

## Benjamin Kaelin

**Mathijs Pelkmans.** *Fragile Conviction: Changing Ideological Landscapes in Urban Kyrgyzstan*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017. 213 pp. ISBN 978-1-5017-0514-4.

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With his monograph *Fragile Conviction: Changing Ideological Landscapes in Urban Kyrgyzstan*, Mathijs Pelkmans offers an ethnographic approach to the issues of ideology and conviction under the conditions of globalization. His goal is to shed light on the “mechanisms, by which individuals become committed to a cause and gain certainty about the meaning and value of the ideas involved” (p. 2). Based on the author’s extensive field research in Kyrgyzstan, the book grants insight into the ever-changing political, economic, and social landscape in the post-Soviet world by focusing on abruptly emerging systems of ideas, which often vanish as quickly as they emerged. He also pays close attention to the often-changing meanings of certain ideological signifiers and thus their temporary character. The main question addressed is how such systems of ideas go viral, “how they come to matter in people’s lives” (p. 5). Therefore, the book is situated within debates about the so-called end of history and ideology, as well as the proposed ideological, spiritual, and moral vacuum in the post-Soviet era—which some others have described, on the contrary, as a time of ideological excess. Key to his analysis is a conceptual focus on “conviction,” which Pelkmans differentiates from ideology: while he sees ideology closely associated with dominant power, his concept of conviction aims to capture an “emotive energy that is produced in the connections between individuals” (p. 10). Conviction is, therefore, better suited to include political and religious belief systems and also emphasizes the relationship between subject and ideas.

The central object of analysis is the social life of the formerly flourishing mining town of Kokjangak, which during the Soviet period was a spearhead of the state-socialist model of modernization. In the two main chapters Pelkmans demonstrates in great detail the shifting ideologies propagated by the state, as well as the rapidly transforming convictions of a population left vulnerable in a world stagnating under conditions of economic disarray. He achieves this by making the voices of people from all social strata heard. The book includes depictions of many of the author’s personal encounters in Kokjangak, many of which are quoted verbatim. Through these primary sources, of which there are many, the reader gets to know people of different backgrounds and the ways in which they try to make sense of the past, present, and future of their surrounding environment as well as their place in it. Pelkmans begins the introduction to his book with a long quote from a young woman, in

which she expresses the prevalent feelings during her involvement in the Tulip Revolution of 2005. Here we find the notion of great enthusiasm, of feelings of strength and energy that culminate in brief moments of clarity, which the author dubs “flashes of conviction” (p. 2). Yet these intense but short moments when ideas gain transformative potential and goals seem clear and collectively attainable were then followed by widespread disappointment and, ultimately, disillusionment in large segments of the population: the new leadership that gained power through the revolution very soon proved to be even more corrupt than its predecessor. Throughout the book Pelkmans then shows on the basis of different examples these movements of conviction that followed a similar pattern as described in the young woman’s discussion of the Tulip Revolution.

In the first part of the book the author describes the time of political and economic turmoil in Kyrgyzstan after the fall of the Soviet Union, a period when reforms were carried out in close connection with, and often under the surveillance of, international organizations. During this time the former Soviet republic, by the willingness of its elites to implement “shock therapy” reforms, quickly became a poster child for the Washington Consensus. The ideological climate was characterized by great hope and optimism for a quick and painless transition to a functioning market economy and a flourishing Western-style liberal democracy. Yet those hopes and aspirations soon lay shattered and Kyrgyzstan became an example of a transition gone hopelessly wrong. This development culminated in two revolutions (in 2005 and 2010) and violent ethnic tensions between Kyrgyz and Uzbek groups in the Fergana Valley following the 2010 events. Thus the neoliberal period was immediately followed by nationalistic outbursts of the worst kind with a death toll of at least several hundred. The failure of the transformation can be attributed to the teleological ideas and concepts of transition applied in Kyrgyzstan. Pelkmans convincingly argues that those ideas were simply based on wrong—at times astonishingly naïve—assumptions that had little or no respect for local conditions and history. The disasters of the transition become especially apparent in the lively picture the author paints in the second chapter of the “postindustrial wasteland” (p. 46) of Kokjangak, a place ruled by corruption at all levels and seemingly devoid of any chance of economic and social development.

