

Department of Geosciences
University of Fribourg (Switzerland)

Rethinking Agricultural Cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan
Towards a Postcapitalist Approach to Cooperation in Postsocialism

THESIS

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Ottavia Cima

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Accepted by the Faculty of Science and Medicine of the University of Fribourg (Switzerland)
upon the recommendation of:

Thesis supervisor: Prof. Dr. Christine Bichsel (University of Fribourg, Switzerland)

Jury members: Dr. Jeanne Féaux de la Croix (University of Tübingen, Germany)
Prof. Dr. Jérémie Forney (University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland)
Dr. Bruno Meeus (University of Utrecht, Netherlands)

President of the jury: Prof. Dr. Olivier Graefe (University of Fribourg, Switzerland)

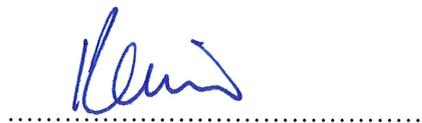
Fribourg, 11.05.2020

Thesis supervisor

Handwritten signature of Christine Bichsel in blue ink, positioned above a horizontal dotted line.

Prof. Dr. Christine Bichsel

Dean

Handwritten signature of Gregor Rainer in blue ink, positioned above a horizontal dotted line.

Prof. Dr. Gregor Rainer

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ABSTRACT

In the last three decades, community-based approaches have gained acclamation worldwide as a way to promote sustainable and inclusive development and, in ex-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union, as a way to support the “transition” towards a market economy. International donors have attempted to establish formal institutions for cooperation in local communities; among these, service cooperatives have promised a democratic and market-fit alternative to socialist collective farms. Kyrgyzstan’s liberalised economy after its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 has been a fertile ground for experiments with models of institutionalised cooperation – including agricultural cooperatives. However, today the dominant framing considers most cooperatives in the country as failed and explains this apparent failure through forms of historically inherited negative attitude towards cooperation.

This research aims to provide an alternative reading of agricultural cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan in order to generate more positive affects than the feelings of failure and inadequacy produced by the dominant framing. I focus on the promotion of agricultural cooperatives in rural Kyrgyzstan by international actors and on how local communities reinterpret and renegotiate a formal institution for cooperation promoted by external actors. I thereby illustrate how international actors uphold a specific model of cooperatives – as a tool on a prescribed route towards a teleological fantasy of development – and how local actors incorporate, and thereby reframe, this model in their everyday. I do this through an ethnographic engagement with villagers in Pjak, in the north-east of the country, and in particular with the practices and representations that emerge in relation to a local cooperative, Ak-Bulut.

My analysis represents an entry point for rethinking not only cooperatives but also well-established economic theories and models – not only in Kyrgyzstan or in other ex-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union, but globally. The focus on the promotion of cooperatives opens a broader reflection on how communities and individuals locally rearticulate global processes of neoliberalisation and marketisation. I thus interrogate the ways in which hegemonic discourses on the economy, development and modernity produce particular kinds of subjectivities and affects and their consequences on material inequalities; simultaneously, I explore the room for individual agency – for resistance and contestation – that emerges from the discontinuities of these hegemonic discourses. As a way to reinforce and expand this agency, I propose an approach to cooperatives and cooperation in postsocialism – a postcapitalist, postfantasmatic and relational approach – that invites to assume an open, anti-essentialist stance to engage with communities in the here and now. This approach, I argue, is relevant (and indeed needed) globally, especially in the present context of rising nationalist and authoritarian forces.

RÉSUMÉ

Repenser les coopératives agricoles au Kirghizistan. Vers une approche post-capitaliste de la coopération dans le post-socialisme

Les approches participatives bottom-up ont été saluées dans le monde entier d'une part, pour leur capacité à promouvoir un développement durable et inclusif, et dans les anciens pays socialistes d'autre part, pour leur propension à soutenir la « transition » vers une économie de marché. Les bailleurs de fonds internationaux ont tenté de créer des institutions formelles de coopération dans les communautés locales ; parmi celles-ci, les coopératives de services – en opposition aux fermes collectives socialistes – ont promis une alternative démocratique et adaptée au marché. L'économie libéralisée du Kirghizistan après son indépendance de l'Union Soviétique en 1991 a été un terrain fertile pour expérimenter divers modèles de coopération institutionnalisée – dont les coopératives agricoles. Cependant, le discours dominant aujourd'hui considère que la plupart des coopératives du pays sont un échec, et attribue cet échec apparent à des formes d'attitude négative envers la coopération, héritées du passé.

Cette recherche vise à fournir une lecture alternative des coopératives agricoles au Kirghizistan, afin de générer des affects plus positifs que le sentiment d'échec produits par le discours dominant. Je me concentre sur la promotion des coopératives agricoles par les acteurs internationaux et sur la façon dont les communautés locales réinterprètent et renégocient une institution formelle de coopération promue par des acteurs externes. J'illustre ainsi comment les acteurs internationaux soutiennent un modèle spécifique de coopératives – en tant qu'outil au sein d'une voie prescrite vers un fantasme téléologique du développement – et comment les acteurs locaux intègrent, et ainsi recadrent, ce modèle dans leur quotidien. Cette analyse se fonde sur mon engagement ethnographique avec les pratiques et représentations qui émergent en relation avec une coopérative locale dans un village dans le nord du pays.

Mon analyse constitue un point d'entrée pour repenser non seulement les coopératives, mais aussi des théories et modèles économiques bien établis – au Kirghizistan, dans d'autres pays ex-socialistes d'Europe Centrale et Orientale et de l'ancienne Union Soviétique, et plus généralement à l'échelle mondiale. L'accent sur la promotion des coopératives permet d'ouvrir une réflexion plus large sur la manière dont les communautés et les individus réarticulent localement des processus globaux de néolibéralisation et de marchandisation. J'interroge ainsi les façons dont les discours hégémoniques sur l'économie, le développement et la modernité produisent des types particuliers de subjectivités et d'affects, ainsi que leurs conséquences sur les inégalités matérielles. Simultanément, j'explore l'espace pour l'action individuelle – pour la résistance et la contestation – qui émerge des discontinuités de ces discours hégémoniques. Afin de renforcer et d'élargir cette capacité d'action, je propose une approche – post-capitaliste, post-fantasmagorique et relationnelle – aux coopératives et à la coopération dans le post-socialisme, invitant à adopter une position ouverte et anti-essentialiste pour s'engager avec les communautés dans le présent. Je maintiens que cette approche est pertinente – et nécessaire – à l'échelle mondiale, en particulier dans le contexte actuel de montée des forces nationalistes et autoritaires.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AAG	American Association of Geographers
ADK	<i>Aiyldyk Den sooluk Komitet</i> (Kyrgyz): Village Health Committee
CB(N)RM	Community-Based (Natural) Resource Management
CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CUK	Cooperative Union of Kyrgyzstan
DAC/OECD	Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations
FSU	Former Soviet Union
GAO	Gross Agricultural Output
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIZ (ex GTZ)	Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (formerly, the Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit)
ICA	International Cooperative Alliance
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
JICA	Japanese International Cooperation Agency
LRF	Land Redistribution Fund
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NSSD	National Sustainable Development Strategy for the Kyrgyz Republic
POLLEN	Political Ecology Network
RAS	Rural Advisory Services
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WUA	Water User Association

GLOSSARY OF KYRGYZ AND RUSSIAN TERMS

<i>Aiyl</i>	Kyr.	Village. <i>Aiyl okrug</i> is the lowest local government entity, with its legislative (<i>aiyl kenesh</i>) and executive (<i>aiyl okmotu</i>) bodies. The term <i>aiyl okmotu</i> is also used to refer to the local government in general, its building and its territory.
<i>Akim</i>	Kyr.	Head of the district
<i>Aksakal</i>	Kyr.	Elder, local leader
<i>Artel</i>	Rus.	Team
<i>Ata</i>	Kyr.	Father; used also as a form of respectful address to older men
<i>Ashar</i>	Kyr.	Practice of community work considered traditional in Kyrgyzstan
<i>Baike</i>	Kyr.	Older brother; used also as a form of respectful address to men older than the speaker
<i>Banja</i>	Rus.	Bath, bathhouse
<i>Beshbarmak</i>	Kyr.	Traditional Kyrgyz dish consisting of boiled meat and noodles, eaten in special occasions
<i>Bii</i>	Kyr.	Local leader
<i>Birikme</i>	Kyr.	Association
<i>Borsoki</i>	Kyr.	Small fried breads
<i>Chornaya kassa</i>	Rus.	Form of rotating savings and credit association
<i>Dyikan</i>	Kyr.	Farmer
<i>Dyikan charba</i>	Kyr.	Peasant farm
<i>Fermer</i>	Rus.	Farmer
<i>Gubernator</i>	Rus.	Head of the province
<i>Jailoo</i>	Kyr.	Summer pasture
<i>Jarma</i>	Kyr.	Popular grain-based cold drink in Kyrgyzstan
<i>Kelin</i>	Kyr.	Daughter-in-law or, in general, young married woman
<i>Kolkhoz</i>	Rus.	(Soviet) collective farm
<i>Kristjanskije khozjastva</i>	Rus.	Peasant farm
<i>Kulak</i>	Rus.	Designation for peasant farmers during the Russian Empire; in Soviet times the term assumed a negative connotation
<i>Kurort</i>	Rus.	Resort
<i>Manap</i>	Kyr.	Local leader
<i>Mirab</i>	Kyr.	Water manager
<i>Oblast</i>	Rus.	Province
<i>Rayon</i>	Rus.	District
<i>Remont</i>	Rus.	Repair, renovation
<i>Sovkhoz</i>	Rus.	(Soviet) state farm
<i>Subbotniki</i>	Rus.	Form of community work established during the Soviet Union

<i>Toi</i>	Kyr.	General term for different kinds of social celebrations
<i>Uruu</i>	Kyr.	Descent line

Note on plurals: for the reader's easier understanding, the plural of foreign words is in most cases marked by the English "-s" (in some cases, the Russian "-i" is maintained, as in *fermeri*).

Note on currencies: the value of Kyrgyzstan's national currency, the Kyrgyzstani Som (KGS, or som) dropped between 2014 and 2015; since 2016 it has been mostly stable. Prices are indicated in soms with their equivalent in US Dollars (USD) based on conversion rates on 08.06.2016, when 1 KGS corresponded to 0.0146 USD and 1 USD to 68.37 KGS (<https://www.xe.com>, accessed 23.12.2019).

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1 INTRODUCTION

It has been three days since I settled down in Pjak,¹ a village in Kyrgyzstan's north-eastern Issyk-Kul province,² with the idea to collaborate with the local agricultural cooperative Ak-Bulut for my doctoral research. The previous week I met Kumbat, Ak-Bulut's chairman, who provided me with an overview of the structure and numerous activities of the cooperative and invited me to move into his house for the time of my fieldwork. In the last three days I have roamed the streets of the village to meet the persons Kumbat indicated as members of the cooperative. The ones I could meet told me, however, that they are not anymore (or have never been) active in the cooperative, and that now they do all their agricultural activities alone: for instance, they buy agricultural inputs from private companies in the nearby town and sell their produce to private traders. My last interlocutor stated plainly that the cooperative exists only on paper; he is, indeed, a member, but a member only on paper. I am frustrated: it seems that the cooperative I was planning to study does not exist. The decision to focus my research on agricultural cooperatives was motivated by my interest in identifying forms of collective work that persist or emerge as an alternative, and a form of resistance, to the expansion of neoliberal markets started with the reform programmes that followed the independence of Kyrgyzstan from the Soviet Union in 1991. I am, therefore, also disappointed: it seems that "the market" has conquered the agricultural sector, even in Pjak. At the apex of my frustration and disappointment, I fall sick.

After a couple of days of rest, I continue with Elzada, my interpreter, our tour in the village to meet other "members" of Ak-Bulut. When we are told that the person we are looking for is not at home, Elzada suggests that we stop by the house vis-à-vis: some of her in-laws live there. After the conventional introductions, Jamilya invites us to sit in her kitchen. While she pours tea from the samovar, she comments that, like every Sunday, she is preparing the *banja* – a small bathhouse in the garden – for her family. Since in Kumbat's house there is no *banja*, Jamilya offers me to use hers: she usually asks 50 soms (0.70 USD) for its use. I am happy to accept the offer, especially because the public *banja* is open only every second Saturday and closed this week. Jamilya explains that she has just started the fire and that the water will be ready after one hour. Elzada and I leave and come back one hour later, but the *banja* is not yet ready. I remain alone in the kitchen; the minutes pass slowly.

After a long while, the two women come back in the kitchen and Jamilya starts cutting some meat and potatoes. I understand from Elzada that Jamilya is cooking a *tamak* (the general Kyrgyz term for a hot meal) for her as a way to show respect to her in-law. I sense that this will take some time, so when the *banja* is finally ready, I linger over the washing ritual and enjoy, without rushing, the pleasure of scrubbing away the dust of the village from my skin. When no traces of dust are left and I re-join the kitchen's door, the pot is still on the fire and Jamilya is preparing a new samovar for the tea. I realise that I misunderstood the situation: I thought that Elzada would eat while I used the *banja* but in fact Jamilya

¹ The names of villages, persons and cooperatives are anonymised in the whole manuscript.

² When I use the term "province", I refer specifically to the administrative entity; otherwise, I speak more generally of the Issyk-Kul "region" to refer to the area surrounding the Issyk-Kul lake (see Fig. 1).

was waiting for me to serve the food. I tell Elzada that I should inform Kumbat's wife Dinara that I will not eat at home, since she is waiting me for dinner. Elzada comments that it is not worth calling her: since Dinara is preparing a meal for me, I will have anyway to eat it. I am tired, cold and do not want to eat dinner twice. After a short argument with Elzada, we agree that she will stay and eat Jamilya's food while I go home. I am still standing in the yard and say goodbye to Jamilya: she brings a plate with the steaming-hot food at the door and she does not allow me to leave before having tasted her food. I take a tiny piece of meat and finally leave. On the table at home there is *beshbarmak*, the Kyrgyz traditional dish consisting of boiled meat and noodles that is eaten in special occasions: Kumbat's daughter has come for a visit and she brought the meat as a gift to her parents. I breathe a sigh of relief that I did not eat the first dinner!

This experience is for me what Marilyn Strathern (1999) calls an "ethnographic moment" – a revealing moment of disruption – which, in this Sunday of early August 2015, manifests bodily and affectively through my irritation. Why am I so irritated? First of all, the rituals of Kyrgyz hospitality can be intrusive and excessively insistent. This experience is not new to me after spending several months in Kyrgyzstan. I have become familiar with situations when, as a guest, I feel like the "host's hostage"³ – feeling obliged to honour hospitality rituals as a way to show respect to the host, even if this means sometimes to go against my own bodily or affective needs. I have also become familiar with the sensation that often the host is herself⁴ hostage of these rituals – feeling obliged to perform prescribed rituals as a way to show respect to the guest rather than following her own mood and needs. Moreover, I am usually relatively high-positioned in the hierarchy of guests because I am a foreigner and a European. I therefore often interpret the excessive hospitality reserved to me as the expression of broader post-Cold War power structures between the West and the East – the host's material enactment of my privilege within these structures. Therefore, excessive hospitality often disturbs me because it confronts me materially with a privilege I have difficulties coming to terms with.

However, on this Sunday, there is something more in my irritation: it is the clash between my expectations about a commodified service and its actual realisation in Jamilya's house. For me, the service of the *banja* appeared as a commodity exchange: I expected to be able to consume a use value against the payment of an exchange value. I assumed the transaction to be a purely market transaction and did not expect to have to comply with additional social rituals or reciprocations, which, in my experience with "hostaging" rituals in Kyrgyzstan, can be quite burdensome. However, my expectations are betrayed in Jamilya's house: not only does the service not correspond to the description provided (the water is not warm after one hour), but I also have to perform the hospitality rituals I thought to escape thanks to the commodification of the service. I thus realise that "the market" has not taken over everything in Pjak: I experience instead, literally on my skin, its embeddedness in social relations (Polanyi 2001).

³ I thank Camille Giraut for suggesting this expression; I am grateful to her and to Sarah Bittel for reflecting with me on my experience in Jamilya's *banja*.

⁴ Most of the time the ones who materially perform hospitality rituals are women.

In this research I investigate how markets reconfigure social relations and power structures and how, at the same time, these relations and structures embed and shape markets. I interrogate the ways in which hegemonic discourses on the economy, development and modernity produce particular kinds of subjectivities and affects and their consequences on material inequalities. I explore the room for individual agency – for resistance and contestation – that is left in the interstices of such hegemonic discourses. As an entry point for these broad questions, I focus on the promotion of agricultural cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan by international actors within rural development programmes paralleling post-independence governmental structural reforms. I thereby illustrate how international actors uphold a specific model of cooperatives as a tool on a prescribed route towards a teleological fantasy of modernity, and how local actors incorporate, and thereby reframe, this model in their everyday practices. I do this through an ethnographic engagement with villagers in Pjak and in particular with the practices and representations that emerge in relation to the cooperative Ak-Bulut.

Cooperatives as tools for development in the “postsocialist transition”

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and of other socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and Asia between 1989 and 1992, reforms in many countries have aimed at the privatisation, liberalisation and deregulation of the economy – a “transition”⁵ from the previous socialist economic and political system towards a market economy within a liberal democracy (e.g. Herrschel 2007; Luong 2009; Ahrens and Hoen 2012). International organisations such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank and various governmental and non-governmental development agencies have played an important role in conceiving and implementing reforms after socialism in a similar way, as they have promoted structural reforms and development programmes in the Global South since the start of decolonisation (e.g. Atabaki and O’Kane 1998; Hann 2002) or, more recently, austerity programmes in the Global North (e.g. Dogaru 2014; Hinterleitner, Sager, and Thomann 2016; Farnsworth and Irving 2018). In all these contexts, such programmes for reforms, development or austerity have mainly followed a neoliberal logic that advocates for a reduction of the role of the state in both economic production and welfare provision and for its substitution by private actors within territories framed as nation-states (e.g. Collier 2011).

The outcomes of these programmes remain contested, however. Whereas nationalised economic activities and governmental welfare have been drastically reduced, their effective substitution by private actors and markets is often limited: instead, informal exchanges and patronage relations – often framed as corruption – easily fill the void that results from state withdrawal (e.g. Clapham 1982; Tangri 1999; Collins 2006; McMann 2014). Moreover, even if programmes sometimes specifically target disadvantaged population groups and implement (especially since the mid-1990s) participatory mechanisms, local elites are often better able to “capture” the resources mobilised through these programmes (e.g. Olivier de Sardan 2005).

⁵ I generally avoid using the term “postsocialist transition” to refer to the process of socio-economic change that has followed the end of socialist regimes in CEE and the FSU; I prefer to speak instead of “transformation after socialism” (see e.g. Altvater 1998; see Burawoy and Verdery 1999b, 14ff for a critical use of the term “transition”). I sometimes use the term “postsocialist transition” to reflect its use within a discourse where the term implies a linear and teleological vision of this process of transformation.

The result of all this is thus commonly the exacerbation of social inequalities and a general precarisation of living conditions (e.g. Stiglitz 2003). In the Global South and in ex-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Former Soviet Union (FSU),⁶ both scholarly literature and public discourse often explain the difficulties of reforms or development programmes in complying with their stated aims because of the persistence of pre-modern cultural habits or Soviet/socialist structures, whose logics seem to be incompatible with the “modern” logics of reforms and development programmes: entire populations and regions are thus discursively trapped in backwardness or pre-modernity along determined trajectories of path-dependencies (e.g. Stark 1992; Jürgen Beyer and Wielgoß 2001).

The idea that local habits or structures are to be blamed when local transformations do not follow the prescribed trajectories has been questioned, especially from two perspectives. On the one hand, postdevelopment scholarship has contested the very notion of development, revealing how the hegemonic discourse on development reproduces and strengthens the divide between developed and underdeveloped (e.g. Pigg 1992; Escobar 1995). Drawing on Foucault’s notion of governmentality (e.g. Foucault 1991) scholars have critically unpacked development programmes as instruments of governmentality (see Watts 2003): as devices or “dispositifs” of governance and control that, while presenting development as a technical issue, depoliticise it and evacuate its promoters from the responsibility and accountability for their choices and assumptions (e.g. Ferguson 1990; Brigg 2002). On the other hand, ethnographies of aid (e.g. Mosse 2005; Olivier de Sardan 2005) and of postsocialism (e.g. Burawoy and Verdery 1999b; Humphrey 2002; Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008) have offered richly documented empirical material that demonstrates the poverty of “grand narratives” – respectively, development and the postsocialist transition – to understand how local structures, power relations and representations actively engage with reform or development programmes. From this perspective, these programmes are not coherent devices of control but contingent processes whose outcomes are unpredictable and cannot be inscribed into pre-defined trajectories and path dependencies. The failure or success of such programmes is therefore not determined by existing structures or habits but, rather, depends on how the actual outcomes of these programmes are discursively interpreted within dominant frames of legitimation (Mosse 2004).

Initiatives for the promotion of cooperatives, in both the Global South and in ex-socialist countries in CEE and the FSU, constitute a particular and, I argue, relevant example of how development models are implemented and legitimised within broader teleological narratives and how they are renegotiated and reframed at the local level. Cooperatives, intended as a particular form of collective enterprise (e.g. Hansmann 1999),⁷ have represented, in the framework of development projects, a tool for inclusive development within market economies (e.g. Birchall 2004) and, in the context of transformation after socialism, a tool for supporting small private entrepreneurs and farmers in their transition and adaptation

⁶ The term “Global South” usually refers to those regions of the world that are not part of the “Global North”; it often implicitly includes also ex-socialist regions in Asia, although these remain underrepresented in work done under the label of “Global South”. In order to differentiate and emphasise the specific experiences of ex-socialist regions in CEE and the FSU, I refer to these separately. I am well aware of the ambiguity and questionability of these and other categories (e.g. “postsocialist” or “Western”); I hope the reader will concede the use of these categories in the manuscript while maintaining a critical stance on them. For a critical discussion of some of these categories see Müller (2018) and also Chapter 4.

⁷ See also <https://www.ica.coop/en/cooperatives/cooperative-identity> (accessed 22.11.2019).

to a new market system (e.g. Deininger 1995). Existing research on cooperatives in ex-socialist countries, however, highlights the difficulties in establishing and maintaining cooperative organisations in these contexts (e.g. Theesfeld and Boevsky 2005; Lerman and Sedik 2014). As an explanation for these difficulties and, more generally, for what seems the scarce success of initiatives for community-based cooperation in ex-socialist countries, scholars have pointed to the legacies of “pseudo-cooperation” in socialist regimes (see Theesfeld 2019). They lament that socialist regimes used (or “abused”, e.g. Gardner and Lerman 2006) the concepts of cooperation and cooperatives within a rhetoric of emancipation that masked their centralised management and authoritarian control. This, according to several scholars, is at the basis of people’s unwillingness to cooperate – an unwillingness due to a “psychological resistance to cooperation” (*id.* 5), a lack of trust in institutions and in others (e.g. Lissowska 2013) or, as is expressed mainly in oral communications, a generalised passivity and a lack of active entrepreneurial spirit.

