the town’s employment center], and together they split the money. Did she ever contribute to some kind of [community] project, or give people money? No, of course not, she kept the money herself.” Atyrgul half jokingly said that this showed how well Carrie had adjusted to Kyrgyz reality, and it prompted her to mention the Kyrgyz saying: “If you fail to eat the meat of others like a wolf, your own meat will be taken” (Karyshkyr bolup biröönün, etim zhulup albasam, senikin zhulup alat).
The lack of trust, the sense of suspicion, and the notion that everyone becomes drawn into this “post-Soviet chaos” was evident in this conversation. The reference to wolves’ dinner etiquette reflected the idea that life in Kokjangak amounted to a zero-sum struggle, and brought to mind Hobbes’s state of nature in which “the condition of man . . . is a condition of war of everyone against everyone.” In fact, the same human-animal comparison featured in the Greek saying from which Hobbes had taken his inspiration: “homo homini lupus est” (a man is a wolf to another man). Just like in Hobbes, the reference to animalistic behavior contained a negative value judgment, suggesting that order is to be preferred over chaos, a sentiment we also came across in the various nostalgic references to the Soviet past. The post-Soviet condition, in the words of my acquaintances, was to be seen as diķii (untamed) or as bardak (chaos), a term with the secondary meaning of “brothel,” thus weaving ideas of moral decay into discussions of animal-like struggle.

Notwithstanding the similarities, my acquaintances’ descriptions of “post-Soviet chaos” reveal important differences with the Hobbesian state of nature. Inhabitants of Kokjangak did not suggest that chaos followed from the equality of citizens in the absence of a “power able to overawe them all” (Hobbes 1651). Instead of pure randomness, what was sketched was a situation in which hidden orders loomed below a seemingly orderless surface. Here, just like in chaos theory, chaos referred not to pure disorder but to “order within apparent disorder,” possibly even to “deterministic kinds of order . . . arising from the generalized properties of complex dynamical systems” (Mosko 2005, 7). The miners argued that the main problem was not the collapse of the state but the remainders thereof; the women insisted that the police had turned into a predatory machine targeting ordinary people, and they suggested that local NGO representatives plotted to channel external funds into their own pockets.

The logics underlying these observed predatory practices were tacitly understood, and the tactics employed were recognized by all. However, the efficacy of these practices depended on remaining in the shadow of the largely empty rhetoric of privatization, bureaucracy, and development. Moreover, precisely because of their shadowy nature these tactics were never hegemonic. In other words, the overwhelming sense of chaos and unpredictability was not caused by random disorder, but because informal hierarchies, networks, and lines of exclusion operated below the surface.
Not only did these hidden orders cause uncertainty, they produced and enlarged inequalities in ways that were difficult to predict.

The ethnographic examples in this chapter all reveal aspects of this chaotic configuration. The collapse of the Soviet infrastructure had produced a rush for spoils that inhabitants presented as chaotic, in which the activities of the police, officials, NGO workers, and Peace Corps Volunteers were characterized by secrecy and obscurity. Far from being “random,” everyone recognized the logics of dependency, reciprocity, and protection on which they were based. The rush for spoils had the “predictable” effect of enriching the well-placed and leaving poorly connected inhabitants increasingly impoverished and marginalized.

Chaos, then, is about the cracks through which people fall; it is about the opportunities it creates for those able to manipulate the situation and the immoral behaviors that people are pushed into. Ultimately, it is about the reordering of society at a moment when connections are unstable, in which new lines of inclusion and exclusions are being drawn and old ones are being reinstated or intensified. In such circumstances, Katherine Verdery comments, “people of all kinds could no longer count on their previous grasp of how the world works” and “became open to reconsidering . . . their social relations and their worlds of meaning” (1999, 35). Or, to go back to an already-mentioned observation by Geertz, “it is a loss of orientation that most directly gives rise to ideological activity” (1973, 219). It is to such reconsiderations and reorientations that we now turn.

Reorientation

On a cold morning in November 1998 a white UNDP jeep arrived in Kokjangak, coming to a halt next to a small office building. Two days previously a UNDP worker had made a phone call to a local NGO, expressing the intent to include the town in a “Participatory Poverty Alleviation Project,” and therefore wishing to meet with poor inhabitants. The phone call had not been without effect. A crowd of two hundred people had assembled in the open area in front of the NGO’s office. The two UNDP workers, one of whom was me, struggled to get through the crowd into the office, which was equally packed. People were jostling to enter their names and passport data on long lists. As my colleague and I found out later, rumors had circulated that the UNDP was about to embark on a massive aid program. And instead of relying on local intermediaries—who, as everyone knew, would channel funds to their own people—this time the
UNDP would be working directly with recipients. Together my colleague and I addressed the crowd outside while standing on top of the stairs leading to the office. We explained that the project would not be handing out grants, but would provide access to microcredit to poor residents after they had first received various forms of training and been “socially mobilized” for at least half a year. This had the desired effect of thinning out the crowd—those who had expected immediate assistance left the scene—but at least a hundred inhabitants stayed and came to subsequent meetings.