Then, in the second part of the book, the author turns to the “specific rhythms, intensities, and reach of concrete ideological currents” (p. 71) that surfaced in the region. As he shows, the state of disarray and “structured disorder” (p. 47) in Kokjangak produced a great many competing—and often contradictory—ideologies to be adopted and often dropped by a population eager for hope and inspiration. In the third chapter on Soviet atheism Pelkmans lays the groundwork for the following discussion on contemporary religious beliefs. Based on observations of Soviet-style scientific atheism, the heritage of which can be found in the post-Soviet period in the denunciation of religious groups as fanatics or excessive by nonbelievers and a widespread general skepticism, Pelkmans elaborates on the different faith-based groups waging “discursive battles” (p. 100). In the fourth chapter he concentrates on conservative Islamic piety movements such as the Tablighi Jamaat, followed by a chapter on the Pentecostal Christian churches. Both these movements possessed a strong

foreign element and made efforts to adapt to local conditions. Lastly, the sixth chapter follows with an analysis of the beliefs and practices of proponents of spiritual healing. All of the belief systems discussed share an unstable existence, not least because they constantly challenge each other's legitimacy. And while all experienced times of boom-like growth, their popularity seems to have faded just as quickly.

Based on these observations, Pelkmans in a plausible way concludes that "conviction thrives in contexts of instability" (p. 170) and that the disruption and demise of stable structures in the case of Kyrgyzstan have given way to a whole range of often-contradictory convictions. The instability of these belief systems is shown by the way in which they peaked in moments of great clarity while rarely being able to establish themselves lastingly, although this process did not go by without leaving immutable traces. From a historian's perspective, especially interesting are Pelkmans's thoughts on the Soviet past of the city of Kokjangak and the way in which the Soviet experience still informs the present-day life of its citizens. While the empirical material is thinnest in this part and archival sources are absent, Pelkmans, in my opinion, nonetheless quite aptly identifies a Soviet mode of urban modernity in backward regions, characterized not only by economic development and industrialization but also by stable and comfortable conditions of everyday life. It seems that exactly these experiences are prevalent in the ambivalent nostalgic memories of a population longing for stability, but also longing for purpose and a sense of potential development. There is a great deal to learn from this take on Soviet modernity that includes the experiences of the (former) Soviet citizens and their everyday life, which unfortunately were often absent in previous studies on the topic of urban transformation in Central Asia (Gangler 2006). With Pelkmans's book, the excellent historiographical work on the central Asian city (e.g., Stronski 2010) and rural regions (Abashin 2015) in the Soviet period is complemented with newer developments. His insights on religion also expand the historical perspective in a thought-provoking way beyond the changing character and social role of Islam after the end of the Soviet Union (Khalid 2007). Likewise, his take on the general character of the post-Soviet transformation pays close attention to the role of economic policies and the central part international agents played in shaping them, something that previously tended to be neglected (Sartori and Trevisani 2007).

But the most important aspect to bear in mind when discussing this book is, in my opinion, as follows, and it is less connected with observations on the past and more with insight about the present. It is paramount—as Pelkmans also emphasizes in his introduction—to not treat Kyrgyzstan as some kind of strange oddity or backward exception: economic and political conditions of uncertainty like the ones described by Pelkmans are by no means limited to Central Asia or the post-Soviet world, but on the contrary seem to be more and more normal on a global scale. That these conditions—as is shown in the book at hand—create upheaval in the ideological realm is also evident on a global scale. It is this central place of Kokjangak in the global village that makes *Fragile Conviction* an important book for understanding the ambivalent consequences of globalization as it pertains to the vital issues of conviction and ideology.

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