Kyrgyzstan does not seem to constitute an exception to this argument, and the little available research on cooperatives in the country agrees with this reading (e.g. Lerman 2013a; Lerman and Sedik 2013). Despite the boom in the number of registered cooperatives that has followed a focus on the promotion of cooperatives by aid agencies especially in the 2000s, today several scholars, development practitioners and policy-makers lament that most of these cooperatives are “fictive”, in that they exist only on paper and do not carry out collective activities in their frameworks (e.g. Beishenaly and Namazova 2012). Also in this context, the “failure” of cooperatives is attributed to the legacies of the Soviet system (e.g. Lerman 2013a). Indeed, as illustrated above, when I started engaging with cooperatives in the Issyk-Kul region and in particular with Ak-Bulut in Pjak, the first impression I had was that these cooperatives correspond to the description of “fictive” cooperatives and that farmers base their agricultural activities mainly on market transactions.

When Jamilya offered me to use her *banja* against a payment, I interpreted this as a clear sign of commodification and, more generally, of the achieved establishment of market economy in the village. However, the experience reported above suggests that we cannot understand market transactions in Pjak as separated from reciprocal relations, hospitality rituals or kinship obligations. In line with the numerous scholars who have conceptualised markets as embedded in social relations (e.g. Polanyi 2001) or in moral economies (e.g. Thompson 1971) or, more radically, as intrinsically social and moral processes (e.g. Narotzky and Besnier 2014; Palomera and Vetta 2016), I argue that this observation is not relevant only for a small Kyrgyzstani village but that, instead, it represents an entry point to question and rethink dominant understandings of formality, markets and economy. Yet the few studies on cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan as well as the more numerous research on community-based management in the country (e.g. Sehring 2009; Dörre 2015; Shigaeva et al. 2016) mostly limit their attention to cooperation practices within formal institutions and usually neglect other, often unformalised, forms of cooperation – although the few studies that include informal cooperation in their analysis suggest that it is crucial for farmers’ livelihoods (e.g. Sabates-Wheeler 2007).

Existing research in Kyrgyzstan (and also a good number of studies in other ex-socialist countries in CEE, the FSU and other parts of the world) thus mostly falls short of accounting for, and therefore

explaining, how local social structures and cooperation practices embed formal cooperatives or more generally formal institutions for community-based cooperation. These studies also neglect to consider how local actors renegotiate and reinterpret dominant models and representations of cooperatives, cooperation or, more broadly, of development and modernity. Therefore, ultimately, these studies fail to understand the symbolic and material consequences of cooperation initiatives on the livelihoods and everyday lives of individuals or to provide relevant ideas of how individuals and communities can engage with such initiatives towards more inclusive economic practices.

Rethinking agricultural cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan

This research is motivated by the aspiration to provide a different reading of agricultural cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan in order to generate affects more positive than the feelings of failure and inadequacy implied by the dominant framing and thereby to open up alternative possibilities for engaging with cooperation and communities. I therefore question the narrative according to which cooperatives have failed because of socialist legacies and path dependencies. I challenge the assumptions underpinning this narrative as well as the assumptions that inform, in the first place, reforms and development programmes. I provide an empirically grounded understanding of how individual actors construct and reproduce, but also reinterpret and contest, the dominant narrative of cooperatives and how, through their everyday practices, these actors reconfigure, and are reconfigured by, the formal institutions for cooperation proposed by international agencies. I maintain that such an analysis can serve as an entry point for rethinking not only cooperatives but also broader conceptualisations and models of economy – not only in Kyrgyzstan or in other ex-socialist countries in CEE and the FSU, but globally.

I thus aim to answer following research questions:

1. How do actors reinterpret, perform and rearticulate representations and practices of cooperation in the context of Kyrgyzstan's decollectivised agriculture?
 - 1a. How do international and local actors discursively construct a narrative of failed cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan and in the particular case of the Ak-Bulut cooperative?
 - 1b. How do existing cooperation practices, representations and power structures in Kyrgyzstan and in Pjak reframe the model of formal cooperation promoted by international agencies?
 - 1c. How do actors in Kyrgyzstan and in Pjak renegotiate the practices promoted by this model?
2. What are the material, affective and symbolic consequences of these processes for villagers in Pjak in terms of their livelihoods, social relations and subjectivities?

The context of contemporary Kyrgyzstan is particularly well suited for engaging with these aims and questions. In comparison with other Central Asian republics, Kyrgyzstan has quickly opened to international cooperation and democratic governance mechanisms. The country has thus represented a

favourable ground for aid agencies to experiment with participatory approaches of formal cooperation for community-driven development and resource management. Nevertheless, most existing research on the topic has been less creative in experimenting with different epistemological approaches. This research has mainly applied the common assumptions about postsocialist transition and path dependencies discussed above and reproduced the same narrative of failure.

In order to challenge these assumptions and narrative in the specific context of Kyrgyzstan and for the even more specific case of Ak-Bulut, I therefore build on the two scholarly currents, introduced above, that have already provided a compelling critique to these assumptions and narrative in other contexts worldwide. On the one hand, I draw on postdevelopment scholarship and on its critique of a universalised notion of development to deconstruct the developmentalist discourse that underpins the promotion of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan and to critically unpack reform and development programmes as devices for control and governance. On the other hand, I draw on the ethnographic traditions of scholarship about aid and postsocialism in order to acknowledge and make sense of the agency of local subjects in the renegotiation of cooperation models and in the reconfiguration of local cooperation practices, social relations and power structures in the context of post-independence reform and development programmes.

Gibson-Graham's "weak theory" (Gibson-Graham 2006a; see also 2014) constitutes an epistemological approach and a conceptual frame that, I argue, allow to engage with and expand the critique formulated by postdevelopment scholars and ethnographers of aid and postsocialism. Weak theory challenges deterministic teleological visions and established categories by refusing to align observed "small facts" to "grand narratives". It invites to commit instead to a practice of thick description that leaves analysis open to the contingencies of social processes, which are never determined by a single factor but co-determined by a multiplicity of diverse localised experiences. I therefore abandon the idea of cooperatives as formal enterprises and bounded objects and embrace instead a vision of cooperatives as the always incomplete and volatile result of open-ended and contingent practices (Byrne and Healy 2006; Gibson-Graham 2006a, 101–26). I draw on the growing commoning scholarship to frame these cooperation processes as relational practices that co-emerge with other localised practices and subjectivities (e.g. Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016; Singh 2017) and that imply, therefore, the continuous reconfiguration of social relations within assemblages of human and nonhuman entities (e.g. Nightingale 2019).

Such an endeavour requires a methodological approach that allows the researcher to be open to the contingencies and diversity of situated social processes. I therefore apply a reflexive ethnographic approach inspired by feminist epistemologies – an approach that acknowledges the situatedness of all knowledge and that draws attention on the material and affective dimensions of social processes (e.g. Rose 1993; Davies 1999). Within such an approach, the embodied experiences of the researching subject – such as, for instance, the physical sickness or the frustration, disappointment and irritation I described at the beginning of this chapter – constitute an analytical entry point to make sense of broader social processes (e.g. Miltz, Faria, and Schurr 2019), such as the transformation of economic practices or reciprocity relations in a Kyrgyzstani village.

Yet, I argue, such an analysis is relevant well beyond the specific context of this particular village and even of Kyrgyzstan. Hörschelmann and Stenning (2008, 356) have claimed that ethnographies of postsocialism contribute “to reconceptualizations of taken-for-granted concepts [...] while enabling further theorizations of social change and posing questions about the validity of the models now applied in postsocialist countries for established capitalist societies themselves”. In line with them, I maintain that my analysis is relevant to broader debates, especially in the fields of economic geography and critical development studies. In particular, my analysis contributes, first, to question the taken-for-granted concepts of “cooperatives”, “cooperation”, “development” or “economy”, among others; second, to understand the affective and material consequences of taking these concepts for granted; and third, to rethink these concepts in ways that allow a concrete engagement, in the present, for more inclusive communities and, ultimately, a juster society.

Outline of the manuscript

Eight chapters, subdivided in four parts, plus a concluding chapter and this introductory chapter, constitute this manuscript. Part I situates my research in the relevant scholarly literature and in the regional context. Chapter 2 presents current approaches for the promotion and analysis of cooperatives and formal cooperation initiatives. Chapter 3 provides an overview of post-independence reforms and socio-economic transformation in Kyrgyzstan, focusing in particular on the role of international development actors in this transformation.

Part II lays down the conceptual and methodological approach of my research. In Chapter 4, I advocate for a weak theory to engage with cooperatives (in Kyrgyzstan as well as worldwide) and I specify the terms and concepts of the postfantasmatic postcapitalist relational approach that underpins my analysis. In Chapter 5, I develop my feminist ethnographic methodology and, according to its epistemology, I dedicate a section to the presentation of the background and genealogy of my research project.

Four analytical chapters build the following two parts of the manuscript. Part III investigates the promotion of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan. Chapter 6 focuses on the actors engaged in this promotion and reveals the discursive practices through which these actors construct – and sometimes contest – a specific ideal model of cooperative. In the chapter I argue that, since these actors base their evaluation of existing cooperatives on an ideal model that narrowly defines what is a “true” cooperative, it is almost inevitable that their evaluation concludes with the statement that cooperatives have “failed”. This mechanism mirrors thus the developmentalist discourse denounced by postdevelopment scholars – a discourse that reproduces the very categories it aims to erase. In Chapter 7, I first provide an overview of cooperative experiences in the Issyk-Kul region and then analyse the history, representations and practices of the Ak-Bulut cooperative in Pjak. I describe my search for a cooperative: an entity that reveals difficult, or even impossible, to grasp *as bounded object*. Part III thus concludes by stating the need to abandon the fantasy of such a cooperative in order to be able to see and engage with the actual cooperation practices that are carried out in the village.

Starting from the spaces opened up by the deconstruction process initiated in Part III, Part IV develops the analysis of the diverse economies of agriculture in Pjak. In Chapter 8, I analyse their transformations over the last four decades and highlight their continuities and discontinuities from the late Soviet period throughout the post-independence period. I thus reveal the power relations, privileges and inequalities but also the reciprocity and solidarity relations that shape, and that are constituted by, the diverse economic practices in the village. Chapter 9 provides a similar analysis of the current diverse agricultural practices in Pjak. The chapter starts from the observation of a divide between representations of an individualised village community (representations produced by scholars, development practitioners and villagers) and the observation of widespread forms of cooperation among villagers during my stay in Pjak. I therefore interrogate the representations, moralities and rationalities that constitute this divide and its symbolic, affective and material consequences in villagers' everyday lives. Part IV concludes by unfolding the mechanisms and effects of subjection processes in the village and discussing how villagers engage with these processes, sometimes reproducing and sometimes resisting them.

In the concluding chapter of the manuscript I propose and outline a renewed approach to engage with cooperatives (but also with cooperation and communities more generally) academically and politically, and I highlight the contribution of my analysis to broader disciplinary debates and social theory.

Part I – Situating the research in academic debates and the regional context

The two chapters composing Part I situate my investigation on the promotion of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan in the scholarly debates on the topic and in the regional context. In Chapter 2, I start by presenting the commonly accepted definition and conceptualisation of cooperatives that underpin most initiatives for the promotion of this kind of formal collective organisation as well as most scholarly literature on the topic. The historical overview of how these definition and conceptualisation have emerged and changed through time (§2.1) shows that these are far from being fixed and universal, but are instead the result of complex negotiations, controversies and compromises spanning over several decades. This historical contextualisation makes clear that the model promoted by aid agencies in Kyrgyzstan, although it is presented as universal, is instead only one among several other, existing or imaginable, understandings of cooperatives. I extend my review (§2.2) to scholarly literature that deals with other forms of formalised cooperation, in particular with initiatives promoting models for the community-based management of natural resources (CBNRM). This literature is relevant for my study because development projects have promoted both cooperatives and community-based organisations for CBNRM as tools towards a particular idea of inclusive development based on the empowerment and emancipation of citizens as entrepreneurs. I will show that a good part of the literature on CBNRM – and especially on commons – is based on similar assumptions and conceptualisations as the literature on cooperatives. In the last part of the chapter I engage with the critique on these assumptions and conceptualisations provided by the recent commoning scholarship.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the regional and historical context of post-independence Kyrgyzstan. After a short contextualisation in the broader Central Asian context, I outline the main social and economic transformations that the country has experienced since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. I focus on the main structural reforms in the agricultural sector and their outcomes (§3.1). I then (§3.2) illustrate the role of international actors in supporting these reforms and clarify in particular how development programmes have paralleled governmental reform programmes. I engage with the work of scholars who have pointed to Kyrgyzstan's increasing dependence on international resources and who have discussed the micro-politics of development intervention in the country. In the chapter, I only marginally mobilise scholarly literature that deals specifically with the topic of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan. Since this literature is very limited and applies relatively homogeneously an economic approach, I will engage more deeply with this literature in the analytical part of the manuscript (§6.1).

2 FROM COOPERATIVES AS COLLECTIVE ENTERPRISES TO COOPERATION AS RELATIONAL PRACTICE

It is today common to refer to the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) for the definition of cooperatives and their principles. For ICA (2019a), “a cooperative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise”. According to this widely shared definition (*id.*, see also ILO 2018, 12), what technically distinguishes a cooperative from other kinds of enterprise is especially its *purpose* (benefit for the members), its *governance* (one member, one vote principle), its *ownership* (by members), and the way *surplus* is handled (proportionally distributed to members and/or reinvested in the enterprise). In contrast to other forms of enterprise, cooperatives are considered to build on specific values (“self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity” as well as “honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others”) and on seven “cooperative principles” listed in Table 2.1 (ICA 2019a).

Table 2.1: ICA cooperative principles (ICA 2016, ii; see also 2019a)

<p>1. Voluntary and open membership</p> <p>Co-operatives are voluntary organisations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.</p>
<p>2. Democratic member control</p> <p>Co-operatives are democratic organisations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary co-operatives members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) and co-operatives at other levels are also organised in a democratic manner.</p>
<p>3. Member economic participation</p> <p>Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of the co-operative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the co-operative. Members usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing their co-operative [...]; benefitting members in proportion to their transactions with the co-operative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.</p>
<p>4. Autonomy and independence</p> <p>Co-operatives are autonomous, self-help organisations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organisations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their co-operative autonomy.</p>

<p>5. Education, training and information</p> <p>Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives. They inform the general public [...] about the nature and benefits of co-operation.</p>
<p>6. Co-operation among co-operatives</p> <p>Co-operatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the co-operative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures.</p>
<p>7. Concern for community</p> <p>Co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members.</p>

These definition and principles emphasise the formality of cooperatives as a specific form of enterprise and as legal entity with clear boundaries between members and non-members. Cooperatives are often differentiated by categories based on their functions as production, service or consumer cooperatives (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2: Classification of cooperatives (based on Lerman 2013a, 7–10; see also Zamagni 2012; ILO 2018, 23–31)

	Production cooperative (or worker cooperative)	Service cooperative (or producer cooperative)	Consumer cooperative (or users cooperatives)
Member owners	Members are workers of the cooperative, at the same time its owners and employees	Members are individual producers who use the cooperative to access goods and services, including the marketing and processing of their produce	Members are consumers and customers of the cooperative who buy consumption goods and services from the cooperative
Purpose	Provide employment with good working conditions for its members	Support members in their individual production, processing and marketing through the provision of goods and services	Provide members with quality consumption goods and services at affordable prices
Ownership structure	Means of production (including land in the case of agricultural cooperatives) can be individually owned and pooled or owned by the cooperative	Means of production are usually privately owned by members	Not relevant
Activities	Production of goods or services by worker-owners, to be sold to third parties	Provision of goods and services to members; this can include the purchase of members' production, its processing and/or marketing to third parties	Purchase and selling of goods and services to members, minimising intermediate costs

Although these definitions, principles and categorisations are often deemed universal, they are in fact the current result of continuous renegotiations throughout the history of the cooperative movement worldwide. The first section of this chapter provides a review of this history and of current scholarly approaches to cooperatives; the second section expands the review to other initiatives for the promotion of formalised community-based cooperation.

2.1 Cooperatives: from socialist utopia to market instruments

It is common to trace back the beginning of the modern cooperative movement to the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society (ICA 2019b). The Society was funded by a group of artisans in 1844 in Rochdale, England, with the aim to facilitate the access to staple food for its members. Although the Rochdale Society has become the symbol of modern cooperatives (see Fairbairn 1994), similar cooperative formations had already emerged throughout Europe, North America and Japan since the mid-1700s and further proliferated after the mid-1800s (see Shaffer 1999). Advancing industrialisation was corroding farmers' and workers' living conditions and economic possibilities, so the consequent deepening inequalities urged and boosted the cooperative movement.

ICA was constituted in 1895 as a platform for exchange, rather than coordination, between the heterogeneous cooperative experiences that were emerging worldwide. The ICA principles, inspired by the Cooperation Principles of the Rochdale Pioneers, have been regularly renegotiated and reformulated. Debates and controversies have not been absent within the Alliance and have been mirrored in regular changes in the formulation of the principles (see Fairbairn 1994). The way in which cooperatives should be capitalised, surpluses calculated, profits re-invested and/or distributed or members selected, are all questions that co-operators have always had to face and that have raised, beyond their technical aspects, more fundamental and ethical concerns. For instance, a persistent tension has existed between supporters of gradualism and of expansionism (see Fairbairn 1994, 38–51): whereas the former insist on the local rootedness of cooperatives and advocate for a gradual expansion of their activities through localised action, the latter call instead for more centralisation and a more rapid growth and territorial expansion of activities.

A more profound division concerns the relations cooperatives should cultivate – or not – with governments. This debate was particularly pressing on the background of the two World Wars and the Cold War, when ICA considered whether to expulse members from fascist and socialist regimes (see Fairbairn 1994). Critics denounced the misuse or even abuse of the cooperative concept by fascist and socialist regimes, which were accused to co-opt cooperatives and transform them into state-controlled institutions. In parallel, critiques were also raised against the top-down and state-led promotion of cooperatives in the Global South. In the end, these debates are expressions of the underlying and continuous quest within the cooperative movement for a definition of what a “genuine” or “true” cooperative is (see e.g. Birchall 2004, 14–16). With the end of the Cold War, the voices rejecting the state-led or party-led cooperative experience in socialist countries and/or in the Global South as non-

genuine cooperatives gained more weight. The latest reformulation of the ICA principles in 1995 reflects this with the addition of the principle of “autonomy and independence” – a clear statement against the enmeshing of governments in cooperative affairs (see Shaffer 1999, 131–33; Fairbairn 1994, 36–38).

2.1.1 Cooperatives as rupture with capitalism

Cooperatives as socialist utopia

Cooperative experiments emerged in the industrialising world in a decentralised way, driven by degrading material conditions and rooted in local communities. Fairbairn (1994), however, warns us from the common romanticised vision of cooperatives as emerging spontaneously from the need of the poorest. He notes that, whereas it is reasonable to see poverty and need as forces that inspired the formation of cooperatives in the context of industrialisation, these forces could be channelled in concrete cooperative formations because of the active role of political social movements: “The Rochdale Pioneers did not rise spontaneously from need, but were organized consciously by thinkers, activists, and leaders who functioned within a network of ideas and institutions” (*id.* 4). Fairbairn (*ibid.*) therefore concludes that, “while co-operatives have frequently been tools for the relatively poor and marginalized, there is evidence that (just as in Rochdale) they are rarely led by the very poorest”.

The first modern cooperative experiments were mainly inspired by the utopian socialism of the early nineteenth century in France and Britain (Williams 2016, 10–11). Cooperatives were conceptualised as a way to counter the unfair appropriation by capital of the value generated by labour. The principle of fixed returns of capital (which eliminates the speculative activity of capital) and the principle of profit distribution to members proportional to their engagement in the cooperative were developed to reduce the grip of capital on profits (Fairbairn 1994, 17–24). Cooperatives thus merged pragmatic economic purposes with a visionary ideological outlook of a socialist society. Eventually, local cooperative formations were not an end in themselves but were seen as steps towards a new kind of society, “towards the much larger goal of a comprehensive co-operative system” spanning across the world (*id.* 6).

This teleology was in contrast to Marxist societal objectives; the relationship between cooperatives and the Marxist labour movement has, in fact, often been distrustful, if not openly confrontational (Jossa 2005; also Williams 2016, 2–3; Shaffer 1999, 83–85). Although both aimed at the re-appropriation of labour value by workers, the labour movement focused on confrontational struggles against employers to improve workers’ conditions, while the cooperative movement offered an alternative to organise workers in self-managed and self-owned enterprises. As employers, cooperatives fell sometimes on the opponent side of the labour movement’s struggles. Classical Marxism was suspicious of cooperatives, which it understood as the expression of a sort of “producer capitalism” (Jossa 2005, 14) or “as mere stopgap measures that would only delay the revolution” that would eventually lead to the establishment of the worker state (Shaffer 1999, 44). Nonetheless, in the context of Soviet “real” socialism, Lenin endorsed the legitimacy of cooperatives on the path towards the full realisation of the communist ideal; however,

for Marxist as well as for the Soviet regime, worker cooperatives, although accepted, were always considered inferior to state enterprises (Jossa 2005, 12).

Cooperatives as social movement

Many co-operators across history have been motivated not only by economic need, but also by a more or less intentional wish to counter the existing capitalist system and develop an alternative form of economy and society. Academic scholarship in political economics, sociology and geography has thus studied cooperatives from the perspective of social movement theory (e.g. Schneiberg, King, and Smith 2008; Curl 2010; Williams 2016; see also Emery, Forney, and Wynne-Jones 2017, 229–30). This body of work tends to focus on the confrontational character of the cooperative movement and its embeddedness within broader socio-economic struggles, rather than on internal everyday dynamics of cooperatives. Cooperatives are seen here as tools mobilised intentionally to advance political ideals and struggles. For instance, Schneiberg, King, and Smith (2008, 637) analyse how “movements have mobilized cooperatives against bureaucracies, markets, corporations to promote community, economic self-sufficiency, local ownership, regional development, and workplace democracy”. Co-operators are seen not only as managers and workers of an enterprise, but as political activists connected with local communities as well as with a global community of activists.

From such work often transpire the ideals not only of co-operators, but also of researchers, who tend to select case studies of cooperatives where the ideological component is explicitly and intentionally present. This is the case for instance for the well-known example of the Mondragón Cooperative Corporation in the Basque Country (e.g. Gibson-Graham 2006a, 101–26; Whyte and Whyte 1991), the *empresas recuperadas* in South America (e.g. Ranis 2010) or small cooperatives challenging the monopoly of large retailer companies (e.g. Dyttrich and Wuhler 2012). This work is important to show the global connections of the radical component of the cooperative movement, its achievements and challenges. However, some researchers fall either into a romanticisation of such experiences (e.g. Shaffer 1999; Curl 2010) or into normative recommendations they hope can be applied worldwide for the expansion – and “victory” – of the cooperative model. To give just one example, Cheney, in his preface to Williams’ analysis of “the cooperative movement” (Williams 2016, xvi), describes Williams’ endeavour as the synthesis of “the promises, failures and hopes of cooperatives to develop a blueprint for a more just, more cooperative world”.