For a brief moment, the UNDP workers had produced a wave of anticipation in Kokjangak. Unavoidably, this initial enthusiasm slumped when it became clear that no quick salvation was forthcoming. Nevertheless, in the following weeks sixty inhabitants joined the Poverty Alleviation Program, which continued to run in Kokjangak for the next twelve years (and would include up to two hundred inhabitants). When in 2008 I talked again with some of the earliest participants about their experiences, several mentioned the mix of anticipation and skepticism with which they had approached the project and its missionaries, only gradually becoming committed as the project got on its feet, something that was accompanied by an adjustment of expectations as the project established its routine functioning, which included monthly meetings, training sessions, provision of access to microcredit, and the initiation of small infrastructural projects.

To my acquaintances, the involvement of foreigners had been simultaneously promising because of their external position (which would potentially disrupt the usual patterns of exclusion) and worrying because of their naïveté (which made them easy targets for manipulation by those in powerful positions).

I present this example because it provides a glimpse of the volatile dynamics of hope in a destitute environment and the “attitude of open-endedness” (Marsden 2008) that had emerged. There are many reasons why this development mission never instilled the kinds of conviction that some political and religious missions managed to produce (even if only temporarily). And yet the events made me think about the similarities and differences between the ways in which secular and religious projects travel, the variations in the fluctuations of affect, and how external ideological projects become entangled with local views and interests.

In previous decades “activists” had raised awareness of the truth of “scientific atheism” and more broadly of socialism. In the new millennium development activists had taught inhabitants about rights, sustainability,
and financial mechanisms; meanwhile Tablighi Muslim travelers tried to impress on inhabitants the importance of coming closer to Islam; several Pentecostal missions aimed at bringing the “Good News” of the New Testament; leaders of the opposition rallied inhabitants to join them in ousting the government; and spiritual healers offered solutions tailored to the problems of individuals. These multiple visions alternately focused on the here and now or the afterlife, differently emphasized the collective or the individual, and demanded a break with the past or instead tried to demonstrate continuity. As we will see in the next chapters, each of these characteristics influenced the specific rhythms, intensities, and reach of concrete ideological currents.

At the start of this chapter I quoted a Vechernii Bishkek newspaper article stating that “it is not difficult to destroy a city. One does not even need to bomb it. All that needs to be done is to take away hope and belief in tomorrow. Then the city will destroy itself.” In some ways this had been true enough—the city had indeed collapsed with the emigration of half its
population and the closure of the mine and the factories. Nevertheless, the materials contained in this chapter suggest that the relation between hope and destitution needs to be examined more closely, precisely because, as Zigon has titled an article, “Hope Dies Last” (2009). Even or especially in the direst of situations hope provides the “the energy, the petrol” needed to live and act. If we see hope as a method that reorients knowledge, directing it toward an imagined future (Miyazaki 2004), then the “taking away of hope”—the removal of one imagined future—will push people to imagine alternative ones. For many, this had meant a spatial relocation of hope: they had made the decision to leave the town, moving to horizons where they expected to have better lives. But even those who stayed behind found new points of reference in their “hopeless town.”

Writing about the indigenous inhabitants of Sakhalin, Bruce Grant has made a related argument. He argues that in the twentieth century the Nivkhi were caught between two master narratives: a narrative of “cultural authenticity” that depicted the Nivkhi as “children of nature” with their own language, customs, and rituals; and a “stride” narrative that presented the Nivkhi as having leaped into modernity and become true modern Soviet citizens. But in the late 1980s, the modernist narrative imploded with the decline and collapse of the Soviet system, while the cultural authenticity narrative proved empty because much knowledge about “traditional” ways of living had vanished or was no longer relevant. However, Grant writes, they were “discovering symbolic capital amid the ruins of both these myths” (1995, 158).

How does the case of Kokjangak compare? More than anything else, the inhabitants of Soviet Kokjangak had identified with the modernist narrative. The memories of Moscow provisioning and the remainders of the modern Soviet mining city continued to influence people’s expectations and desires. But with the state having lost its ability to project the future, having lost the “mechanisms for the projection of hope” (Hage 2003, 3), ideas of the modern started to connect in novel ways with tradition. Alexia Bloch argues that “the postsocialist condition requires us to pay close attention to competing ideologies and systems of meaning that give life to shifting subjectivities and the place of ideology in the multiple forms that modernity takes” (2005, 556). This is what I will do in the rest of the book, tracing a range of ideological movements and their spokespersons as
they presented their vision and tried to convince residents of their truth. The chaotic nature of the post-Soviet condition rendered any new capital, whether economic, social, or symbolic, highly unstable. Nevertheless, these new ideologies pierce into this foggy future, even if only for a moment, as we will see in the chapters ahead.