2.1.2 Cooperatives as tools for market development

Cooperatives as enterprises in a market economy

Almost two centuries after the establishment of the first modern cooperatives, cooperative formations exist today in myriad forms. In Switzerland, for instance, cooperatives are a form of enterprise well

known to the local population, which shops at the consumer cooperatives Coop or Migros (the two largest retailer companies in the country), entrusts the cooperative bank Raiffeisen with its savings, insures its house or car by the cooperative insurance company Die Mobiliar or lives in a building of one of the numerous housing cooperatives in the country. In these examples, there are few traces of the confrontational attitude and ideological foundations of the anti-capitalist cooperatives described in the former section. Another Swiss example are dairy cooperatives, through which farmers pool their milk production in order to increase their power on the market (see Stock et al. 2014). Like the similar examples of commodity pooling discussed in Fairbairn (1994, 38–51), such cooperatives have rapidly grown into large enterprises; they do not aim to challenge capitalist modes of production in the first place, but rather to maintain and support farmers' private (sometimes capitalist) production by increasing the rate of surplus they are able to retain from the sale of their produce.

Classic economics has studied cooperatives as a particular kind of firm (Hansmann 1999, 389–90; see also Olson 1985). Whereas vertical and horizontal integration in cooperatives reduces market costs, it also increases the costs of ownerships (e.g. monitoring, control, collective decision-making). The structure of such costs determines whether a cooperative can be competitive or even advantageous in a market economy. Economists have reserved particular attention for service and marketing cooperatives, which can generate comparative productivity gains by achieving economies of scale while maintaining low control costs when production is carried out individually (Altman 2015; Olson 1985; Cook, Chaddad, and Iliopoulos 2004). More generally, economists have maintained that, in comparison with other types of enterprises, “co-operatives can potentially generate higher rates of growth and more equitable growth, even in competitive economic environments” (Altman 2015, 17).

Economists have also investigated the functioning and performance of cooperatives through agency theory, behavioural theory and game theory, focusing for instance on problems such as the cohesion of homogenous and heterogeneous groups of co-operators, the tendency to free-ride within such groups (e.g. Cook, Chaddad, and Iliopoulos 2004), or the role of factors such as human capital, social capital, or property regimes in people's choice to join a cooperative (e.g. Rizov et al. 2001). Such approaches commonly assume that rational individuals maximise their profits by joining a cooperative and have thus tended to neglect the impact on cooperative enterprises and member behaviour of the broader political context, of specific contextual social, political and cultural factors and of other kinds of rationalities (Tilzey 2017, 317 n.1). Although some economists have recently begun to acknowledge this gap, a real dialogue between economics and social sciences – a dialogue that would allow to integrate the analysis of power and culture into economic research on cooperatives – is still lacking (see Fulton 2017).

Similar approaches have informed the study and promotion of cooperatives in ex-socialist countries. Ironically, while cooperatives emerged originally as an alternative to capitalism and were even recognised by Lenin as a step towards communism, after the end of socialist regimes in CEE and the FSU, cooperatives have rather become a tool in the transition to capitalism and a means to remedy to the “imperfections” of emergent markets (e.g. Deininger 1995). In Kyrgyzstan, as in other ex-socialist countries, international agencies have promoted the establishment of cooperatives as enterprises that

could support farmers in their integration in the new market system, in parallel to the withdrawal of the state from its role as employer and as provider of infrastructures and social services (Swain 1999; Rizov et al. 2001; Mathijs and Swinnen 1998; Lerman and Sedik 2014).

Despite the efforts and resources invested in the promotion of cooperatives in ex-socialist countries, scholars scarcely tend to describe these experiences as successful. They often contend that cooperatives, in these contexts, fail to fulfil the expected outcomes both in terms of respecting the cooperative principles and of providing of services to the local population (e.g. Wegren and O'Brien 2018; for Kyrgyzstan Lerman 2013a). Scholars tend to explain this failure with the persistence of some forms of “psychological resistance to cooperation” inherited from the socialist experience (Gardner and Lerman 2006, 5, see my discussion in Chapter 6). They view such “Soviet legacies” as deemed to entail, for instance, a general lack of trust or social capital (e.g. Paldam and Svendsen 2000; see also the critique of Murray 2008), a lack of trust in political institutions (Lissowska 2013), an abundance of bonding capital coupled with the lack of bridging social capital (Kaminska 2010) or cultural and institutional “baggage” (Soliev et al. 2017).

Cooperatives for development

Cooperatives have been considered a means for development in the Global South since the emergence of international development cooperation in the 1950s in the context of decolonisation. In parallel to the establishment of multilateral development organisations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), ICA instituted an own International Development Fund in 1954, aimed at supporting the establishment of cooperatives in the Global South. Recommendation 127 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), adopted in 1966, sealed international recognition of cooperatives as a means for development: “The establishment and growth of co-operatives should be regarded as one of the important instruments for economic, social and cultural development as well as human advancement in developing countries”.¹

Initially, in line with the centralised and state-driven development approaches of the time, governments and development agencies attempted to establish cooperatives as a way to foster economic growth as well as to deliver goods and social services to local communities. Since the 1980s, mounting discontent has challenged such approaches, calling for decentralisation and a stronger involvement of beneficiaries in decision-making and project design (Chambers 1994; Ellis and Biggs 2001). In this vein, Birchall (2004, 3) laments that cooperatives in the Global South “were used in a planned, top-down attempt by national governments and international aid agencies to deliver economic growth”. In the framework of neoliberal structural adjustments, the intervention of the state in private economic activities was radically reduced – thereby also its role in the promotion of cooperatives. This evolution was reinforced in the 1990s: the renewed emphasis of ICA on autonomy and independence aligned with new development paradigms

¹ https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100:34394433083619::NO::P12100_SHOW_TEXT:Y: (accessed 07.07.2019).

calling for less governmental involvement and more participation of local communities. Motivating this shift was the assumption that the involvement of direct beneficiaries in project management would allow a more efficient allocation of resources and that, at the same time, local communities would be empowered through democratic mechanisms (e.g. Malena, Forster, and Singh 2004; McGee and Gaventa 2010). A new 2002 Recommendation of ILO (193) on cooperatives invited governments to disengage from cooperatives' internal affairs and to focus instead on the establishment of a conducive legal and institutional environment for the autonomous development of local cooperative movements – a shift endorsed also by the World Bank and the main international development agencies (Birchall 2004, 16; Hussi et al. 1993).

The formulation of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and, later, of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) gave new impetus to the idea that cooperatives have a central role to play for global development because they can generate and maintain economic and social benefits in the local communities in which they are rooted (Birchall 2004; ILO/ICA n.d.). By now, therefore, cooperatives have acquired legitimation as an economic and social development tool and have been integrated in the programmes of the main development institutions worldwide: “cooperatives are viewed as potentially important vehicles for community development since they can solve local problems by mobilizing local resources into a critical mass, and by virtue of being locally owned and controlled, cooperatives can keep profits and responsibility in the hands of local citizens” (Zeuli et al. 2004, 18).

The broad application of participatory development, including the promotion of cooperatives, has, however, given rise to critique and scepticism (see e.g. the debate between Cooke and Kothari 2001; and Hickey and Mohan 2004; see also Cima 2015). Scholars have warned against considering participatory tools as a panacea for all economic and social problems, denouncing that too often participatory tools are applied in an instrumental way with the aim of increasing the effectiveness of development programmes rather than with a more open approach that would allow the meaningful participation of local actors; this instrumental use of participation risks depoliticising its meaning and limiting its potential for empowerment (e.g. Cornwall and Coelho 2007; Korf 2010). Indeed, in the quotations above we have seen that cooperatives are defined as “vehicles for community development” that can “solve local problems” (Zeuli et al. 2004, 18), or as “instruments for economic, social and cultural development” (ILO Recommendation 127).

Zeuli and Radel (2005) discuss the tension between the goal of supporting the establishment of cooperatives for development purposes and the bottom-up imperative for their formation and management. They note that too-heavy external intervention in the establishment and management of cooperatives reduces ownership and engagement among the local population and eventually undermines the viability and sustainability of cooperatives (*id.* 51). As noted by Fairbairn (1994) above, the success of the first modern cooperatives in the nineteenth century relied on the support by existing networks of political activists. Today, political activists have been replaced by development agencies, but the same tension remains between top-down support and bottom-up emergence.

Others have pointed to more practical and material limitations of participation. In particular, the requirements in terms of human and social capital, but also of time and financial resources, often limit the inclusion of the most marginalised in participatory processes (Olivier de Sardan 2005, 166–84). Participating in development projects can represent an additional burden hardly bearable by the most vulnerable groups and even less bearable by women, who often – and worldwide – still perform most reproductive tasks in households (e.g. Walker 2013). Potential future cooperative members might simply lack the essential time, energy and financial capital to start a cooperative, or the local community networks might be too loose to constitute a solid basis of trust necessary for a cooperative to function (Zeuli and Radel 2005, 51–52). The risk is thus that local elites appropriate participatory mechanisms (and the resources mobilised through development projects or cooperatives), generating further exclusions and inequalities in communities through the process of “elite capture” (Olivier de Sardan 2005, 166–84).

2.1.3 From cooperatives as objects to cooperation as process

In the former sections, we have seen that, whereas modern cooperatives emerged in the nineteenth century as an alternative and direct challenge to capitalist modes of production (§2.1.1), their inclusion in the programmes of development agencies made them integral part of market economies (§2.1.2). On the one hand, cooperatives have been conceptualised as a tool within broader political struggle; on the other, as a type of firm concerned with business performance and efficiency. There is, however, a commonality between the two approaches: both see cooperatives as means towards a better society – a better society located in the future. For utopian socialists, the ultimate goal is a comprehensive co-operative system; for Marxists, the worker state and communism; for classical economists and development agencies, an efficient and perfect market system in which empowered citizens-entrepreneurs will finally lift themselves out of poverty.

Byrne and Healy (2006) suggest that this kind of attitude is typical of the mechanisms of Lacanian fantasy: being oriented towards a goal in an idealised future, this attitude forecloses an engagement with the concrete challenges and achievements of actual cooperative experiences in the present (see also Healy 2010; Gibson-Graham 2006a, 101–26). In order to avoid such mechanisms, Gibson-Graham (2006a, 103) proposes to perform “an ethical practice of weak theory² – choosing to view [cooperatives] not as predictably limited and shaped by a capitalist world order, but instead as the complex, surprising, unfinished outcome of innumerable contingent acts and decisions”. The analysis of cooperatives should thus be open to see and discuss the unpredictable ways in which co-operators discuss, negotiate and finally find together solutions for the multitude of small or big issues they face day after day. Instead of evaluating cooperatives against an ideal goal in the future, or focusing on the inherited structures that limit their action, the mentioned authors invite to look at the present – the *here and now* – of actual

² I present and discuss more in detail the concepts of “fantasy” and “weak theory” in Chapter 4.

cooperative experiences in their nonfixity and contingency, but also in their openness to diversity and transformation.

Such an approach to cooperatives also implies to loosen the definition of cooperatives as objects with a certain degree of formality, oriented towards either political or commercial goals and with rigid membership boundaries. Instead, analysis should focus on “cooperation *as a process* rather than a means to fixed ends” and on how this process “underpins sociality, ways of relating, cultural affirmation and affective inter-subjectivity” (Emery, Forney, and Wynne-Jones 2017, 234, 233 emphasis added). Analysis should thus pay more attention to the ways in which new subjects and identities emerge through practices of cooperation, but also through other practices, converging into and at the same time spreading from an unfix “cooperative” object (see also Gibson-Graham 2006a, 127–63; Cornwell 2012). Following this approach, for instance, a recent special issue of the *Journal of Rural Studies* explores the “more-than-economic dimensions of cooperation” (Wynne-Jones, Emery, and Forney 2017). The analyses in the special issue reveal a series of dimensions, beyond the economic one, that are crucial for the unfolding of cooperative experiences – and that we should therefore consider when engaging with cooperatives. In their introductory contribution, the editors highlight in particular three dimensions: how communities relate to and embed cooperatives and how the benefits of cooperatives spread among broader communities beyond formal membership boundaries; how formalised and informal cooperative agreements enmesh and the opportunities and constraints this enmeshment creates; and how temporality, expressed in visions of histories and futures, informs and is entrenched into cooperative experience (Emery, Forney, and Wynne-Jones 2017).

These scholars invite thus to loosen the focus on cooperatives as a formally bounded object and to look instead at cooperation processes. In the next section I therefore turn to academic approaches to broader forms of cooperation beyond cooperatives.

2.2 Cooperation: from commons to commoning

Economic theory commonly assumes that *competition* – embodied in the *homo economicus*³ as the self-interested, profit-maximiser individual – to be at the basis of human behaviour: an individual will always privilege her own interests and attempt to maximise her own benefits while disregarding the interests of others, which are often rivalrous. In this model, cooperative behaviour (or *cooperation*), intended as considering the interests of others and benefitting them, is conceivable only when it brings a higher benefit for the individual than competitive behaviour. The popular model of the Prisoner’s Dilemma posits that in an interaction between two individuals, both parts will assume that the other will not cooperate and both will therefore decide not to cooperate, even if this decision will lead to a suboptimal outcome. On this basis, Mancur Olson’s famous “zero contribution” thesis postulates that “rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests” (Olson 1965, 2).

³ For a discussion of the origins and meanings of the term see Persky (1995).

Applying this thesis to the use of common goods (defined as non-excludable but rivalrous goods), Garret Hardin (1968) formulated his thesis of the “tragedy of the commons”. With the example of pasture land management, Hardin concluded that a regime of common property leads to the overexploitation of resources. Individuals have an incentive to “free ride”, or to use a resource as much as they can without regards to the interests and needs of others. In Hardin’s example, herders will increase the number of animals on pastures regardless of agreements to limit their number. Hardin therefore calls for the privatisation of commons, arguing that private property provides incentives to avoid overexploitation.

Olson’s and Hardin’s reflections have informed decades of privatisation and enclosure of the commons. At the same time, numerous critical voices have questioned their conclusions with both conceptual and empirical arguments. In this section, I present the critique by neo-institutionalists inspired by the work of Elinor Ostrom (§2.2.1) and the critique by the more recent commoning scholarship (§2.2.2). Both lines of scholarship have contributed to advance the understanding and conceptualisation of cooperation and are thus an important basis for my endeavour to investigate cooperatives as the result of cooperation practices.

2.2.1 Managing the commons

Ostrom (1990) challenged Hardin’s and Olson’s conclusions by extensively documenting numerous successful examples of common-pool resource management worldwide. Her work provided an important argument against privatisation and for the maintenance of common property, since it showed that cooperation is indeed a viable and even rational choice under certain conditions.⁴ She was concerned with how participants in interactions can “avoid the temptation of suboptimal equilibria and move closer to optimal outcomes – in other words, gain a ‘cooperators’ dividend” (Ostrom 2010, 156). This question is also referred to as the “problem of collective action” (*ibid.*), where collective action is intended as “an action taken by a group (either directly or on its behalf through an organisation) in pursuit of members’ perceived shared interests” (Marshall 1998, quoted in Meinzen-Dick, DiGregorio, and McCarthy 2004, 200). The task of researchers becomes therefore to identify the specific conditions under which cooperation is the best rational choice and collective action can thus emerge. Building on game theory, scholars investigated the “structural variables” of interactions that make cooperation more likely, such as the size of the group, the existence of face-to-face communication, the availability of information about past actions, the probability of a future interaction with the same individuals, or enter/exit possibilities (Ostrom 2010, 157).

⁴ It must be noted that already Olson and Hardin had qualified their statements about the “zero contribution” and the “tragedy of the commons” in this direction; these qualifications, however, had gone forgotten in successive work based on their research. Olson (1965, 2) had observed that his thesis was valid only “unless the number of individuals in a group is quite small, or unless there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest”. Hardin (1998, 682), thirty years after his own influential paper, noted that “the weightiest mistake in my synthesizing paper was the omission of the modifying adjective ‘unmanaged’” and reformulated his thesis as follows: “The *unmanaged* commons would be ruined by overgrazing; competitive individualism would be helpless to prevent the social disaster” (emphasis added). See also Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy (2016, 192).

The task of policy-makers, on the other hand, becomes to provide those conditions through the right structure of incentives, rules and sanctions. According to Ostrom (2000; Ostrom et al. 1994), this can be achieved through the design of specific institutions – intended as systems of rules that are applied and reproduced iteratively. Following Ostrom’s reflections, New Institutional Economics was concerned with the identification and design of the best suited institutions for the common management of resources (Williamson 2000). Ostrom (2000) formulated eight “design principles” that, based on her empirical observations, should be fulfilled if these institutions are to be long-surviving and sustainable. These principles include the clear definition of group boundaries; clear rules-in-use defining benefit allocation and cost distribution; participation in decision-making by those affected; an effective monitoring system and enforceable graduated sanctions for non-compliance. These universal principles, however, have to be adapted to the specificities of each local context: scholars warned from top-down blueprint approaches and insisted that institutional systems need to be developed and enforced by local users.

Applications in practice

These reflections have been very influential and have contributed to the expansion of community-based and participatory development approaches. Development programmes have applied these principles for the promotion of community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) worldwide, with the goal of achieving a more sustainable and inclusive management of these resources (see Twyman 2017). Following Ostrom’s principles, development agencies have attempted to design local institutions with “a focus on formal public structures with clear boundaries, transparency, representativeness and the codification of rules through written by-laws, contracts and the specification of property rights” (Cleaver 2002, 13).

These reflections have informed not only initiatives for the establishment of formal cooperative management institutions but also research assessing the impact of such initiatives. These assessments have often pointed to the limited success of community-based initiatives, especially in ex-socialist countries in CEE and the FSU. For instance, confronting the implementation of recent pasture reforms in Kyrgyzstan with Ostrom’s design principles, Shigaeva et al. (2016) have noted that the boundaries of user associations are not neat; users are unaware of the rules and of their rights and obligations; users’ representation in decision-making is limited; effective monitoring and sanctioning is lacking; and conflicts are usually tackled in informal arenas. With the same approach, Sehring (2009) has found similar results in her analysis of water management in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where users are commonly excluded from decision-making.

Scholars have interrogated why institutions, even when designed on the basis of Ostrom’s principles, have failed to comply with these principles. These scholars mainly identify two factors leading to this “failure”. First, they denounce the top-down establishment of institutions, which limits their legitimacy among local users and their adaptation to the specific local context (e.g. Theesfeld 2004; Sehring 2009; Dörre 2015; Shigaeva et al. 2016). Their recommendation for policy-makers and aid agencies is therefore

to study more carefully the local context of interventions and to build institutions “upward from the ground level”, increasing users’ participation in their design and management (Shigaeva et al. 2016, 100; also Sehring 2009; Baerlein, Kasymov, and Zikos 2015; Dörre 2015; Soliev et al. 2017). However, some scholars have warned about the assumption that bottom-up processes necessarily result in sustainable and inclusive institutions – an assumption that is often rooted in visions of local communities as homogeneous and as repository of “the ‘natural’ basis of co-operation latent in village life” (Clever 2002, 12; see also Dörre 2015). Second, authors argue that some local norms and informal regulations constrain collective action in formal institutions and influence negatively the outcomes and success of the latter (Sehring 2009; Baerlein, Kasymov, and Zikos 2015; Kasymov and Zikos 2017; Klümper, Theesfeld, and Herzfeld 2018; Theesfeld 2019). Since these local norms and regulations predate formal institutions, scholars often conceptualise their persistent influence as path dependency, intended as the determination of present (and future) trajectories by past experiences (e.g. Sehring 2009; Soliev et al. 2017).

In ex-socialist regions, path dependency usually refers to the persistence of structural features from the socialist past. For instance, Sehring (2009, 71) claims that the exclusion of users from decision-making is due to the “conflicting co-existence of formal democratic mechanisms [within the new water management institutions] and authoritarian and personalistic leadership patterns, clientelism, and corruption” rooted in inherited Soviet hierarchies and patronage networks. In most analyses, the main features of such “Soviet legacy” include “1) the discrepancy between formal political intentions and informal effective institutional change at the local level; 2) the high information and knowledge asymmetries, and 3) deteriorated social capital” (Theesfeld 2019, 351; see also Kaminska 2010; Gerkey 2013 see also above, §2.1.2). These legacies are believed to hamper collective action and to create favourable conditions for opportunistic behaviour, fostering power abuse and corruption and limiting trust especially in political institutions (Theesfeld 2004; Lissowska 2013). For several authors, thus, the Soviet experience erased the collective memory of previous effective and sustainable management institutions: instead, the persistent memory of socialist “pseudo-commons” institutions generates now “an inherited behavior promoting a pseudo-implementation of rules and organizations for the management of common pool resources” (Theesfeld 2019, 354).

The recommendation for development programmes deriving from these reflections is somehow in contradiction with the first recommendation (“more bottom-up”): authors recommend “more tailored advice and training for [users] to increase acceptance of formal rules and establish trust in the authorities” (Klümper, Theesfeld, and Herzfeld 2018, 337). They recommend to insist on the compliance of local institutions with Ostrom’s design principles, prescribing more formality especially in what concerns monitoring and the structure of incentives and sanctions (Theesfeld 2004; Baerlein, Kasymov, and Zikos 2015; Shigaeva et al. 2016; Klümper, Theesfeld, and Herzfeld 2018).

Contribution and critique

By emphasising the importance of cooperation in opposition to competition, neo-institutionalist approaches emerged as an alternative and critique to classical economic theory's assumption of fully-rational self-interested individualistic behaviour as the natural basis of human evolution. They importantly contributed to the deepening of the understanding and conceptualisation of human behaviour, its motivations and constraints by drawing the attention of economists on the contextual and structural factors that influence and constrain people's choices. Building on Herbert Simon's work (1955), Ostrom (2010) advanced a theory of "bounded rationality", arguing that in real life the conditions for full rationality are never fulfilled. For instance, information is always partial and individuals, with cognitive limitations, base their decisions also on heuristics ("rules of thumb" learned in past interactions) and social norms (*id.* 160–61). The notion of social norms was particularly important to open economic analysis to moral, emotional and social aspects of decision-making, drawing attention on the role of existing social relations and social capital – the latter intended as "the shared knowledge, understandings, norms, rules and expectations about patterns of interactions that groups of individuals bring to a recurrent activity" (Ostrom 1999 quoted in Meinzen-Dick, DiGregorio, and McCarthy 2004, 201).

Nevertheless, neo-institutionalist approaches maintain similar assumptions about human behaviour as classical economic theory. They still conceive individuals, even if "boundedly rational", "as 'resource appropriators' cleverly deploying sociocultural norms and positions in maximizing their access to and use of resources" (Clever 2007, 223–24). In these approaches, self-interested individuals, even if they happen to simultaneously benefit others, still pursue the maximisation of their benefits; individual behaviour is a response to incentives, rules and sanctions – a response based on economic calculation and free choice (see Singh 2017). Furthermore, the structures and institutions that shape individual behaviour are given (or "to be given") and basically static and unitary. Neo-institutionalist scholars in fact neglect to consider how these structures and institutions emerge in a specific situated context and how human agency shapes them (see Cleaver and de Koning 2015).

A critical current within neo-institutionalism has advanced a more fluid understanding of institutions as the result of "bricolage", or "a messier process of piecing together shaped by individuals acting within the bounds of circumstantial constraints" (Clever 2007, 17). Formal legislation and informal norms, traditional and modern regulations overlap and enmesh within multiple institutions creating a context of legal pluralism that can limit the availability of options of choice in the first place (Engle Merry 2012; also Dörre 2015, 1). Critical institutionalists have also called for a stronger attention to plural identities, rationalities and livelihood strategies in the study of institutions, in opposition to the fixed and singular identities (e.g. "the herder") and motivation (economic rationality) assumed by neo-institutionalists (Clever 2002; 2007).

Despite these important nuances, critical institutionalists – like neo-institutionalists – maintain the assumption that it is possible to design institutions to shape individual behaviour in a determined direction (for instance towards cooperation): the goal remains the proper design of institutions for

sustainable and inclusive resource management. This is possible because these institutionalist approaches – both within their neo and critical currents – conceptualise power structures, identities and rationalities (even if plural) as given, falling short to account for how they are constituted in their turn. In this regard (and with the due distinctions), institutionalist scholars are close to Marxist currents within political ecology in that both consider “power as existing in persistent structures in society that influence access to and control over resources” (Bennett et al. 2018, 335–36). For instance, it is these persistent structures – including identities and rationalities – that shape and set the terms for the process of institutional bricolage conceptualised by critical institutionalists.

2.2.2 Commoning and being-in-common

In contrast to the mentioned Marxist currents, another current within political ecology addresses power in human-environment relationships from a poststructuralist perspective. Scholars within this current thus understand “power as the product of contingent and variegated relationships between different actors and ideological and material elements” (Bennett et al. 2018, 337). In particular, feminist political ecology has contributed to the understanding of how power emerges from embodied everyday more-than-human relations (Harcourt and Nelson 2015) by conceptualising “power as operating both horizontally and vertically so power is not only expressed in vertical oppressive and hierarchical relations but also horizontally in intimate connections that are embodied and emotional among humans and environment” (Clement et al. 2019, 4). Feminist political ecology scholars are engaging in a dialogue with commoning scholars that is opening promising avenues for a deeper understanding of cooperation (*id.*).

The recent commoning scholarship has emerged as a critique to institutionalist approaches and has shifted attention away from institutions as objects and commons as resources towards an understanding of commoning as a relational process and of institutions, resources, subjects and societies as co-emerging (Nightingale 2011, 120; see also Singh 2017; Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016). These reflections originate from Linebaugh’s “manifesto”, where he notes:

To speak of the commons as if it were a natural resource is misleading at best and dangerous at worst – the commons is an activity and, if anything, it expresses relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature. It might be better to keep the word as a verb, an activity, rather than as a noun, a substantive. (Linebaugh 2008, 279)

Instead of focusing thus on the commons as a resource that needs to be managed through the establishment of specific rules and incentives, these authors shift the attention from the noun (commons) to the verb (commoning) to emphasise the dynamic, fluid and relational character of the commons. Rather than *having a commons*, groups *hold a resource in common* in “an active political relationship” (Amin and Howell 2016, 10). Commoning is not about *managing* a commons, but rather about *being* in-common (Singh 2017; see also Popke 2010); commons “are not [...] ways of *interacting* in the world, but [...] ways of *being* in the world” (Nightingale 2019, 22 emphasis added). Commoning is thus “a relational process [...] of negotiating access, use, benefit, care, and responsibility”; it “involves establishing rules or protocols for access and use, taking caring of and accepting responsibility for a resource, and distributing

the benefits in ways that take into account the well-being of others” (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016, 195).

Scholars have applied this framework to evaluate governmental or development programmes for the management of the commons designed on the basis of institutionalist theorising. Environmentalism approaches had already suggested that environmental governance institutions are in fact disciplining devices that aim at transforming the subjects they govern: by treating human subjects as rational economic actors and relying on economic incentives to transform their behaviour, such institutions indeed create the kinds of subjects they assume (Agrawal 2005; Singh 2013). For instance, Singh (2015, 55) showed that in market-based forest conservation paradigms (payments for ecosystem services models), “a sole emphasis on payments can lead to the erosion or replacement of social norms with market norms, and the ‘crowding out’ of intrinsic motivations: a ‘you pay, I conserve’ attitude, the corollary of which is ‘no payments, no conservation’”.

Singh (2013), however, has lamented that environmentalism approaches fall short of considering how subjects are transformed not only by disciplining mechanisms, but also through intimate practices of commoning. She has therefore urged environmental programmes to “look beyond political-economic rationalities and pay attention to the role of affect and everyday human practices in the environment to understand how subjectivities and way of relating to the biophysical environment emerge in affective relations” (*id.* 196–7). In this vein, Nightingale (2011; 2013) has interrogated the outcomes of common inshore fishery management in Scotland and has shown that the subjectivities of fishermen are fluid, often contradictory and can sometimes result in environmentally damaging behaviour. She has suggested that problems with institutional agreements probably derive from the scarce consideration, in these agreements, of complex subjectivities and relationships, rather than primarily from fishermen’s behaviour (Nightingale 2013). Nightingale (*id.* 2363) thus concludes that “understanding how fishers are positioned in conflicting ways in relation to fisheries policy is a prerequisite for more successful cooperation over management objectives”.

By conceptualising the co-emergence of institutions and subjects, commoning scholars have overcome the institutionalist fixation with the design of institutions as sets of rules and have insisted instead on fostering linkages and relations. If commoning is understood as “a set of practices and performance that foster new relations and subjectivities” (Nightingale 2019, 21) – or, in other words, as a process that continuously reconfigures relations within more-than-human assemblages – commons acquire “a *biopolitical potential* to transform subjectivities and sociality based on relations of reciprocity and interdependence” (Singh 2015, 59). If commons nurture our subjectivities, our task as researchers is not limited to understanding how these subjectivities emerge from certain ways of being with the world (Singh 2017), but we can also ask what kind of linkages and relations we want to nurture and create space for thinking new possibilities of relations that were previously difficult to conceive (Nightingale 2019, 22–23; also Singh 2017; Clement et al. 2019, 7).

2.3 Conclusion: cooperatives as a relational process of cooperation

The growing literature on commoning from a “relational-vitalist” (Vasile 2019a) ontological perspective has impressively enriched our understanding of the complexities of social relations to commons. However, the reflections – indeed, complications – revealed by these scholars “can prove overwhelming for policy-makers trying to apply [their] findings” (Bennett et al. 2018, 348). Besides recommending to pay more attention to the complexity of embodied emotions, affective practices, multiple and fluid subjectivities, other-than-market rationalities, scholars – *because* of the complexity they acknowledge – have difficulties in proposing to policy-makers concrete tools and methods for adapting their policies to these new reflections.

One crucial point that is applicable for us as scholars, however, is the invitation to rethink our way to speak about communities’ experiences with, and relations to, the commons. Building on the poststructuralist assumptions that the way we speak about the world also contributes to shape the world, the literature reviewed in the last section suggests a reframing of our representations of such experiences and relations. The commoning practices discussed above entail also discursive practices, which – like affective labour and bodily encounters – contribute to the co-emergence of institutions, subjectivities and the commons (Gibson-Graham 2008 see also Chapter 4). The statements of failure produced by institutionalist scholars (§2.2.1) in the best case frustrate individuals’ motivations for engaging in the formal institutions promoted by development programmes and reduce self-confidence among local individuals and groups; in the worst case they disrupt forms of cooperation that already take place outside these formal institutions (see for instance the disruption of gift and reciprocity practices in forest conservation observed by Singh 2015).

I suggest that in ex-socialist contexts, a shift away from such representations is particularly crucial. The framing of failure and deficiency as the results of socialist legacies produces the idea that local communities are unfit to comply with the standards of development or modernity, similarly to what Gibson, Cahill, and McKay (2010) have noted in the Global South. My hypothesis is that this idea limits the capacity of local communities, but also of us researchers, to think outside the structure of socialist/capitalist dichotomies and thus to see and value already existing alternatives or to imagine new ones.

Vasile’s (2019a) analysis of forestry and pasture self-management in Romania gives a hint of how a relational approach can illuminate the complexity of local realities beyond dichotomous readings. She notices among villagers a suspicious attitude towards formalised institutions that propose spaces for negotiations on resource management. Although Vasile suggests that such a suspicious attitude probably derives from how resource management was organised by the former socialist government, she refuses to inscribe this attitude in a deterministic trajectory of path dependency. Instead, she focuses on how the new participatory spaces create new relations and encounters – both convivial and conflictual – or “new possibilities for reciprocal relationships between commoners and the environment” (*id.* 140).

The point is thus to analyse cooperation (for instance but not necessarily within a formal institution for the management of commons or a cooperative) as a relational process constituted by intimate practices – by encounters with humans and non-humans, affective relations as well as discursive representations. Collective action does not have to necessarily pursue an explicit collective end – an economic interest or political aim – but can also emerge as a way to acknowledge, and ethically deal with, the interdependencies that are at the basis of our being in the world. In this sense, cooperation – which is then conceivable as caring for the well-being of others and benefitting them independently from one’s own individual interest – becomes a way to nurture new subjectivities. Whenever confronted with programmes attempting to establish a specific kind of cooperation institution (be it for the management of commons or of other economic activities), we need thus to ask how they reconfigure social relations and what kind of subjectivities they nurture. Before digging more in detail into this epistemological approach and the concepts it mobilises (Chapter 4), the next chapter discusses the specificities of the regional context of Kyrgyzstan.

3 SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY KYRGYZSTAN

After the end of socialist regimes in CEE and the FSU between 1989 and 1992, multilateral institutions such as the IMF or the World Bank supported the idea of a “shock therapy” approach for the transitioning of these countries from the centrally planned socialist economy to a market economy. This approach, inspired by the Washington Consensus principles that had informed structural adjustments programmes in Latin America and Africa in the 1980s, prescribed the quick implementation of reform programmes for the privatisation of state or collective property, the liberalisation and deregulation of markets and the reduction of the role of the state in economic production and in welfare provision (see e.g. Steimann 2011, 13). In parallel to these economic reforms, shock therapy prescribed political reforms mainly directed at the establishment of mechanisms of representative democracy within nation-states (e.g. Luong 2009). Shock therapy was applied especially in ex-socialist countries in CEE (see Stenning et al. 2010, 38–57); in Central Asia, only Kyrgyzstan and, to a lesser extent, Kazakhstan embraced this approach, while the other republics preferred to maintain control of the national economy by a strong centralised state (Abazov 1999).

Certainly, shock therapy reforms have reduced state welfare provision and nationalised economic activities. However, what was strengthened in the void resulting from the withdrawal of the state from these activities was often not primarily formal private economy but rather the informal sector and patronage relations (e.g. Morris and Polese 2013; McMann 2014), giving rise to “neo-patrimonialist” regimes (e.g. Veldwisch and Bock 2011; Sehring 2009; see also Collins 2009; for the concept of neo-patrimonialism in general see Eisenstadt 1973). Scholars have observed that the expansion of patrimonial practices (such as patronage relations or personal favours) in ex-socialist countries represents a continuity from socialist hierarchies and power structures (e.g. Ledeneva 1998). In regard to Central Asia, scholars have also pointed to the persistence of clan-based relations that pre-date the Soviet experience and have noted that, today, both clan-based and Soviet hierarchies determine the access to political power and economic resources and that clan loyalties underpin decision-making in formal political institutions even in the few countries that have introduced mechanisms of representative democracy (e.g. Roy 2000; Collins 2009; Luong 2009).

At the same time, even when not embracing democratisation reforms, the newly independent republics of Central Asia – a context where the territorial division in nation-states is recent and dates back to the Stalinist reconfiguration of Soviet Turkestan in the 1920s and 1930s – have embarked in a process of nation-building (e.g. Everett-Heath 2003; Haugen 2003). This process includes an increased emphasis on national identities, which are built also through the reviving of historical traditions including the community (and clan-based) bonds that are deemed typical of pre-Soviet Central Asia (e.g. Dadabaev 2015; Isaacs and Polese 2016). Pre-Soviet habits and identities acquire therefore an ambivalent character in postsocialist Central Asia: they represent a basis for nationalistic rhetoric in the process of nation-

building on the one hand, and, on the other, a pre-modern element that seems to undermine the establishment of market economies within the newly independent nation-states.

In Kyrgyzstan, the Central Asian republic that has applied most thoroughly shock therapy economic and political reforms and that has opened the most to cooperation with international institutions, these processes are particularly well visible. This chapter offers an overview of these processes in the country, focusing in particular on reforms in the agrarian sector (§3.1) and on the role of international actors and development programmes in this context (§3.2).

3.1 Reform programmes and their outcomes in the agricultural sector

3.1.1 Reform policies

Abazov (1999, 218) has observed that “the economic policy of the Kyrgyzstan government may be characterized as ‘inconsistent shock therapy’ accompanied with an ‘open door’ policy and maximum economic liberalisation”. Despite their quick launching, in fact, reform programmes have encountered resistance especially in some sectors, where they have therefore been implemented only partially until today. One of these sectors is state governance and administration, where reforms have promulgated the devolution of state tasks to local administrative bodies and the decentralisation of state powers to local executive and legislative bodies (see Abazov 1999; Alymkulov and Kulatov 2001; Steimann 2011, 59–63; INTRAC 2011; Urinboyev 2015). Since 1991, local governance is organised on a three-level structure: the *oblast* (province), the *rayon* (district) and the *aiyl okrug* (village) levels. *Oblasts* and the *rayons* have the functions of local state administration units and are directly accountable to the national government and to the *oblast*, respectively. The *aiyl okrug* is a local self-government entity and includes an executive (*aiyl okmotu*) and a legislative (*aiyl kenesh*) body.¹ In practice, however, the *aiyl okrug* has limited autonomy. Its modest budget (derived mainly from land taxes) is often hardly sufficient to cover its basic responsibilities and is further eroded by other functions that the central government delegates without providing adequate financial resources (INTRAC 2011).

Also in the agrarian sector, some reforms have been implemented more quickly and more thoroughly than others (see Sabates-Wheeler and Childress 2004; Lerman and Sedik 2009a; Mogilevskii et al. 2017; Akramov and Omuraliev 2009). The first phase of land reforms started as soon as 1991 with the distribution of paper shares of arable land to the rural population; the Law on Peasant Farms the same year opened to the privatisation of Soviet farms into joint-stock companies, agricultural cooperatives or peasant farm associations. The actual distribution of arable land, however, started only with the 1994 presidential decree *On Measures to Promote Land and Agrarian Reforms*, which marked the beginning of

¹ Note that the administrative unit of the *aiyl* (“village” in Kyrgyz) can in fact include more than one village. *Aiyl okmotu* in its narrowest meaning refers to the executive body of the *aiyl okrug*. However, it is currently used to refer to the local government and administration in general, its building as well as the territorial unit of the *aiyl okrug*.

the second phase of land reforms. The decree mandated the dissolution of collective farms and the distribution of shares of arable land; the rural population could withdraw its shares in concrete plots with transferable use rights. The new 1999 Land Code set the basis for the private ownership of land, which was fully realised only in 2001 with the lift of a moratorium on private land transactions. Actual regulation still limits the transfer of arable land to residents of rural areas, however.

For other assets previously owned by Soviet farms, the distribution and privatisation process was slower and/or only partial and was delayed with respect to the distribution of arable land (Sabates-Wheeler and Childress 2004, 18 define this process as ‘lumpy’; see also Lerman and Sedik 2009a; Mogilevskii et al. 2017; Akramov and Omuraliev 2009). By the time livestock was distributed, most of the animals had been already sold by the ex-Soviet farms or had “disappeared” from formal registers and appropriated by local elites (Steimann 2011, 67). Similarly, when shares of agricultural machinery were officially distributed, few machines were still with the original farms: many had been sold or “given” to the few peasant farms that had emerged during the first phase of land reforms; the machines that remained in the collective farm were in bad condition due to insufficient maintenance. The lack of maintenance and looting for the burgeoning scrap metal market also left buildings almost in ruin when shares were distributed. First attempts to decentralise the irrigation system occurred in 1997 with the institution of Water User Associations (WUAs). However, it was only with the 2002 Law on Water User Associations that WUAs were formally recognised as non-commercial organisations, owners of on-farm irrigation networks and entitled to collect taxes for water use; the actual implementation of these measures is still ongoing, however (Mogilevskii et al. 2017). Pasture land was excluded from the privatisation process and has remained state property. Local governments controlled pasture land until the 2009 Law on Pasture, which transferred the responsibility of pasture management to local Pasture User Committees; in this case too, the implementation of these measures is ongoing (*id.*).

3.1.2 Reform outcomes and current situation

If we compare the results of reforms with their stated aims (in short: privatisation, liberalisation, deregulation), we can state that, despite their lengthy and “lumpy” application (Sabates-Wheeler and Childress 2004, 18), Kyrgyzstan was relatively successful in their implementation. As Abazov (1999, 218) summarised, “the republic conducted one of the most radical programmes of privatization in the region, established one of the most liberal economic regimes and managed to limit state intervention in the private sector”. In terms of quantitative aggregated indicators for economic performance, the country’s gross domestic product (GDP) dropped dramatically after independence (in 1999 it was only half as in 1991), but rose constantly since 2000, firstly timidly and then, after reaching pre-reforms levels in 2006, more decidedly.² Also the gross agricultural output (GAO) almost halved in the years after independence, but started recovering already in the mid 1990s; since 2000, its growth has been timid and irregular (Akramov and Omuraliev 2009, 12–13).

² Data from the World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/kyrgyz-republic> (accessed 09.06.2019).

In terms of structural transformation, reforms achieved to privatise over 75% of the total arable land³ by the beginning of the millennium and to create a new class of individual farmers, which in 2010 contributed to 98%⁴ of total GAO (Lerman and Sedik 2018, 907). After a dramatic drop in the first half of the 1990s, crop productivity increased constantly, especially within peasant farms. The increase in productivity, especially in the first years of reforms, was driven by the increase in land productivity through the intensification of labour as a consequence of the de-mechanisation of agricultural activities. Farm product mix, which was dominated by livestock before reforms, gradually shifted to a prevalence of crops – a shift driven by the dramatic decline of the number of livestock in the whole country. In this process, the average farm size has dropped to about 3 hectares (Lerman and Sedik 2009a).

Despite these achievements, scholars have denounced “the very high social cost of reform and economic change [which] includes a tremendous social cost in the form of the increasing spread of unemployment, poverty and social polarization” (Abazov 1999, 218). Despite the recovery in GDP and GAO, these problems are still present in Kyrgyzstan. The country is still classified as a low-income food deficit country by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), with high poverty rates (25% countrywide in 2016), mostly in rural areas (66%, FAO 2018). A strategy to mitigate poverty is labour migration by young Kyrgyzstani, primarily to Russia and Kazakhstan: outmigration has exploded since 2000 and remittances represent today more than 30% of total GDP.⁵ Migration is an opportunity for rural communities insofar as it constitutes an increasingly important source of revenue; however, like in other contexts, it poses a new series of social and economic problems (see e.g. Zhunusova and Herrmann 2018; Isabaeva 2013).

In the agricultural sector, farmers face the problems linked to the fragmentation of production and to the reduction of farm size – what Lerman (Lerman 2013b, 5; also Lerman and Sedik 2014) has defined as the “curse of smallness”. Moreover, the changed patterns of integration in international markets have posed new challenges and opportunities for Kyrgyzstan’s agricultural sector, which is strongly dependent on international trade (Pomfret 2010). The complex geopolitical relations between ex-Soviet republics in the region also express in highly unstable border regimes with precarious export possibilities (Grafe, Raiser, and Sakatsume 2008; Kurmanalieva 2008). The proximity to the Chinese market offers export opportunities but the competition of cheap Chinese products drives down profit margins for farmers (Alff 2016). Kyrgyzstan’s integration in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) since 2015, which has considerably reduced trade exchanges with China, promises increased export opportunities in the EAEU market. At the same time, it poses new challenges to farmers, especially concerning the adaptation to quality standards, technical regulations, administrative procedures and the increased competition with

³ 25% of the total arable land remains state property within the Land Redistribution Fund (LRF) and is managed by local governments.

⁴ The percentage includes both household plots and peasant farms. The contribution to GAO of the household plots remained almost stable throughout the 1990s and the 2000s (between 30 and 40%), whereas peasant farms, inexistent in 1990, increased their contribution to GAO from 0 to about 60% in one decade (Lerman and Sedik 2009a, 8–10). The other data in this paragraphs are from Lerman and Sedik (2009a) and Mogilevskii et al. (2017).

⁵ Data from the World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=KG> (accessed 10.06.2019).

Kazakhstani and Belarusian products (Choi et al. 2016; Mogilevskii, Thurlow, and Yeh 2018). The structural changes in the agricultural sector have also an impact on soil conditions: in particular, land degradation is increasing due to the intensified agricultural use without the necessary application of fertilizers and inappropriate irrigation as a consequence of the decrepit conditions of irrigation and drainage systems (Shigaeva, Wolfgramm, and Dear 2013, 31–33). These problems are worsened by the impact of climate change in the region, already visible in the reduction of average humidity, the increased sensitivity of some forms of land use and the changes in water runoff (*id.* 35–36).

The 2004 presidential decree “On New Directions and Measures of Land and Agrarian Reforms” represents the starting point for the third phase of agrarian reforms, after the distribution and privatisation of arable land was concluded. The “new direction” proposed by the Kyrgyzstani government is towards the further development and reinforcement of private agriculture and agri-business, in particular through land concentration (see also the *National Strategy of Sustainable Development of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2013–2017*).⁶

3.1.3 Forms of grouping and association in farming

One of the most radical transformations provoked by agrarian reforms is the individualisation and fragmentation of agricultural production. On the one hand, some scholars point to the superior productivity of smallholder agriculture and thus to its important role in the recovery and development of Kyrgyzstan’s agricultural sector after independence (e.g. Lerman and Sedik 2018). On the other hand, this fragmentation poses to farmers the new problems mentioned above – problems that the promotion of service cooperatives has tried to mitigate (see Chapter 6). The little research available on farmers’ grouping strategies reveal the existence – and importance – of forms of unformalised cooperation (Sabates-Wheeler and Childress 2004; Sabates-Wheeler 2004; 2007; also Lerman 2013b, 26–27). This kind of cooperation is difficult to assess with the analysis of aggregated quantitative data or with standardised surveys and is therefore often neglected in analyses of the agricultural sector. Sabates-Wheeler and Childress (2004, 1) have noted indeed that “the gross trend towards individualisation of agricultural production throughout the post-socialist world obscures a great deal of differentiation in both sectoral and farm performance”.

A survey by Lerman (2013b, 26) on cooperatives and cooperation in Kyrgyzstan revealed the widespread presence of informal cooperation among farmers (22% of respondents declared to “participate informally in some joint activity with other nearby farmers”), whereas formal cooperation remains “very limited” (only 8% of respondents declared to be member of a cooperative). Lerman (*ibid.*) thus observes that “it is somewhat surprising to find that 10% of peasant farmers surveyed report informal cooperation in agricultural production outside a production cooperative”. Sabates-Wheeler’s comparative studies on agricultural cooperation in Kyrgyzstan (2004; 2007; Sabates-Wheeler and Childress 2004) had a broader

⁶ See Government of the Kyrgyz Republic (2013); see also Section 6.4.2.

scope than Lerman's survey and offered also some qualitative data. Results suggest that the 22% of informal cooperation found by Lerman is very probably underestimated. Sabates-Wheeler (2007, 1428) noted "a variety of new informal structures" in the agricultural sector, for instance "individual farms often band together to work larger areas of land". On the one hand, "surrounding the new class of individualised landholders a variety of cooperative forms have rapidly come into existence to provide them with services, such as, producers associations, input-cooperatives and associations of contract farmers" (*ibid.*). On the other, "a variety of clan-based reciprocal institutions co-exist with formal institutions of agricultural management" (*ibid.*).

Sabates-Wheeler (2004) identified two main motivations for farmers to engage in joint activities. First, the result of the uneven distribution of agricultural assets was a diversified landscape of households unevenly endowed with the assets necessary to engage in individual farming. Limitations in the access to assets, although having improved considerably, persist until today. In this context, cooperation with other farmers is a strategy to expand the asset endowment of a farm by pooling its assets with other farmers (Sabates-Wheeler and Childress 2004, 10, 18). Second, the collapse of the Soviet welfare and safety system has exacerbated farmers' insecurity until today, when still no farm insurance exists and access to cash and credit is limited. In this context, grouping represents a crucial strategy of risk management, since it allows to expand or reduce farm assets when needed (Sabates-Wheeler 2007, 1440–43).

According to Sabates-Wheeler (2004; 2007), in short, grouping in farming can be both a strategy for the optimisation of production via asset pooling and a strategy of risk management. The possibility to group (and un-group) represents a crucial safety strategy in a context of insecurity and uncertainty. Sabates-Wheeler (2007, 1442) further notes that these groups are usually based on kinship and friendship ties and that this contributes to their stability. She underlines, however, the risk of a "downward levelling pressures of social capital": the close social relations constituting these groups can in fact imply social obligations and constrain alternative strategies, thus reinforcing "the static nature of these small farm groups" (*id.* 1435).

3.2 The role of international actors in Kyrgyzstan's transformation

International actors played an important role in the definition of the reform approach adopted by Kyrgyzstan's government after independence. Accompanying the reforms outlined in the previous section was a foreign policy directed at the quick opening of the country to international cooperation and trade, as testified by its rapid access to the World Trade Organisation in 1998 (Abazov 1999; Gleason 2001). Multilateral organisations like the IMF, the World Bank, or the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) did not only play a crucial role in the definition of reform strategies through technical and political advice but also supported their actuation with heavy injections of liquidity (over 2

billions US dollars between 1991 and 2000).⁷ Gleason (2001, 174) noted that, “were it not for foreign aid, Kyrgyzstan’s domestic reform efforts might not have been politically sustainable” – nor economically viable (see also Abazov 1999).

International development assistance by both multilateral and bilateral donors proliferated since the mid-1990s in Kyrgyzstan. In rural communities, this assistance manifested initially in a series of rural development programmes that provided among others agricultural inputs, extension services and infrastructure. The recovery of agricultural production discussed above is probably due in part also to the injection of such resources in local communities by foreign donors (see Schmidt 2012). Contemporary Central Asia has attracted the attention of powerful neighbours and other international powers competing for the geopolitical influence in the region, as it has been often the case throughout the history of the region. Besides the aforementioned multilateral organisations, other Western donors include bilateral governmental organisations from the US (USAID), Germany (GIZ), Switzerland (SDC), Japan (JICA), South Korea (KOIKA) and the UK (DFID), whose programmes are often implemented by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from the same countries. Besides these “traditional” donors, other development funds have reached Kyrgyzstan from emergent donors from Turkey (Kulaklikaya and Nurdun 2010) and China (Kassenova 2009) in particular. Both countries have recently invested significant resources in development programmes in Kyrgyzstan, especially in the infrastructural, industrial and health sectors. Russia has remained a close economic and political partner for Kyrgyzstan (see Gray 2011; Freiré 2009).

The topics of agricultural cooperatives and, more generally, of participation and community-based cooperation are a common feature in the development programmes of the mentioned multilateral organisations and “traditional” governmental donors (i.e. those who are part of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, DAC/OECD), whereas they are less present in the agendas of emergent donors and other international actors. For this reason, in this manuscript I focus mainly on DAC/OECD donors and organisations.⁸ In the next sections I offer an overview of the evolution of these donors’ agendas and strategies in Kyrgyzstan and discuss initiatives for the promotion of local cooperation and their impact. Although international support focused initially on rural communities, more recently several initiatives have concentrated in urban areas, especially in the southern part of the country (in particular after the 2010 outburst of ethnic violence in the Osh region). I maintain here a focus on rural areas, however.

3.2.1 Donor agendas: from civil society to community-based development

Donors in contemporary Kyrgyzstan have supported structural reforms for the transition from a socialist economy to a market economy and shared similar assumptions, values and visions about such a transition

⁷ Data from the World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/kyrgyz-republic> (accessed 09.06.2019)

⁸ Therefore, unless specified, when I write of “donors” or “international organisations” I refer to DAC/OECD donors and to multilateral organisations such as the World Bank, IMF or the EDRD.

as the multilateral agencies mentioned above (Babajanian, Freizer, and Stevens 2005; Earle 2005; Pétric 2005). In particular, similar to in other ex-socialist countries, the reinforcement of civil society at national and local levels has been on top of donors' agendas since the beginning of their activities in Kyrgyzstan in the early 1990s. Whereas other Central Asian republics have maintained strong centralised – and in large part authoritarian – control over civil society, the Kyrgyzstani government has reduced this control and thereby opened up new space for citizen initiatives. Kyrgyzstan has therefore become a sort of “laboratory” for donors and NGOs for experimenting with civil society promotion and participation tools, attracting great international interest and resources (Pétric 2013, 189–99).

The focus on civil society has been motivated by the assumption that civil society actors could take over part of the functions of the former Soviet state, especially in regard to social services provision, thereby encouraging the rolling back of the state (Babajanian, Freizer, and Stevens 2005, 211–12). Donors have also proclaimed the reinforcement of civil society to be a solution to reduce the risk of conflict and extremism in communities, and therefore as a way to tackle international concerns about the emergence of ethnic conflicts and Islamisation in the institutional void left in the Central Asian region by the breakup of the Soviet Union – a concern that has grown especially since 2001. Donors' focus on civil society translated initially into the establishment of NGOs at the national level through capacity-building programmes for local development workers (Babajanian, Freizer, and Stevens 2005). International donors, with national NGOs as intermediaries, took over a part of the provision of basic goods and services (such as agricultural inputs and infrastructure or social services) previously assured by the Soviet state. As a result, local NGOs “mushroomed” in the country (Pétric 2005), according to some estimations exceeding the 17,000 units in 2019.⁹

In line with the global trend since the late 1990s, international donors in Kyrgyzstan have gradually shifted their interest to participatory approaches and have thus promoted the decentralisation of responsibilities and decisional power as well as mechanisms of good governance (Pandey and Misnikov 2001). This shift has translated in practice into the diversion of donors' attention (and resources) from national NGOs to smaller community-based organisations (CBOs) at the province or even village level which are meant to take over project management responsibilities and assure the representation of local voices (Earle 2005). In the same period, a series of reforms has shifted resource management responsibilities (for instance for water or pasture land) from local governmental bodies to newly-created CBOs such as water users associations or pasture users associations (see also Bichsel et al. 2010).

3.2.2 Implementing donor agendas: reinterpretation and consequences at the local level

The consequences of the promotion of community-based cooperation in its different forms in Kyrgyzstan have been an object of debate. On the one hand, scholars agree that donors' programmes have provided rural communities with resources and services that had become scarce in the context of state withdrawal

⁹ Data from <http://www.icnl.org/research/monitor/kyrgyz.html> (accessed 17.06.2019). The same source notes that of these 17,000 registered NGOs, only about 5,700 are “operational”.

(e.g. Babajanian 2011; Earle 2005). Scholars also agree that a new “class” of development workers and NGO/CBO leaders has emerged as an intermediary between foreign organisations and the local population (e.g. Féaux de la Croix 2013). On the other hand, the consequences of such processes on inequalities, people’s well-being and the environment, i.e. the extent to which donor intervention has actually achieved to reduce poverty, to preserve environmental resources and to empower the local population, remain questioned and questionable.

A new development class

The emerging class of development workers and NGO/CBO leaders has been the object of a few anthropological studies (Pétric 2005; 2013; Buxton 2009; Féaux de la Croix 2013). Development workers are usually young, urban or urbanised, ethnic Kyrgyz, often women, with high education (Féaux de la Croix 2013). CBO or local NGO leaders, in contrast, are frequently local powerful middle-aged, ethnic Kyrgyz, men, who are often well rooted in local power networks (Pétric 2005). Pétric (2005; 2013) sees the emergence of this social group very critically. He has argued that because of the proactive foreign policy of its government, Kyrgyzstan has lost its production potential and has instead turned into a “globalized protectorate” whose revenues depend on the transfers from foreign actors, in particular from development agencies. In this context, the local development class is the expression of the new strategy of (many old and few new) local elites to accumulate resources and maintain their power. The dependence from international funds also shifts accountability of local elites towards international organisations: the local civil society tends to follow donors’ agenda of the moment rather than respond to specific local needs. This situation also engenders an “internal brain drain” (Pétric 2005, 326): the most qualified workers are drained from the public sector to the development sector, which further weakens the state.

Other scholars, while acknowledging these problems, have nuanced Pétric’s dismal picture of the sector and questioned his representation of local development workers and CBO leaders as individualist rent-seekers by highlighting the variety of their motivations. For instance, Féaux de la Croix (2013) has shown that local development workers sometimes pursue ideological goals that differ from the ones promoted by donors and are able, at least in part, to promote their own visions and values. Researchers have also pointed to some recent evolutions of local civil society actors in Central Asia, noting that these actors are sometimes able to challenge some of the existing hierarchies and raise more radical claims against discriminations and inequalities (Giffen, Earle, and Buxton 2005; Buxton 2009; Paasiaro 2009).¹⁰

Féaux de la Croix (2013) has further shown that the new employment possibilities in the development sector allow some development workers, especially young women, to challenge social expectations about life trajectories and gender roles. Her findings suggest that the emergent development class is not only a new manifestation of old class relations and hierarchies but can also offer new spaces for emancipation to

¹⁰ Two examples are the “Bishkek Feminist Initiative” (<https://bishkekfeminists.com>) and the first gay pride march in Bishkek (<https://www.rferl.org/a/rainbow-rage-kyrgyz-rail-against-lgbt-after-central-asia-s-first-gay-pride-march/29825158.html>, both accessed 17.06.2019).

the younger generations. This emancipation, however, is certainly not accessible to all Kyrgyzstanis indiscriminately. Not only, as mentioned, are development jobs reserved to a specific profile of people, but the very existence of this new class relies on the reproduction of binary categories related to hierarchies of knowledge and degrees of “developed-ness” – categories that further cement the exclusion of the most vulnerable parts of society (*id.*, also Pigg 1992). It must be also noted that Féaux de la Croix’s study is limited to NGOs workers: it seems that participation in CBOs instead remains very much gendered and limited to local elites.

Empowerment and patronage relations

Certainly, the profound socio-political changes of the last century have reconfigured systems of patronage within personal networks (Pétric et al. 2004; Yoshida 2005). The Soviet organisation of local institutions sought to weaken kin and clan bonds, while reinforcing other kinds of ties (especially professional or party-based ones), as a way to shift loyalties from kin to state. Exchanges and reciprocities in personal networks, within or outside kinship, remained crucial in Soviet society, however. Scholars mostly agree in depicting contemporary Kyrgyzstan as a society that is structured around patronage relations and patrimonial practices based on kin and clan ties but also on friendship and professional bonds (e.g. Pétric et al. 2004; Collins 2009; Ismailbekova 2017). The competition for increasingly scarce resources in the context of post-independence reforms and the emergence of representative democracy seem to have strengthened patrimonial practices and patronage networks, since these now determine the access to state resources and services (Babajanian, Freizer, and Stevens 2005; Pétric 2005).

Donor focus on civil society strengthening and community-based development worldwide also aims, at least according to official rhetoric, to empower citizens so that they can hold the government and local leaders better accountable and thus emancipate from their dependence on patronage relations (see e.g. Malena, Forster, and Singh 2004; Cornwall and Coelho 2007). Like in other contexts worldwide (see §2.1.2), scholars have noted that, also in the case of Kyrgyzstan, projects often apply participation tools in a mechanic and functionalistic way motivated more by the will to comply with project requirements than to promote meaningful empowerment (Earle 2005; Babajanian 2011; Kim et al. 2018). Furthermore, the same scholars have observed that participation in development projects or civil society activities often represents an additional and hard-to-bear burden (in terms of financial, material or time resources) for the most disadvantaged groups. Active participation in such activities remains often a privilege of local elites, whose position is therefore strengthened within local patronage networks since they can now access and mobilise also donor resources.

At the same time, projects often explicitly rely on existing local networks to improve the efficiency of their intervention and/or its local acceptability (Earle 2005; Babajanian 2011; 2015). Since personal networks are the common way to access goods and services, projects mobilise such networks to channel and distribute resources in communities. Projects also refer to local leaders as gatekeepers and managers who have the necessary authority and connections to mobilise villagers for the projects’ aims. Babajanian

(2015, 501) points to the role of “benevolent leaders” for the success of projects and for the initiation of further micro-projects benefitting the local community. He further signals the “burden of responsibility” faced by local leaders, who take over the responsibility of mobilising the local population in project activities (Babajanian 2011, 323–24). Local leaders, however, often have to rely on authoritative methods and threats to convince villagers to participate in projects, which in turn contradicts the aims of the project itself (*ibid.*). Although projects have proposed formal instruments to make these leaders more accountable to the local population, it seems that such instruments are rarely effective (Babajanian, Freizer, and Stevens 2005, 217). Considering all this, donor initiatives often end up in reproducing, if not strengthening, existing patronage relations and the power relations that underpin them (Earle 2005; Pétric 2005; Kim et al. 2018).

Reviving traditions

When mobilising local networks and authority for the implementation of their activities, projects commonly refer to pre-Soviet forms of cooperation, in particular to pre-Soviet “traditions” of clan solidarity, mutual help or the community work practice of *ashar* (Earle 2005; Giffen, Earle, and Buxton 2005; Jacquesson 2010; Babajanian 2011; see also Pétric et al. 2004; Bichsel 2009, 71–76). Often, however, this strategy neglects that some of these “traditions” were meanwhile transformed, first, through their inclusion (or co-optation) in Soviet institutions (see e.g. Earle 2005; Judith Beyer 2006; Jacquesson 2010) and, second, through the emergence of markets in the post-independence period (see e.g. Earle 2005, 252; Babajanian 2011, 328; G. Botoeva 2015). Jacquesson (2010), for instance, has shown that pasture land reforms both in Russian colonial time and in contemporary Kyrgyzstan relied on generalised and imprecise notions of traditions. Vague understandings of “clan” and “custom” are used as general categories for complex social relations that the designers of reforms have difficulties to grasp and conceptualise.

Thus, romanticised ideals of *ashar*, clan solidarities and mutual help referring to pre-Soviet practices are raised to the status of precious “traditions” that need to be revived for the successful implementation of reforms and donors’ programmes and, perhaps, also as a way to disengage from “Soviet legacies” (Earle 2005; Jacquesson 2010). As Bichsel et al. (2010, 264) have noted, however, donors “include only selective aspects of these traditions that are of interests, while at the same time attempting to transform their underlying societal model”. In this sense, donors tap into conceptions of (imagined) pre-Soviet decentralised self-governance that resonate with the project of state roll-back and of shifting responsibilities (and burdens) to local communities (Jacquesson 2010). Or they refer to *ashar* to legitimise project contribution requirements that are actually informed by an utilitarian conceptualisation of participation and a commodified idea of communal services (Earle 2005).

In this framework, communities are idealised as homogeneous entities, and their internal divisions, differences and inequalities are neglected. Projects for instance ignore that *ashar* and other forms of community cooperation are often authoritarian, conservative and patriarchal (Babajanian, Freizer, and

Stevens 2005; Earle 2005; Babajanian 2011), or that pre-Soviet decentralised decision-making “actually resulted in permanent conflict and the competitions for pastureland were overwhelming, not limited” (Jacquesson 2010, 115). Therefore, the reliance on traditional practices within development projects often reproduces authoritative relations between local leaders and villagers. Moreover, the reference to “traditions” adds a moral pressure on villagers, who are even more reluctant to question project requirements when asked by local leaders because they fear social stigma and communal condemnation (Babajanian 2011, 325–26). Jacquesson (2010, 104) therefore concludes that “the reliance on ‘custom’ and ‘tradition’ and the dismissal of the real social relations of pastoral land use are among the most important reasons for the failure of pastoral land reforms in the past and in the present”.

3.3 Conclusion: reforms and development projects as governmentality devices?

As Burawoy and Verdery (1999a, 5) have noted, shock therapy reforms in ex-socialist countries constituted “a package [...] aimed to dissolve the past by the fastest means possible”. Not only the centrally planned socialist economy had to be dissolved to make place for a new and efficient market system; the very subject of the socialist worker had to be transformed along with the disintegration of collective enterprises to make place for a new type of citizen (Alexander 2004; Empson 2011). The “project of transition”¹¹ from socialism to capitalism has been not a purely material and economic one, but it implies also a symbolic transformation aimed to reframe subjects as democratic citizens and capitalist entrepreneurs (Humphrey 2002). This chapter has shown that donor intervention in Kyrgyzstan throughout the last three decades has paralleled and supported shock therapy reforms in their attempt to transform economic practices as well as subjects. The literature discussed in this chapter generally agrees that most donor programmes in contemporary Kyrgyzstan assume, and at the same time produce, a specific type of subject that Pétric (2013, 13) has synthesised with the concepts of *biznesman* and *demokrat*, two English terms that have been integrated into Russian and Kyrgyz language usage in Kyrgyzstan. These terms condensate the idea of the capitalist entrepreneur and democratic citizen that is modelled on the ideal of the active citizen and entrepreneur of Western liberal democracies.

Donors’ focus on civil society and participatory mechanisms is not only a way to increase the efficiency of donor intervention, but also more or less implicitly aims to produce a new type of active citizen that realises his/her autonomy by contrasting the hegemony of the state and by taking over some of its functions (Earle 2005; Pétric 2005). Donors, thus, assume that democracy and entrepreneurship can be learned through practice and thereby ignore “the importance of institutional structures that determine the nature of local decision-making, resource allocation and inclusion or exclusion” (Babajanian 2015, 511). The promotion of community-based forms of management and of community empowerment through economic activities builds on the assumption “that all humans are rational actors with similar aims played out in a sphere defined as ‘economic’” (Féaux de la Croix 2017, 61); it assumes and produces the ideal of

¹¹ I use this expression here to reproduce the way in which coherence, intentionality and linearity are often ascribed to the process of transformation after socialism.

an entrepreneurial subject, or the idea that “the poor are resilient, creative, entrepreneurial, and consuming, and as such are fully capable and willing participants in the free market economy” (Kim et al. 2018, 242). As a consequence, subjects who do not correspond to this profile are stigmatised “as inherently deficient and ‘unempowerable’” (*id.* 231). In short, the reform and development programmes discussed in this chapter have led to the emergence of “an unprecedented form of personhood: the ‘peasant farmer’ becomes the basic social unit of rural livelihood production, engagement in the market economy, preservation of natural resources and the environment, and realisation of local self-governance” (Bichsel et al. 2010, 259).

Nonetheless, it would be simplistic, if not arrogant, to think that Kyrgyzstani citizens can just be crafted at will by international donors into *biznesmans* and *demokrats*. Indeed, Pétric’s use of Russian/Kyrgyz transliterations is also a way to indicate that the concepts and ideals, like the terms, are reinterpreted in their encounter with the specificities and contingencies of the local context. For instance, some beneficiaries of the women empowerment programme analysed by Kim et al. (2018, 239) refused to participate in saving-and-loan activities because these were incompatible with their religion-based values. Herders, overwhelmed by the organisational burden generated by the new system of pasture tickets, negotiate informal agreements with animal owners, thereby bypassing the formal system (Dörre 2015). The Kyrgyz development workers interviewed by Féaux de la Croix (2013) adapt the content and form of training according to their own values and perceive their own educational mission to be a way to promote moral values and to provide social cohesion and national unit. These observations suggest, in line with what observed worldwide by ethnographers of aid (e.g. Mosse 2005; Olivier de Sardan 2005) and of postsocialism (see Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008), that local actors reinterpret and adapt the framings and conceptualisations advanced through reform or development programmes, thereby reconfiguring the form and practices of these programmes.

Part I – Conclusion

The review in Section 2.1 revealed that most scholarly approaches to cooperatives rely on normative ideals of what cooperatives should be and on teleological visions about what kind of society cooperatives should contribute to build. The section concluded with a call for abandoning these ideals and visions and for instead adopting a non-normative stance to engage with cooperatives as cooperation processes. Section 2.2 critically discussed institutionalist approaches to cooperation and questioned in particular their conceptualisation of economic rationality, identity and power and their assumption that institutions can be crafted to steer the behaviour of individuals in a specific direction. As an alternative to these approaches, the section reviewed recent work within the commoning scholarship, which conceptualises instead identities, rationalities, practices, institutions as well as power as co-emerging within more-than-human assemblages.

Chapter 3 illustrated how both governmental reforms and international development programmes in post-independence Kyrgyzstan have pursued similar goals towards economic liberalisation, state withdrawal from economic production and welfare provision and the establishment of democratic mechanisms within a nation-state. The chapter also showed that both reform and development programmes can be intended as governance devices aimed to “craft” not only new types of economic or political institutions but also new types of subjects: the “peasant farmer”, the *demokrat* or the *biznesman*. The concluding section of the chapter provided, however, some glimpses from existing ethnographic studies of how individual actors not only adapt their practices to the changed institutional settings but also how they reinterpret and reconfigure the institutions promoted by governmental or development actors.

I therefore argue that, if we seek to understand the process of the promotion of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan and its consequences for the everyday of villagers, we should look at how governmental and development programmes frame and conceptualise cooperatives (but also subjects and institutions) as well as how individual actors reinterpret these framings and conceptualisations in their specific and contingent local context and situated practices. In order to do this, we should abandon normative and teleological ideals of cooperatives and instead interrogate how these ideals are reproduced or reinterpreted and how the promotion of cooperatives based on these ideals reconfigures social relations in the everyday. In the following two chapters I develop a conceptual and methodological approach that will allow to engage in such an endeavour.

Part II – Conceptual and methodological approach

In Part II I outline the conceptual and methodological approach that allows me, in the following two parts of this manuscript, to engage with the promotion of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan and with the particular case of the Ak-Bulut cooperative in Pjak by avoiding evaluating these processes against normative teleological ideals of cooperatives and cooperation and to inscribe them within “grand narratives” of postsocialist transition or modern development. Chapter 3 builds on Gibson-Graham’s project of rethinking the economy to develop a weak theory for postsocialism and a postfantasmatic, postcapitalist approach to cooperatives. In Chapter 4, again drawing on Gibson-Graham’s epistemological approach, I outline my feminist ethnographic methodological approach.

4 WEAK THEORY TO RETHINK COOPERATIVES

In this chapter, I outline the conceptual framework that will guide my analysis. I first present J.K. Gibson-Graham's weak theory approach and its application for her project to rethink the economy (§4.1). I then discuss how Gibson-Graham's weak theory can be applied for the study of postsocialism (§4.2) and in particular for the study of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan (§4.3).

4.1 Gibson-Graham's weak theory

Over the last three decades, Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham, under the pen name of J.K. Gibson-Graham,¹ have engaged in an epistemological and political project of rethinking the economy – especially capitalism – in order to open up space for imagining other possibilities for living together ethically. They radically resist “the gravitational pull toward strong theories of economic behavior and unidirectional change”, i.e. the temptation “to align small facts with [...] large issues of economic import” as determined processes (Gibson-Graham 2014, 148). “Strong theory”, as “powerful discourses that organize events into understandable and seemingly predictable trajectories” (*ibid.*), permits us to discover only what we already know and is nourished by our paranoid need to understand and control a complex reality that we will never be able to fully grasp (Gibson-Graham 2006a, 4). We tend thus to trace what we observe to familiar processes – for instance modernisation, neoliberalisation, or postsocialist transition.

As an alternative approach, Gibson-Graham (2014) draws on Eve Sedgwick's weak theory. In contrast to strong theory, “weak theory does not elaborate and confirm what we already know; it observes, interprets, and yields to emerging knowledge”; it “powerfully attends to nuance, diversity, and overdetermined interaction” and thus it “widens the field of economic ‘realities’” (*id.* 149). Weak theory requires us to be open to the unknown, to consider different possibilities of causation and motivation without falling into the determinism of known processes. It allows us, for instance, to see that the monetisation of labour in the rural Philippines does not necessarily ascribe to a process of proletarianisation consequent to land expropriation; monetisation can also be a way to reinforce reciprocal relations of labour exchange between villagers (Gibson, Cahill, and McKay 2010, 239–40). Or, in a postsocialist context, it allows us to see that the precarisation of labour conditions in Bratislava is made possible and “more tolerable” by kinship and neighbourhood ties that support a collective system of domestic food production and care work exchange (Smith and Rochovská 2007).

Weak theory is forcibly anti-essentialist: it denies processes and social categories of an essence that would make them determined and predictable. Gibson-Graham (2006b, 15–17, 25–29; 2006a, xxx–i) draws here on Althusser's idea of “overdetermination”. With the concept of overdetermination, “every identity is reconceived as uncentered, as in process and transition, as having no essence to which it will

¹ As Gibson and Graham do, I refer to Gibson-Graham in the singular form.

tend or revert. Every event is constituted by all the conditions existing in that moment” (Gibson-Graham 2006b, 28). All social objects, including social processes and categories, are thus understood as “continually and differentially constituted rather than as pre-existing their contexts or as having an invariant core” (*id.* 16, n33). Overdetermination refuses thus to reduce complex processes to the effect of one or two determinants, such as economic profit maximisation or neoliberal policies:

The practice of overdetermination [...] encourages us to deny these forces a fundamental, structural, or universal reality and to instead identify them as contingent outcomes of ethical decisions, political processes, and sedimented localized practices, continually pushed and pulled by other determinations. (Gibson-Graham 2006a, xxxi)

If everything is overdetermined and without an essence, the way in which we ascribe essences and determinations – or the way in which we do not ascribe them – becomes the centre of the problem, or of the possibilities. Gibson-Graham (2008), drawing on post-structuralist and in particular feminist reflections, points to the performativity of knowledge and discourse: the way we speak about, represent, theorise and include social phenomena in broader structures of meaning contributes to fixing such phenomena in specific – but, after all, aleatory – determinations and essences. In other words, in an overdetermined world, how we represent social objects also determines and defines (together with innumerable other factors) these same social objects. As Gibson-Graham (*id.* 149) summarises, “by accepting that how we represent the world contributes to enacting that world, we collapse the distinction between epistemology and ontology”, so that “the epistemological and the performative ontological become one”.

As researchers, thus, we bear a profound responsibility about how we choose to describe and make sense of the world. Gibson-Graham (2006a, 619) emphasises that, in her project, “the choice to create weak theory about diverse economies is a political/ethical decision that influences what kind of worlds we can imagine and create, ones in which we enact and construct rather than resist (or succumb to) economic realities”. In this sense, her project calls for “a reframed ontology of becoming and an orientation to seeing difference and possibility rather than dominance and predictability” (*id.* 626). Her work invites researching subjects to transform ourselves, since the frustration and powerlessness we might feel when describing a world of “dominance and predictability” are produced (also) by our own way of describing that world. Instead, Gibson-Graham calls for a radical turn to hope and possibility as generative of alternative ways of living.

4.1.1 Weak theory to rethink the economy

Gibson-Graham has applied the principles of weak theory, anti-essentialism and overdetermination to rethink the economy. Instead of thinking the economy “as a central organizing cultural frame within contemporary society”, her aim is to reveal the “complexly overdetermined field of a diverse economy” and thus to rethink economy “as a site of ethical interdependence”, abandoning “the structural imperatives and market machinations of capitalocentric discourses of economy” (Gibson-Graham 2014, 147, 152). For Gibson-Graham (*id.* 152) this is “the enactment of revolution in a performative sense” – a

revolution aimed at opening up spaces for imagining other possibilities for ethical engagements with the economy and the world. This is both a political and ethical project: it concerns *politics* – intended as “a process of transformation instituted by taking decisions in an undecidable terrain” – and *ethics* – understood as “the continual exercising, in the face of the need to decide, of a choice to be/act/think a certain way” (Gibson-Graham 2006a, xxviii).

The first step in Gibson-Graham’s project is the *deconstruction* of the hegemonic capitalocentric discourse of the economy (see in particular Gibson-Graham 2006b, 1–23; Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003). Gibson-Graham argues that this hegemonic discourse assumes capitalism as the master signifier of the economy and is in this sense capitalocentric: *the* economy, as a unitary entity, *is* capitalism. At the same time, “other forms of economy (not to mention noneconomic aspects of social life) are [...] understood primarily with reference to capitalism” (2006b, 6): the innumerable other practices that people carry out in the pursuit of their livelihoods are usually defined *in relation to* capitalism, as capitalism’s Other. For Gibson-Graham (*id.* 59), even Marxism, with its evolutionary vision of history as a sequence of “stages” from capitalism to the utopia of socialism, reproduces the capitalocentric discourse. From a capitalocentric perspective, capitalism is fullness and the rest is lack, *non-capitalism* (like “informal economy” or the “black market”), or just *non-economy* (like care work in the household). Gibson-Graham seeks to take away capitalism’s essence through two strategies. On the one hand, she fills and gives an own autonomy to capitalism’s Other by describing the myriad of non-capitalist economic practices that make up an economic system. On the other, she reveals capitalism’s own heterogeneity and instability: there is no Capitalism, but rather *capitalisms* – always partial realisations of local and contingent negotiations and choices.

The deconstruction of the binary between capitalism and its Other opens up spaces for “reading for difference” (see in particular Gibson-Graham 2006a, xxxi–ii). As discussed above, instead of aligning her observations with the habitual framings, Gibson-Graham’s analysis remains open to diversity and difference. Building on a sort of “thick description” (Gibson-Graham 2014), she aims to re-populate our understanding of the economy with the multitude of diverse economic practices that make up “diverse economies”. In this vision, wage labour, unpaid care work, barter, market exchange, and all the rest, are all equally legitimate and important components of the economy. Acknowledging them means also to become aware of the existence of *actual* and *concrete* practices beyond capitalism – practices that exist already in the *here and now*.

The last observation represents the basis for the “postcapitalist politics” advanced by Gibson-Graham (2006a). If we recognise that alternatives to capitalism are already here, we can finally give up the “fantasy” (see §4.3.1) of having to smash the system (capitalism) before being able to build an alternative, as assumed and pursued by most leftist radical politics. Instead, Gibson-Graham and the numerous scholars and activists of the Community Economies Collective² engage in a postcapitalist politics *here and now*. This entails the exploration and experimentation of “community economies” – of

² See <http://www.communityeconomies.org> (accessed 16.08.2019).

possibilities of living together that are ethical because they recognise and respect the interdependences of our economic practices and the implications of our decisions for others. Such a politics is *postcapitalist*, and not *anticapitalist*, because it overcomes the centrality and the definition power of Capitalism; therefore, a postcapitalist politics can also include capitalist practices. What is crucial, however, is that all these practices should be based on a principle of “ethical action” intended as “reflecting on our interconnections with others, approaching the new with an inquiring mind and an appreciative stance, trusting others as we jointly encounter a future of unknowns and uncertainties, and learning to allay our fears and conjure creativity” (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013, xviii).

4.1.2 Cultivating subjects

Gibson-Graham’s postcapitalist politics is also a *politics of the subject* (see Gibson-Graham 2006a, xxxv–i); it is about “cultivating subjects [...] who can desire and inhabit noncapitalist economic spaces” (Gibson-Graham 2006b, x). Within the capitalocentric hegemony, capitalism is the master signifier of identities as well (*id.* 46–71). The correspondence of subjects’ identities with their role in the capitalist economy hides or at best undervalues the multiple other possible signifiers constituted by diverse economic practices. This creates a fixation with defined subject positions – a fixation that produces a lack and a frustration whenever the conditions for the fulfilment of such positions are not given. This is the case in the context of the de-industrialised Australian mining valley studied by Gibson-Graham (2006a, 23–51), where the loss of stable employment creates a void among ex-coal workers, who are unable to identify with anything else than wage labour. Gibson-Graham (*id.* 23) tracks “the institution, stabilization, and naturalization of a regional *economy*, the production of its economic *subjects*, and the obduracy of both in the face of change”. She shows how these subjects are products of *subjection* processes, or of specific “governmental practices and technologies that had constituted the Economy as the central anchor of identity in the region, naturalizing it as singular and definitely ‘non-diverse’” (*id.* 25).

Gibson-Graham’s project of rethinking the economy “has the potential to offer new subject positions and prompt novel identifications, multiplying economic energies and desires” (*id.* xxxv). Importantly, Gibson-Graham (*id.* 24, also xxix) overcomes an understanding of the subject as located only in the symbolic realm, but acknowledges also its “visceral” nature, something pre-representational that is related to feelings and embodied affects. For her, transforming subjects means to shift their “libidinal investment” on different objects (*id.* xxxv): away from the capitalocentric identifications that nourish a sense of lack and abandonment and towards more positive and productive “affective orientations of openness/freedom, interest/curiosity, and joy/excitement” (*id.* xxix). If subjects can be transformed “through self-awareness and transforming practices of the self that gradually becomes modes of subjectivation” (*id.* xxviii, drawing on Foucault 1985: 28), a postcapitalist political engagement means, first of all, a commitment to self-transformation. Such an engagement means “refusing a long-standing sense of self and mode of being in the world, while simultaneously cultivating new forms of sociability, visions of happiness, and economic capacities” (*id.* xxxv).

Such an approach could, however, bear the risk of overlooking the existing repressive and oppressive forces that constrain the capacities and possibilities of subjects to transform themselves and the world. This is also one of the main criticism raised against Gibson-Graham's project (e.g. Glassman 2003). Yet, she emphasises that her ontological reframing should not be "mistaken for a simplistic assertion that we can think ourselves out of the materiality of capitalism or repressive state practices" and that her "orientation toward possibility does not deny the forces that militate against it – forces that may work to undermine, constrain, destroy, or sideline our attempts to reshape economic futures" (*id.* xxxi). Gibson-Graham thus insists on the importance to analyse the conditions that produce "reluctant subjects", i.e. subjects that are stuck in their fixed identities and are unable to transform (*id.* 23–52).

4.2 Weak theory for postsocialism

Gibson-Graham's reflections presented in the previous paragraphs have emerged primarily from her experience in the de-industrialising Global North; the community economies project is mainly experimented in that context. These reflections draw only secondarily on postdevelopment scholarship and observations from the Global South (Gibson-Graham 2005; McGregor 2009; Gibson, Cahill, and McKay 2010). Experiences from ex-socialist countries in CEE and the FSU, both as source of inspiration for community economies theorisations or as ground for experimentation with its tools, remain very much absent (see, however, the exceptions of Pavlovskaya 2004; Smith and Stenning 2006; Stenning et al. 2010). I suggest that Gibson-Graham's ontological project is relevant for and can find inspiration in the context of contemporary CEE and FSU as well.

4.2.1 Ethnography against grand narratives of transition

As Gibson-Graham (2014) herself acknowledges, ethnography is a powerful methodology to avoid the temptations of strong theory. Ethnography-based research has indeed been first in line in both the Global South and ex-socialist countries in CEE and the FSU in countering the "grand narratives" of, respectively, development and postsocialist transition. By providing detailed empirically grounded knowledge, scholars have contributed to understand and conceptualise how transformation projects (only apparently coherent) such as "development" or "transition" are rearticulated and transformed when they enter local life-worlds. In the Global South, ethnographers have shown that local actors and structures always mediate and reinterpret external development intervention (Long 1990; see also Long and Long 1992; Mosse 2005; Olivier de Sardan 2005). Projects' goals and methods are never applied in a void but are always performed, renegotiated and reframed in the everyday micro-politics of local arenas: projects' outcomes are therefore always unpredictable beforehand. "Development" is not a structural force or a coherent ideological project with a defined and defining teleology (modernisation or sustainable livelihoods), but becomes an object of study conceptualised as an undetermined, incomplete and contingent social process involving multiple actors in multiple places.

Similarly, ethnographic accounts of postsocialism have rejected a teleological understanding of transformation after socialism as a determined transition from a defined economic and political system – socialism – to another – capitalism (e.g. Pickles and Smith 1998; Burawoy and Verdery 1999a; Hann 2002; Humphrey 2002). These scholars have called instead for “a radical openness to uncertainty and surprise” by understanding postsocialism as an object of study and not as a determined trajectory (Müller 2019, 538). This approach has emerged in neat opposition to the assumptions of mainstream approaches to transition by political scientists and economists – an approach also known under the name of “transitology” (e.g. Burawoy and Verdery 1999a; Müller 2019). Transitology scholars have sought to identify the policy strategies best suited to “shuttle” entire societies from one system to the other and have thereby informed the design of structural reforms after the fall of socialist regimes. In this regard, transitology is close to the institutional approaches discussed in Section 2.2.1: both assume that policies and institutions can be designed to shape individual behaviour at will.

Ethnographies of postsocialism have countered this assumption by disentangling the complex, undetermined and always partial process of transformation of everyday practices after the end of socialist regimes in CEE and the FSU. Anthropologists and geographers have shown that neither what came before (“socialism”) nor what was supposed to come next (“capitalism”) are uniform and coherent entities (see Verdery 1996), but that, on the contrary, both had to be “domesticated” through everyday practices to make them more tolerable (Creed 1998; Smith and Rochovská 2007; Stenning et al. 2010). Capitalist modes of production or exchange were part of the everyday already under socialist regimes, especially in the grey or black economy, and neoliberal reforms have often opened spaces for the proliferation of solidarity economies (see Pavlovskaya 2004). Authors have thus focused on the discontinuities *and* continuities between the two systems as lived and practiced in the everyday and on the complex ways in which individuals have enacted, transformed and rearticulated structural reforms and policy changes (e.g. Humphrey 1998; Verdery 2003).

4.2.2 The end of postsocialism (as we knew it)?³

Müller (2019) has recently called for the abandonment of the concept of “postsocialism”. He has convincingly argued that postsocialism has lost its object in a double sense: first, “socialism is no longer a unifying experience and [...] other experiences increasingly overwrite it”; second, “postsocialism’s emphasis on plurality and openness seems increasingly moot” since transitology as “postsocialism’s constitutive Other” has lost foot (*id.* 540). What remains in the term “postsocialism” is thus a fixation with the past, a backward-looking stance that risks “buttress[ing] a continued exoticisation of the East as Other and backward, ‘defining the present in terms of its past’” (*id.* 539, quoting Sakwa 1999: 3). Despite the efforts to reveal the complexities of transformation after socialism by anthropologists and geographers, postsocialism as a concept “risks reifying socialism into a uniform experience that it never

³ The title is a reference to Gibson-Graham’s first book *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)* (Gibson-Graham 2006b [1996]).

was” and “glossing over the varying degrees to which countries in the East are still, are no longer, or have never been postsocialist” (*id.* 541).

The merit of postsocialism as a concept is to have offered an alternative discursive and conceptual framing to transition and transitology, thereby inviting scholars to avoid aligning their empirical observations to determined trajectories of “transition” or “neoliberalisation”. However, Müller further notes, the concept has never achieved an emancipatory force as it is the case for the concepts of postcolonialism or postdevelopment. I suggest that the problem with postsocialism is that its prefix has been intended mainly temporally rather than ontologically like in *post*colonialism or *post*development, where it marks the overcoming of, respectively, colonialism’s and development’s role as master-signifier. For postsocialism, instead, socialism remains the ontological reference as a “unifying experience” for a wide spectrum of diverse contexts. At the same time, however, at least since the end of socialist regimes in CEE and the FSU between 1989 and 1992,⁴ *capitalism* is the master signifier of meanings and identities of postsocialism, whereby socialism remains only capitalism’s (failed) Other.

The temporal prefix (“post-”) traps entire societies into the determinations of one specific past experience – societies that, in the last 30 years, have experienced complex historical processes, have followed diverse trajectories and are now looking to diverse futures. These determinations produce specific subject positions – of individuals but also of entire groups and territories – that are defined in the negative, as *lacking something*, as not being anymore (socialist) and not being yet (modern/capitalist). Like the subjects of development, defined by their lack of modernity (Gibson, Cahill, and McKay 2010; see also Gibson-Graham 2005; Escobar 1995), and the unemployed ex-workers in de-industrialising contexts, defined by their lack of wage labour (Gibson-Graham 2006b, 206–37), postsocialist subjects are defined in the negative by their lack of both socialism *and* capitalism/modernity, trapped until further notice in an interstitial space, in-between, unable to move and look forward (see also Müller 2018). Like the subjects of development and late capitalism, postsocialist subjects are thus charged with feelings of abandonment, frustration and failure.

In fact, I am more careful than Müller in declaring transitology’s lost influence today. Not only, as we have seen in Chapter 2, do essentialising and generalising narratives of “Soviet legacies” often underpin academic accounts at least concerning cooperation in ex-socialist countries; also, I have the impression, at least in the Central Asian contexts, the concept of transition – and the dichotomous, essentialising and hierarchical representations that come along it – is still very much present in both academic and public discourses. This is the case especially within the disciplines that are most influential for policy-making, in particular economics and political sciences. As a sign of this, consider that three decades after the fall of socialist regimes in CEE and the FSU, there are still academic institutes, study programmes and several conferences or publications that carry the term “transition” in their names or titles.⁵

⁴ It could be even argued, as Gibson-Graham (2006b) does when she denounces the capitalocentrism of Marxism, that socialism has always been capitalism’s Other.

⁵ To give just a few examples among countless others, the “Leibniz Institute of Agricultural Development in Transition Economies” (IAMO) in Halle, Germany, is one of the most influential for agrarian policy-making in Central Asia. In 2016, IAMO jointly

Müller (2019, 546) has made indeed an important and timely point in calling for a renewed epistemological project that “would be attuned to the plurality of forces that shape ex-socialist countries today, no longer referring back to socialism as the major reference point”, a project that “would not have sharp boundaries, but blurred, porous ones, not continuous”. I suggest that Gibson-Graham’s weak theory and diverse economies framework could provide a solid basis and inspiration for such a project. Applying Gibson-Graham’s reflections in this context would allow to acknowledge the diversity not only of experiences after socialism, but also of socialism itself. It would allow to retain us from the temptation to ascribe our observations to some grand narratives of “Soviet legacies” or of “transition” – as it is still too often the case today in both popular discourse and academic literature. In the project of a “postcapitalist postsocialism”, the prefix *post* would mark an ontological distancing from socialism *and* capitalism as master signifiers, thereby allowing to create discursive and affective space for acknowledging diverse experiences in the past, for thinking alternative in the future and for engaging in the present.

For instance, applying Gibson-Graham’s frameworks, Stenning et al. (2010, 227) showed that the neoliberal reforms promoted in Poland and Slovakia in the 1990s produced an expansion of alternative economic practices that “were inflected with a set of rationalities that extended beyond the narrowly neo-liberal” (see also Smith and Rochovská 2007). The expansion of these practices, they argued, reinforced “other-than-neo-liberal subjectivities” – an outcome opposite to the original aims of reforms (Stenning et al. 2010, 227). Similarly, Pavlovskaya (2004) mapped Moscow’s “diverse transitions” and showed the proliferation of diverse economic practices and their importance for household reproduction after the end of the Soviet Union. By reframing the ways they speak about transformation after socialism and naming and including the diverse economic practices this transformation produces, such analyses offer new modes of identification for postsocialist subjects and open spaces for hope and agency in the place of frustration and nostalgia.

4.3 Weak theory to rethink agricultural cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan

In their study of cooperation among ravens, van Dooren and Despret (2018) questioned how evolutionary biology – supported by the use of economic metaphors – has contributed to an understanding of (human and non-human) living beings as individuals are driven by one single motivation: their own survival in an evolutionary system where only the fittest can survive. The authors lament that, when observing a behaviour through the glasses of evolutionary biology, one can only see functions and motivations that correspond to an individualised quest for fitness. While noticing that this renders invisible other functions and motivations because they are considered impossible, van Dooren and Despret (*id.*) call for an approach based on a “logic of multiplication”, in which there is “a ‘cooperative’ relationship between

organised with the International Association of Agricultural Economics (IAAE) a Symposium in Almaty titled “Agricultural transitions along the Silk Road: restructuring, resources and trade in the Central Asia Region”. Some influential economists of postsocialism teach the master programme in “Transition Management” at the Justus-Liebig University in Giessen, Germany. In December 2019, a radio broadcast dedicated to the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of Ceausescu’s regime asks whether Romania’s transition has finished or is still ongoing today.

hypotheses, highlighting the *many reasons* that ravens might do the things they do in particular contexts”. At the same time, they reject the use of an economic terminology that erases “an animal lifeworld – an everyday experience of activity and leisure, pleasure and pain, abundance and hardship, exhilaration and fear, rivalry and affection” (Crist 1999, 141–42, quoted in van Dooren and Despret 2018).

Chapter 2 explained how approaches by international actors to promote community-based cooperation and cooperatives are often based on a functionalistic understanding of cooperation and cooperatives as tools for economic and social development. In this sense, these approaches reproduce a perspective similar to the one criticised by van Dooren and Despret in evolutionary biology: a perspective that reduces human behaviour mainly to a quest for profit maximisation. The institutionalist approaches reviewed in Chapter 2 have attempted to complicate this understanding by tackling the complexity of human behaviour and by acknowledging its “bounded” rationality. Nonetheless, these approaches also tend to reproduce the assumption of profit maximisation as the main motor of human behaviour. With the narrow lenses of classical or institutionalist economics, authors are thus unable to explain or understand the limited participation in formal cooperation institutions and tend to generally blame some “psychological resistance to cooperation” inherited from the Soviet past. The application of such approaches and assumptions in postsocialist contexts therefore often leads to the conclusion that the failure of formal cooperation institutions is due to the legacies of previous socialist experiences, which trap communities in the determinism of path dependency. –

As discussed (§4.2.2), even the concept of postsocialism that emerged as a critique to the grand narratives of transitology bears the risk, today, of maintaining entire societies and territories in a state of in-betweenness and thus of producing a sense of lack and feelings of inadequacy, frustration and abandonment. I sense that such affects might be similar to the ones produced by the narratives that declare the failure of cooperatives and of formal cooperation in ex-socialist contexts in general and in Kyrgyzstan in particular. I presume that such affects might limit villagers’ possibilities for empowerment and self-determination within the framework of broader, formalised or unformalised, already existing cooperation practices. With this research, I thus aim to challenge such narratives and propose an anti-essentialist reading of cooperatives, cooperation and, more generally, of agricultural transformation in Kyrgyzstan. This reading should follow a “logic of multiplication” and produce more positive affects, of hope and possibility instead of frustration and abandonment. In the remainder of this chapter, I outline more in detail the conceptual basis (§4.3.1/2) and epistemological process (§4.3.3) for such an approach.

I apply Gibson-Graham’s weak theory to avoid the temptation of aligning my empirical observations to predictable trajectories (of neoliberalisation, of failure, of postsocialist path dependency for instance) and to remain instead open to the unpredictability and contingency of everyday practices of cooperation in my field site and propose an anti-essentialist re-reading of these practices. My approach is, first, *postcapitalist*, as defined in the former section, since it rejects capitalocentric assumptions and representations of the economy. It is, second, *postfantasmatic* insofar as it calls for traversing the fantasy that expects cooperatives to be bounded formal objects corresponding to the idealised models discussed in

Chapter 2. It is, third, *relational* since it considers cooperatives as overdetermined cooperation practices co-constituted through intimate everyday relations within more-than-human assemblages.

4.3.1 Traversing fantasies to engage with cooperatives

As mentioned in Chapter 2, some scholars have pointed to the “fantasmatic” attitude that very often underlies initiatives for the promotion of cooperatives both with an anti-capitalist transformative goal or as a tool for development within market economies (Byrne and Healy 2006; Gibson-Graham 2006a, 127–63). To counter such an attitude, these scholars have suggested to abandon an understanding of cooperatives as a formal and bounded object that is evaluated by comparing it with an idealised model in the future. Instead, they have proposed to look at cooperatives as a process of cooperation – specific, contingent, unpredictable – that takes place, with all its imperfections, in the present (see also Emery, Forney, and Wynne-Jones 2017).

Byrne and Healy (2006) base their analysis of fantasmatic attitudes towards cooperatives on Lacan’s concept of fantasy (see Lacan 1977). In Byrne and Healy’s reading of Lacan, fantasy originates from the “fundamental and unavoidable gap or lack in identity” that characterises subjects from the moment they break from the “prelinguistic, presubject wholeness” (*id.* 243). Fantasy is the mechanism through which subjects try to recreate the lost wholeness which will never come back. Fantasy creates at the same time the object of desire and the obstacle to its realisation: the “symptom”. Fantasmatic subjects are thus caught in the trap of desiring an object they can never have but, by producing the symptom as a scapegoat, they avoid confronting the inevitability of this lack.

Read from this perspective, co-operators, development practitioners and scholars engaging with cooperative initiatives project their desires onto a goal in the future: a cooperative system comprehending the whole society, Socialism, development or a perfect market. These goals represent objects of desire, however, and, instead of acknowledging their intrinsic impossibility, these subjects constitute different symptoms as scapegoats: the persistence and ubiquity of the capitalist system; interventionist governments limiting the self-fulfilment of the free market; corrupt and weak governments unable to implement the needed reforms for a conducive environment for cooperatives; or people’s cultural norms and habits not in line with the rationality of *homo economicus*, resulting for instance in a “resistance to cooperation” inherited from their Soviet experience.

Fantasmatic mechanisms bear a series of risks. Inspired by Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) interpretation of Lacanian psychoanalysis, even if not explicitly referring to the mechanisms of fantasy, Gibson-Graham (2006a, 103, 111) questions the “tradition of essentialist or structural (and thus largely negative) readings of cooperative experiments” that “constricts the ethical space of becoming, obscuring possibilities of (self)cultivation and the way that cooperative practice itself calls forth and constitutes its own subjects”. She warns against the hypercritical scrutiny that results from the comparison of actual cooperative experiences with utopian ideals and denounces that this attitude leaves scholars blind to the small achievements and struggles cooperatives and co-operators go through day by day (*id.* 102).

Byrne and Healy (2006), building on Gibson-Graham's reflections, note that fantasmatic attitudes in approaching cooperatives impose a rigid normative framework against which actual initiatives are judged. These attitudes nourish a purism that, besides limiting a deep engagement with the practical challenges of the everyday management of cooperatives, can also provoke fractions and sectarianism within the cooperative movement as well as within cooperatives. Therefore, Byrne and Healy warn:

We are [...] concerned with what fantasy [...] prevents us from imagining, what possible politics and what other orientations of the desiring (economic) subject are precluded – how different approaches to economic, social and environmental justice are stymied by fantasies in which the world is already full of meaning, where the identity of (economic) subjects is anchored in relation to a frustrating symptom of which these subjects are unwilling to let go. (*id.* 245)

How can subjects then overcome the mechanisms of fantasy and start imagining other futures, other possibilities? Always following Lacan, Byrne and Healy suggest that the point is not to abandon fantasies, but to *traverse* them (see also Healy 2010). This means to become aware that fantasies *are fantasies*, intrinsically unrealisable. Subjects who have traversed their fantasies become postfantasmatic subjects and ethical subjects: they are “capable of acting ethically” because they can assume responsibility for their own desires and actions, without externalising that responsibility onto others or onto symptoms (*id.* 502–3).

Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) “radical democracy” project similarly calls for acknowledging the nonfixity of identity and remaining in the lack in order to build a new understanding of democratic struggle (see also Gibson-Graham 2006a, 53–56; Byrne and Healy 2006). This is a struggle that does not aim “to fill the institutional authority or articulate the positive content of the law, but rather, to maintain the negativity that makes institutions and law changeable” (Byrne and Healy 2006, 246). For the realisation of this project, fantasies need to be traversed, since they “interfere with this negativity, fill up these spaces with a positive content that forecloses the possibility of struggle and the political” (*ibid.*). Following Gibson-Graham (2006a, 53–56), Byrne and Healy (Byrne and Healy 2006, 248) call for an extended project of “radical economic democracy”. Contrary to Laclau and Mouffe's radical democracy, Byrne's and Healy's radical economic democracy acknowledges also the nonfixity of *the economy*: subjects can abandon the idea of the economy as a fixed and determined object and can embrace “structural indeterminacy” as “a vision that opens up the economy as a field of responsibility and decision” (Gibson-Graham 2006a, 103, drawing on Laclau 1995).

More concretely, Byrne and Healy (2006) tell how, in their vast experience of action research with cooperatives, they have encountered several subjects trapped in the mechanisms of fantasy, but also some postfantasmatic subjects. For the authors, the latter are co-operators who are capable of recognising “the fundamental negativity of identity [and thus] that the productive, appropriative or distributive processes of the firm are not given and may be transformed through struggle” (*id.* 252). They are ethical economic subjects, “open to democratic struggle and conflict, resolutely committed to producing a cooperative economy, and decidedly anti-utopian in their ethicopolitical commitments” (Healy 2010, 503). These co-operators can thus truly democratically and non-dogmatically discuss issues such as the distribution of

surplus, the remuneration of labour, or the inclusion of new members (see also the analysis of the Mondragón Cooperative Corporation in Gibson-Graham 2006a, 101–26). In their endeavour to study cooperatives, researchers need first of all to traverse their own fantasies if they aspire to see, analyse and perhaps promote the commitment of postfantasmatic subjects and the processes of (radical) democratic negotiation or to identify what prevents them (Healy 2010; also Byrne and Healy 2006, 244, note 2).

4.3.2 Cooperation as relational practice

In Chapter 2, I discussed how commoning scholars have questioned the assumptions of institutionalist approaches to the commons and have instead advanced an understanding of commoning as relational practice. These scholars invite an analysis of initiatives for the management of commons by focusing on how such initiatives reconfigure more-than-human relations. Such an analysis is based on a conceptualisation of institutions, identities and practices as bare of an essence and as co-constituted and co-emerging – or overdetermined. Therefore, institutions for the management of commons, or for community-based cooperation more generally (for instance cooperatives), are never fixed but always in becoming: they are negotiated, contested, experienced and practiced. They are not determined by specific structures of human behaviour or social norms, but they co-emerge with them. Human subjects (including their identities, rationalities and moralities) and social structures are also, like institutions, always contingent, co-constituted and in-becoming (Singh 2017; Nightingale 2019; also Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016).

This co-emergence happens through everyday intimate practices, intended as the embodied performance of affective practices that are always relational since they necessarily imply encounters with other human and nonhuman entities (Singh 2013, 194 drawing on Raffles 2002). These intimate practices include of course conscious decision-making based on economic calculations (as assumed by institutionalist approaches), but also, for instance, the affective labour of taking care of a forest or a pasture or the negotiation of rights and responsibilities over their use and care (Singh 2013; Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016). Representations – as discursive practices – are part of these intimate practices and also co-emerge in this process: discourse and knowledge are therefore always performative and co-constituted.

This approach rejects the assumption of full or bounded economic rationality as the main motor of decision-making, but also the assumption of cognitive decision-making as the main motor of human behaviour. Nightingale (2011) speaks of “irrational commons” not to imply that some decisions are not rational, but to draw attention to alternative rationalities (based for instance on moralities of reciprocity, affective attachments and emotional states) that indeed appear to be irrational to approaches valuing only one type of economic rationality. Instead, human rationalities are multiple and based on understandings of self and relational ethics that “*emerge* from certain ways of being with the world” (Singh 2017, 764).

From a relational perspective, humans are conceptualised “as ‘thinking-feeling’ empathetic beings”, whose subjectivities emerge through intimate practices and affective socio-nature encounters (*id.* 752). Senses of self, or identities, are never fixed nor stable, but are fluid and dynamic, so that “individuals at

time resist, collude, or otherwise inhabit contradictory subjectivities” (Nightingale 2013, 2374). Whereas this approach recognises that subjects are produced through subjection processes entailing governmentality practices and disciplining technologies, it also emphasises that these subjection processes are never completely accomplished (Gibson-Graham 2006a, 23; Nightingale 2019).

Although Foucault recognised that the power emerging from governmentality practices of subjection can be both “oppressive and limiting” or “productive and enabling” (Gibson-Graham 2006a, 23), it is rather the expansion of his reflections by Judith Butler (1990; 1997) that has allowed to understand how the “productive and enabling” aspect of power can lead to the emergence of new and different subjects. In Gibson-Graham’s (2006a, 24) reading of Butler, subjection is a process of becoming that is always ongoing and never completely accomplished, since “the exercise of power is temporalized, made up of a continuous repetition and reiteration of ritualized practices that necessarily involve interruptions and productive intervals of discontinuity”. It is in these intervals and discontinuities that subjects “may shift and create new identities for themselves despite the seemingly hegemonic power of dominant discourses and governmental practices” (*ibid.*). It is also in these same intervals and discontinuities that commoning scholars, including Gibson-Graham, aim to lever to cultivate new kinds of subjects.

An essence is thus negated to identities. As a consequence, communities are not constituted around a pre-given essence or natural belonging. An approach to commons as “an active political relationship, rather than some assumed common inheritance, natural or historical” (Amin and Howell 2016, 10), necessarily implies “inessential” communities (Gibson-Graham 2006a, 88 drawing on Agamben 1993). Commoning practices constitute communities – referred to as “commoning-communities” in Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy (2016) – with boundaries that are always contingent, fluid and transformable. Importantly, commoning scholars, assuming a “relational-vitalist ontology” (Vasile 2019a) inspired by posthumanism and vital materialism, insist that “the commoning-community is more-than-human” in that commoning practices always imply relations between humans and non-humans (Singh 2017). Commons are thus “a set of more-than-human, contingent relations-in-the-making that result in collective practices of production, exchange and living in the world” (Nightingale 2019, 18).

It is thus important to avoid the temptation of falling in known patterns of identification with “essential” communities but also with particular regimes of property. In this sense, a postcapitalist politics of commoning is decoupled from “formal legal struggles against the enclosure of commons through privatisation or commodification” (although these struggles remains important), but rather “attends to the diversity of practices for commoning different types of property” (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016, 198; also Clement et al. 2019; Sato and Alarcón 2019). This decoupling allows eventually

a transformative politics not located in an elusive future, not in a combative anti-privatisation struggle focused narrowly on property rights; instead it would be a postcapitalist and posthuman politics located in the shared present – in the becoming of a commoning-community in the here and now. (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016, 207)

Amin and Howell (2016, 2, 5) agree that such an approach allows us to see what is already happening and thus to “nurture and expand the politics of possibilities”, instead of waiting for anti-capitalist alternatives that never arrive. They salute that understandings of inessential commoning-communities allow us to abandon “a nostalgia for community as the antidote of neoliberal individualism” (*id.* 10) – a nostalgia that often underlies development programmes. However, they also rightly warn that “there is, at the very least, nothing *inherently* progressive in the political use of the commons” (*id.* 5). Similarly, Nightingale (2019, 18) reminds us that communities emerging from commoning processes are always “contingent achievements, never free from the ambivalence and contradictions of power”. As such, they can forge new relations and include new entities but can also reconfigure such relations by cutting other entities out; they continuously create inclusions *and* exclusions. Since we cannot avoid these ambivalences, Nightingale (*id.* 31, drawing on Haraway 2016) concludes that we should practice “staying with the trouble, keeping in view the exclusions, others, and power over that commoning practices create”.

More generally (and beyond commoning), insisting on the ontological importance of acknowledging the diversity of economies does not entail naively assuming that all forms of noncapitalist practices are progressive. On the contrary: a diverse economies analysis as outlined above makes visible economic practices that often remain hidden in capitalocentric analyses and therefore exposes these practices to evaluation against ethical criteria – for instance by revealing the inequalities and discriminations produced through these practices. Gibson-Graham’s framework allows to identify communality and solidarity as well as exploitation in economic spaces (such as the household) that are often overseen by traditional analyses (see Gibson-Graham 2006b, 265). This framework allows, for instance, Smith and Stenning (2006) to show how the diverse economies of postsocialism (including remittances, black markets or care work) constitute at the same time exploitative as well as empowering relations.

Geographers have been particularly well positioned to contribute to the development of such theoretical reflections in that they have brought a special attention and a more precise theorisation of space, scale and materiality within the investigation of commoning practices (see e.g. Nightingale 2013; Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016; Amin and Howell 2016; Singh 2017). They have emphasised that practices of commoning or, more generally, of cooperation, are always localised – they happen in particular *places*, which in their turn emerge through the embodied affective experience of engaging in such practices (Singh 2017). These practices are also always embedded in a multi-scalar context – from the macroeconomic structures of, for instance, neoliberal policies and global environmental processes to the materiality of embodied emotions and bodily experiences of everyday practices (see Clement et al. 2019, 6).

4.3.3 Rethinking cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan

In order to rethink cooperatives as the result of relational practices of cooperation in Kyrgyzstan from a postcapitalist postfantasmatic perspective, I will follow the conceptual steps⁶ that Gibson-Graham (2006b; 2006a) has applied for her project of rethinking the economy. We have seen that cooperatives are usually understood as a particular type of enterprise that follows specific principles and values (Chapter 2). I depart from such a narrow understanding of cooperatives as formal institutions and look instead at the diverse practices that emerge around, and sometimes converge into, the idea of cooperative. These practices are sometimes based on principles of solidarity and altruism and other times on the maximisation of individual profit; however, they are always part of relational processes of being-in-common and thus always entail also affective attachments, bodily encounters and discursive representations.

First, I will *deconstruct* both the idea of cooperatives as formal bounded objects and their insertion within specific teleologies of development or postsocialist transition. I will analyse attempts to promote cooperatives not as part of a coherent and unitary ideological or political project, but rather as contingent and localised practices that individual actors negotiate and reinterpret in their everyday. I will analyse how the narrative of the failure of cooperatives is constructed in the specific context of contemporary Kyrgyzstan, how this narrative produces particular affects and their consequences for villagers' subjectivities and everyday lives. At the same time, the operation of deconstruction concerns also my own fantasies about cooperatives as an alternative to capitalist modes of production and to neoliberalisation processes.

Second, looking at the cooperative as a fluid entanglement of diverse practices will allow a *re-reading* of cooperation experiences in rural Kyrgyzstan. In particular, I will be able to grasp and analyse the diversity of such practices (e.g. formal or informal, punctual or repeated, spontaneous or imposed, old or new) and how they are inserted in broader local diverse economies. Conceptualising cooperatives as emerging from relational practices also allows me to analyse their promotion as one element (among others) of the continuous reconfiguration of social relations through everyday practices.

The final step would be to engage in a *creative exploration* of the ways in which some particular subjectivities might be nurtured through specific cooperation practices. For the reasons I explain in the next chapter, however, I pursue a less ambitious project within the scope of my doctoral dissertation: I will explore how we – as scholars – can modify the way we frame and (if we) speak about the failure of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan in order to nurture more positive affects.

⁶ Note that these steps do not correspond to the order of the chapters in Parts III and IV. Rather, they are part of the methodological strategy I apply iteratively within the single chapters and sections of the manuscript.

5 ENGAGING WITH COOPERATIVES: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

In his contribution to the symposium in memory of Julie Graham, DeMartino (2013, 491) provides an eloquent synthesis of the methodological implications of Gibson-Graham's reflections:

Meeting the Gibson-Graham challenge to see the world differently, without recourse to sutured ontologies that discipline, direct, and constrain, requires of the academic a difficult adjustment in affect that many cannot countenance. It calls on us to challenge the supposed academic virtues of detachment, discernment, and critique [...]. We are challenged [...] to take the risk of laying ourselves bare – apprehending the world with the naïveté of the unscholarly rather than with an attitude of already knowing.

The weak theory approach outlined in the former chapter indeed requires from researchers to abandon the usual categories and “strong theories” with which we are used to make sense of the world we observe. This means committing to an epistemological openness that allows us to resist the temptation to trace what we observe back to known categories and predictable processes. It would be naïve, however, to think that we can lay ourselves *completely* bare of them; instead, we are called to make an effort to become aware of, and critically scrutinise, the structures that already – and often unconsciously – frame our ways of thinking and reading the world (see Gibson-Graham 2014, 148).

A performative ontology as outlined in the previous chapter, on the one hand, acknowledges that, in an overdetermined world, knowledge is always situated, contingent and partial; that – like subjects, institutions, or power structures – knowledge emerges in a specific context not only through discursive practices but, more broadly, through intimate practices that are always affective and relational. On the other hand, performative ontology also acknowledges that knowledge is at the same time performative – it is constitutive of such practices – and invites us therefore to assume the responsibility we bear as producers of knowledge that are legitimised by a particular institutional context. The idea of an “active transformative subject ‘learning about’ a separate inert object” is abandoned in favour of a “subject-object that is a ‘becoming world’” (Gibson-Graham 2011, 4).

Learning, then, means first of all a transformation of the researching subject: this is “not learning in the sense of increasing a store of knowledge but in the sense of becoming other, creating connections and encountering possibilities that render us newly constituted beings in a newly constituted world” (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010a, 322; see also Gibson-Graham 2006a, 127–64; 2008; DeMartino 2013, 492). This means also that data are not “collected”, but rather co-produced and constructed in a specific situated context (see also Rose 1993; 1997) and that “the field is not a site where we recognize or particularize what we already know, but a place where we create the new” (Gibson-Graham 2008, 625). In this sense, as advanced by feminist scholars already in the 1980s, the field itself as a place, the researcher as a subject, as well as data or knowledge, all co-emerge in an always situated, contingent and transitory way through relations, encounters and practices (e.g. Harding 1987; Haraway 1988).

Reflexive ethnography, as a way for “researching selves and others” (Davies 1999), is particularly well suited for an intellectual endeavour as the one proposed in the previous chapter (see Gibson-Graham

2014). Ethnography as a methodological approach commits to an in-depth engagement with other lifeworlds: it focuses on how the object it studies is constituted in the everyday of people's lives (e.g. Crang and Cook 2007). Reflexive ethnography expands this approach by including the researching subject, and her own lifeworld, in the analysis, thereby collapsing the difference between research subjects and objects (e.g. Davies 1999; Foley 2002; Alsop 2005). Ethnography as a methodological approach is necessarily iterative-inductive. It requires to be open to the unexpected of the field, to reveal local structures of meaning, instead of projecting external structures on the local reality to make sense of it. The researcher is thus invited to adopt a flexible attitude to fieldwork and research – a flexibility that allows the researcher to integrate the unexpected and to creatively modify the research plan, approach and categories in accordance with the evolution of observations and reflections.

Reflexive ethnography is also necessarily feminist, since it de-centres the site of knowledge production and embraces an understanding of knowledge as always situated and contextual (e.g. Rose 1993). A feminist methodology also implies a particular attention to the materiality of the research process (e.g. Stodulka, Dinkelaker, and Thajib 2019). This includes a focus on the body (of the researcher and of others) “as a social, political and economic location” and thus “as a site of material inequality” (Noxolo 2009, 63, 61); but also a focus on the body as the “sensory agent” (*id.* 63) through which we experience inequalities and, more generally, social processes – a “sensory agent” whose affects, feelings and sensations need to be part of analysis (see also Ahmed 2007; Laliberté and Schurr 2016; Militz, Faria, and Schurr 2019).

For my study of agricultural cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan I thus apply a case-study approach (see e.g. Gomm, Hammersley, and Foster 2000; Yin 2003) inscribed within a feminist/reflexive ethnography methodology. A case-study approach allows a long-term engagement in and with a specific subject/object or place, which is crucial for my endeavour to apply weak theory to postsocialism. Within my broader theoretical approach, the limited statistical generalisability of case-study findings is not a major concern, since the objective of weak theory is precisely to avoid generalising “small facts” into broad categories but, on the opposite, to be committed to the diversity of each field. Still, my aim is to produce an analysis that is relevant also beyond my specific case study: indeed, a case-study approach of the kind outlined allows for analytic generalisations, intended as the possibility to “expand and generalize theories” beyond the single case study (Yin 2003, 10).

If we acknowledge that knowledge is always situated and that the field is co-constituted through research practice, reflecting on the genealogy of a research project becomes inescapable. Before turning to the more traditional elements of a methodology chapter (§4.2), I therefore briefly describe the evolution of my reflections, decisions and actions since the beginning of my doctoral project (§4.1). Certainly, this description cannot account for all the ups and downs, ebbs and flows, moments of enthusiasm and frustration, second thoughts and changes of mind that make up a doctoral research project or research in general. Yet writing about them in retrospective allows me to ascribe to events and decisions a certain (even if always partial) coherence that was not consciously perceived in the moment these events and decisions happened. This outline is intended only to give a general overview of how my research project

evolved and of my positionality within it. Committing to a reflexive ethnography, however, means that such reflections are not relegated to a methodological section; instead, they will be integral part of analysis. Therefore, the reader will find more details about, among other things, field access difficulties, translation challenges and “going native” in the analytical chapters.

5.1 Genealogy of the research

This research project has developed over the last six years, starting when I joined the Human Geography Unit at the University of Fribourg as a research and teaching assistant in November 2013.¹ Before, I had obtained a master’s degree in geography at the University of Zurich with a thesis on the implementation of participatory tools in international development projects in rural Nepal (see Cima 2013; 2015). The research in Nepal was part of an applied research project² initiated and funded by a Swiss NGO, by which I was then employed as an intern after obtaining my degree. At the University of Fribourg, Christine Bichsel, a professor working on Central Asia would become my future supervisor. When I joined her group, I had no previous knowledge of the Central Asian region, but I carried a baggage of theoretical reflections as well as ethical and practical questions about the design and implementation of development programmes. This background revealed crucial for the evolution of my doctoral research: although initially determined to shift my research focus away from development questions, these questions, and the conceptual framings developed during my previous academic and professional engagements, strongly shaped the way I started looking at the new regional context and influenced what I was able – and unable – to see during the first reviews of literature and the first visits to Kyrgyzstan.

My doctoral research was not part of a broader research project, which had advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, I had ample freedom to develop my own research foci and ideas; on the other, this freedom was often difficult to deal with, especially at the beginning, when I had to develop a research idea in a regional context I barely knew. The choice to work specifically on Kyrgyzstan was then mainly pragmatic. In comparison with the other Central Asian republics, Kyrgyzstan has the most open visa regime and the least authoritarian government. This means, for a young researcher without experience in the region, more freedom and ease to explore the context without a clear research design in mind and a limited risk of naïve *faux pas* putting other people and myself in danger.

I visited Kyrgyzstan for the first time in summer 2014 (see Tables 5.1 and 5.2) with a vague idea to focus my research on memory processes in relation to land issues, since memory is highly politicised within nation-building processes (see Umetbaeva 2015; Isaacs and Polese 2016). During this first stay, I visited six of the seven provinces of Kyrgyzstan, exploring possibilities for my future fieldwork.³ Through a

¹ The position was financed for five years by the university. Fieldwork costs were covered in part by my supervisor’s personal research fund and in part by the *Fonds de recherche du Centenaire de l’Université de Fribourg*. My acknowledgments go to both.

² See <https://www.ids.ac.uk/projects/accountability-at-local-level-in-fragile-contexts/> (accessed 26.08.2019).

³ With “fieldwork”, I mean the research work taking place during my stays in Kyrgyzstan. However, as this chapter shows, I do not assume an epistemological divide between this narrow definition of fieldwork and the rest of the research process. For a critical discussion of the concept of field see Amit (2000).

fortuitous chain of contacts, I could visit Oktjabr, an ex-state-farm-turned-cooperative near Karakol, the capital of the Issyk-Kul province. This particular encounter stimulated my imagination about a last bastion of resistance against the penetration and expansion of capitalism in rural Kyrgyzstan after the end of the Soviet Union.⁴ Once back in Switzerland, I thus decided to focus my research on the memory of collective work in the framework of ex-Soviet farms transformed into agricultural cooperatives in order to understand how such memory is constructed through everyday practices of collective work.

Table 5.1: Research timeline⁵

2013	
Autumn	Getting acquainted with the regional context
2014	
Winter–spring	General literature review on Central Asia
Summer	2 months' exploratory stay in Kyrgyzstan
Autumn	Elaboration of the research concept
2015	
Winter–spring	Thematic literature reviews, preparation of fieldwork
Summer	3 months' exploratory stay in the Issyk-Kul province
Autumn	Data analysis
2016	
Winter	Specification of the research concept, preparation of fieldwork
Spring–summer	IAMO-IIAE Symposium, Almaty 6 months' research stay in Kyrgyzstan
Autumn	Theoretical framework (Gibson-Graham)
2017	
Winter	Data analysis
Spring	AAG Annual Conference, Boston Theoretical framework, preparation of last fieldwork
Summer	2 months' research stay in Kyrgyzstan
Autumn	Data analysis
2018	
Winter	Summer school "Researching post-capitalist possibilities", Paramatta Clarification of theoretical framework
Spring	Data analysis
Summer	POLLEN Bi-annual Conference, Oslo Clarification of theoretical framework
Autumn	Data analysis
2019	
Whole year	Writing the thesis manuscript

Before going back to Kyrgyzstan in summer 2015, I thus focused my desk work on the exploration of regional experiences with cooperatives and on more general conceptualisations of cooperatives in academic literature. While engaging with this literature, my normative position towards it was influenced by my fantasy of cooperatives as a form of resistance and as an alternative to capitalist modes of production – nurtured in my imagination by the examples of South American *empresas recuperadas*.⁶ With my background in critical development studies, I remained suspicious of attempts to promote cooperative organisation through international development programmes as well as of economic literature

⁴ This formulation is of course caricatural: see Chapter 6 for a more nuanced analysis of these fantasies.

⁵ I only include here the main milestones of the research process and the conferences/workshops that most influenced my reflections. For a detailed timeline of research stays in Kyrgyzstan see Table 5.2. Certainly, the research process is much more messy, unpredictable and aleatory than both Table 5.1 and 5.2 can show.

⁶ See e.g. <http://mner.com.ar/wordpress/> (accessed 01.10.2020).

promoting them as a solution to the problems of the free market. Having spent already a few months in Kyrgyzstan, where I experienced the extraordinary hospitality of its people as well as the strong reciprocity ties among relatives and friends, I was surprised – and sceptical – of finding in most literature on cooperatives and cooperation in the region the conclusion that, in short, Central Asian people today are not very prone to cooperate in economic activities. This was also the main take-home message on cooperation at the symposium of agricultural economists to which I participated in spring 2016 in Almaty. The narrative of the failure of cooperatives and cooperation in all of Central Asia and the identification of the causes of such failure in some sort of “Soviet legacy” hovered about the whole symposium.

My next stay in Kyrgyzstan in summer 2015, however, seemed to confirm the message of the symposium, which provoked in me feelings of frustration and disillusion. It revealed impossible to conduct my research with Oktjabr; what I had planned to be my first fieldwork in my restricted “field” transformed thus in a second explorative fieldwork in the Issyk-Kul province, searching for a cooperative to work with. The exploration of several cooperatives seemed to confirm that cooperatives in the region had failed: in the best case, they existed only on paper; in the worst, nobody seemed to know about them. This reading was also confirmed in my meetings with development practitioners in Bishkek. The decision to settle down in Pjak for the rest of my fieldwork in 2016 and 2017 and to maintain Ak-Bulut as my single case study was therefore not due to its success as a cooperative, but rather as its representativity of “failed cooperatives” in the country. In the meantime, the encounter with cooperatives more recent than Oktjabr that had been created in the 2000s with the support of international development programmes brought back the relevance of the topic of development and of questions related to the role of international actors in the promotion of a particular model of cooperative for my research.

The decision to work on memory practices with a cooperative that existed almost only on paper revealed difficult to implement in practice, however. I realised this only after the first two months of my long fieldwork in Pjak in 2016. While trying to identify some sort of collective activities in the village as entry points for the investigation of memory practice, I gradually built the conviction that the market had taken over everything and that no (or very few) collective practices remained to observe: villagers confirmed this impression by lamenting the monetisation and/or loss of traditional social rituals and solidarity practices. My interest at this point became to understand how this “marketisation” had happened.

I had already heard about Gibson-Graham’s diverse economies, in particular through their application in ex-socialist contexts by Smith and Stenning (2006). While observing current agricultural practices in the village, indeed, I felt that the categories I was using to frame them as “capitalist” or others were not helping me making sense of them; rather, they were producing a further sense of frustration in facing the powerful “market forces” that were taking over even social life in the village.⁷ Once back in Switzerland in autumn 2016, I thus engaged deeply with Gibson-Graham’s work, which would radically change my

⁷ Again, I am providing a caricatural account of the feelings I experienced. This is similar to Gibson-Graham’s (2006b, 9, note 19 drawing on Foucault 1973) strategy of denaturalisation, “where ‘orders’ or classifications are made to appear strange or ridiculous”.

perspective on my research and on research in general. I was further inspired by the encounter with Neera Singh and the vitalist-relational commoning scholarship at the annual conference of the American Association of Geographers (AAG) in Boston in summer 2017. The privilege – in terms of time and resources available – of working at a Swiss university allowed me to pursue the engagement with these theories not only through readings but also through personal encounters, in particular at the summer school “Researching Post-capitalist Possibilities” organised by Katherine Gibson and Stephen Healy in (Southern) summer 2018 and at a feminist political ecology panel at the bi-annual conference of the Political Ecology Network (POLLEN) in Oslo in (Northern) summer 2018.

These theoretical inspirations, in parallel with the engagement with my empirical data, have helped me in making better sense of the affective and intellectual experiences I lived during my stays in Kyrgyzstan – and that I am also continuously living throughout the research process until the present moment. In particular, Gibson-Graham’s work has helped me to abandon the narrow categories on which both agricultural economists or development workers and anti-capitalist cooperative supporters commonly rely. Abandoning these categories has meant to be better able to value the diversity of economic practices that make up agriculture in Pjak and to evaluate them more precisely according to the ethical principles I decide to apply. Thus, in the last short fieldwork in 2017, I was not trying anymore to see how market had taken over everything; rather, I was looking at how market had *not* taken over everything and how also “market” was a contingent and incomplete entity. I focused thus on the identification and investigation of the diverse economies of the village and how a cooperative (whose “failed” status suddenly made less sense) was inserted in them. Questions of memory and the relation to past practices and ideas of collective work lost their centrality in my work; nevertheless, they remain one of the numerous aspects to consider in the analysis of diverse economies practices.

As this brief overview has shown, my research process (as all research) is far from being linear, predictable and coherent but is rather a continuous open-ended iterative process between the various parts of a research design – a process that is influenced by the researcher’s emotions and affects, normative positions, fortuitous encounters, empirical and theoretical inspirations, as well as material limits and possibilities. It is a continuous back-and-forth from theory to empirical experience and from empirical experience to theory, mediated also by conscious and unconscious affective dispositions. As I have explained here, the conceptual framing through weak theory, diverse economies and commoning approaches emerged quite late in my research – actually after I had already completed most of the fieldwork. Also for this reason, one of the main limitations of my application of Gibson-Graham’s framework is the lack of her third step: the active political step of *constructing* alternative practices and feelings with and within a hybrid community through action-research practices (see Chapter 4). My political contribution to the field I have engaged with over the last six years is therefore less ambitious: it is about providing an alternative way for speaking of rural transformation and the promotion of

cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan, hoping that this can contribute to nurture more positive affects than the sense of frustration and disillusionment in front of the “failure” of cooperatives in the region.⁸

5.2 Constructing a case study and approaching the field

In the former section, I showed that the research is not a linear and coherent process; on the contrary, the evolution of a research project is shaped by hazard, fortuitous events, casual encounters and the unpredictable trajectories of relations and materialities. My choice to work in Kyrgyzstan was mostly due to the pragmatic factors discussed above. The decision to focus on the Issyk-Kul region was determined by the encounter with Oktjabr cooperative in 2014. When Oktjabr refused to work with me in 2015, I had already settled in Karakol and could count on a relatively good network of people there. From that position, it was easier to find other cooperatives in the surroundings than to extend my search beyond the Issyk-Kul. Finally, also the choice of the cooperative Ak-Bulut in Pjak was largely due to pragmatic reasons: the difficulties in accessing the other cooperatives I had visited, on the one hand, and the openness and hospitality of Ak-Bulut’s chairman’s family on the other.⁹

This fortuitousness, however, does not mean that the choices and decisions that shaped the research process were random. Certainly, they were also informed by my theoretical and methodological reflections. In this section, I explain in retrospective the epistemological rationales to focus my work on Kyrgyzstan, the Issyk-Kul region and the Ak-Bulut in Pjak and to work, in these specific places, on specific topics. Because my research is iterative-inductive, the question is not only why a particular place is suited to study a given topic, but also the other way around: what topics are relevant to be studied in a particular place?

5.2.1 Studying cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan

As anticipated in the Introduction and as detailed in Chapter 3, Kyrgyzstan is a well-suited context to delve into the complex debates on cooperation. The importance of cooperation has been a topic of concern for Kyrgyzstan’s agricultural sector in the context of decollectivisation after independence. At the same time, the country’s quick opening to international cooperation and to democratic governance mechanisms has attracted numerous international programmes promoting cooperation in the agricultural and other sectors. The peculiar characteristics of contemporary Kyrgyzstan have made the country a perfect laboratory for international agencies to experiment with increasingly popular approaches of community-led development, including the promotion of community-based management and cooperatives. In these experiments, projects have often mobilised the reference to pre-Soviet Kyrgyz

⁸ I plan a visit to Kyrgyzstan once I have finalised my doctoral degree, during which I will organise workshops and bilateral meetings with development and governmental actors to present and discuss my reflections. I also plan to engage in conversations with my main collaborators and friends in the village with the same aim. For restitution as a way to increase scientific rigour see Lincoln and Guba (1985).

⁹ I will discuss these issues in detail in Chapter 7.

traditions of cooperation. On the other hand, as we have seen, scholars and practitioners lament the scarce effectiveness of such initiatives in the country and point to the persistence of Soviet habits that limit their success. It becomes then relevant to investigate the ways in which the models of cooperation promoted by projects are translated at the local level, but also to reveal the implications of different representations of past and present cooperation and of different definitions of success and failure for the actual practices of cooperation in Kyrgyzstan's agricultural sector.

5.2.2 Studying cooperatives in the Issyk-Kul region

The climate and accessibility of the Issyk-Kul region (see Fig. 2, also Chapter 7) provide favourable conditions for farming; the region is one of the most russified in Kyrgyzstan and where the tradition of Soviet collective farming is most rooted. This context could be considered favourable for cooperatives: it has indeed attracted numerous rural development programmes and maintains today the highest number of registered cooperatives in the country (Ministry of Agriculture, personal communication, 30.06.2017). At the same time, my explorations in the region seemed to confirm the idea that, also here, cooperatives are rarely successful. It is therefore all the more relevant to study the “failure” of cooperatives (or at least the construction of failure) in a region that, in principle, seems to provide favourable conditions for both farming and cooperation.

5.2.3 Studying cooperatives in Pjak

When I first decided to settle down in Pjak in 2015, I thought that the cooperative Ak-Bulut was an example of a quite successful cooperative of the “new generation”, i.e. of those service cooperatives promoted especially in the 2000s by international agencies in the framework of their rural development programmes. Since access to ex-Soviet farms that had turned into cooperatives was precluded to me, Ak-Bulut seemed a good substitute. According to its chairman's explanations during our first meetings, Ak-Bulut's members met regularly, bought products in bulk together and marketed their produce collectively. The cooperative fulfilled thus my requirement of having some collective activities that were taking place materially in concrete locations, which would allow me to easily meet members and observe their practices.

When I later found out that these concrete practices and locations were in fact almost nonexistent, I nevertheless decided to keep Ak-Bulut as my case study. What, then, revealed more relevant were questions about the “failure” of this cooperative and especially about the representations and definitions of such failure – by members, villagers and development practitioners. In this sense, I now consider Ak-Bulut an example of what is commonly seen as a “failed cooperative” – one of those cooperatives that exist only on paper and for whose failure scholars usually mobilise the idea of some sorts of Soviet legacy determining a “psychological resistance” to cooperation (e.g. Gardner and Lerman 2006, 5). Even if I acknowledge the peculiarities of Ak-Bulut as a unique experience in a specific place and time, I maintain that the cooperative is a good example among the three fourths of the registered cooperatives in

Kyrgyzstan that are considered “fictive” because they do not carry out collective activities in their formal framework (Lerman and Sedik 2017, 236–37, see Chapter 6).

5.2.4 The researching subject as part of the field

The researcher’s multiple identities in the field

I settled down in Pjak in August 2015, where I was hosted by Kumbat (Ak-Bulut’s chairman) and his family in their house. Kumbat became my referent person in the village. This provided several advantages, but also some challenges. As Ak-Bulut’s chairman, Kumbat was key to introducing me to its members, activities and history. As an influential person in the village, former chief agronomist in the local Soviet farm and later land specialist of the local administration, he was also my main reference to identify and be introduced to important people in the village and its surroundings, as well as a crucial source of knowledge about the history of the village, its institutional organisation, agricultural practices and political and social structures. Having settled down in his house, I quickly became known in the village as Kumbat’s “Swiss daughter”. This guaranteed me a warm welcome among his friends.

On the other hand, I am well aware that my position as “Kumbat’s daughter” made more difficult my approach to people who were less befriended with Kumbat. The network of contacts I built during my stays in Pjak has been strongly shaped by Kumbat’s own networks; I had to actively search for contacts outside his networks and it was not always easy to overcome their initial suspicious attitude provoked by my strong link with Kumbat. At the same time, Kumbat’s influence in the village probably shaped in a specific direction the way some of his friends talked to me.

Being a young female foreigner in the village, in comparison to other identity positions, was usually advantageous to my relations with villagers and their readiness to speak with me. Middle-aged to old men were often flattered to speak with a young female foreigner and were usually courteous – although I sometimes felt taken a bit less seriously than men or older women. Women were in general prone to chat with me; older women often assumed a caring motherly attitude towards me, which, of course, sometimes felt disempowering. As a general rule, in the case several household members were present at an interview or a chat with me, older members (if not too old) would interact more actively with me than younger ones, and men would interact more actively than women. It was therefore difficult to relate to young women (especially if married and living in their in-laws’ house) and to young married men, whose contact with a young unmarried woman was probably judged as inappropriate. There were of course several exceptions to this general rule – a rule that I have outlined only referring to the categories of gender, age and familiar status. Certainly, other categories (such as social and economic status) as well as personal sympathy or “chemistry” played a role in the way villagers related to me and I to them.

On the one hand, being a young woman offered me a sort of epistemological privilege of the oppressed (see Harding 1991), which made to me visible and tangible the difficulties and discriminations female and/or young Kyrgyzstani experience in their everyday. On the other hand, being European granted me a

series of privileges that are inaccessible to young Kyrgyzstani women – and to many Kyrgyzstani *tout court*. My particular multiple identities allowed me to enter spaces and relate to persons by mobilising a specific identity each time. For instance, as a woman, I could develop intimate relations with women in the village and, as a young woman, also with some young women. As a foreigner, however, I could have access to masculine spaces that would be inaccessible to local women. Considering these particular positions in the analysis will allow to reveal some of the power structures that determine these privileges and discriminations (see Militz, Faria, and Schurr 2019).

Language and translation

Pjak is a homogeneously ethnic Kyrgyz village. Villagers there speak Kyrgyz in their everyday; most of them (with the exception of a few younger people and several children) can speak Russian well – although not all like to speak Russian. I could reach an acceptable level of Russian that allowed me to engage in everyday conversations and some deeper discussions; lamentably, I was able to learn only very basic Kyrgyz. For most of the formal interviews and many of the informal interactions, I was accompanied by an interpreter. For the duration of my fieldwork in Pjak, I lived in Kumbat's house, with some regular visits to Karakol. My interpreters lived in Karakol and would join me during the day in Pjak, variably between three and five times a week. I spent the rest of the time “alone” (without interpreter, but certainly not without company) in the village, engaging in informal conversation, participant observation and the flux of everyday life – in these cases, I mostly interacted with villagers in Russian. When my interpreter was present, either for formal interviews or informal conversations, my interlocutors usually preferred to speak in Kyrgyz and let the interpreter translate for me into English. For the rare interviews or conversations in Russian, I asked the interpreter to translate passages where I was unsure of my understanding. Similarly, if in a conversation I conducted alone I was unsure about some passages I estimated important, I checked them later with the interpreter.

In 2014 and 2016 I collaborated with Saikal, a considerate but determined young Kyrgyz woman in her early twenties from a well-off family of Karakol, who had just graduated from the prestigious (and expensive) American University in Bishkek. In 2015 and 2017 I collaborated with Elzada, an active and very talkative Kyrgyz woman in her forties from Karakol, who works as a freelance interpreter while simultaneously engaging in innumerable other small businesses. The relation with both women was initially mostly a commercial, paid arrangement, but friendships developed, especially with Saikal. Certainly, the nature of our relationship influenced the way we collaborated: for instance, Elzada (for whom interpretation is her profession) probably felt pressure sometimes to perform a “good” translation even if the original speech was confused and difficult to understand. Or, as a proud Kyrgyz, she probably sometimes obscured some details she considered negative for the image of the country and its people, whereas Saikal often translated to me narrations that our interlocutors deemed embarrassing and asked her not to translate. Certainly, the presence of the interpreter also influenced the way people interacted with me. Whereas for Saikal it was sometimes difficult to grasp villagers' references to the Soviet past, Kyrgyz tradition or political scams, Elzada was at ease with such references and could expand them into

explanations for me. Although useful, such “explanations” were also sometimes challenging, since, first, she did not always separate the original statement from what her own expansion and, second, she often overinterpreted people’s statements according to her own references. Also, Saikal’s discretion and politeness probably often made people more at ease to share their lives and stories with us than did Elzada’s sometimes intrusive talkativeness.

Not only the person and positionality of the interpreter, but also the process of translation, influenced the experience that emerged through my fieldwork (see Rubel and Rosman 2003). My limited access to people’s original words, expressions, intonations, hesitations and emphases certainly constitutes an important weakness of my research, which was at least in part reduced thanks to the long moments and interactions I experienced with villagers without an interpreter. At the same time, collaborating with an interpreter also represented an opportunity. First, the interpreters were precious sources of local knowledge and could provide me with explanations about specific terms, expressions, cultural references and habits. Second, I could check in real time my own interpretations and reflections about what we were observing during fieldwork: I especially spent a lot of time reflecting and discussing events, connections, hypotheses with Saikal. Third, the process of translation also sometimes produced interesting moments that revealed deeper ambiguities, mismatches and power relations. This was the case, for instance, when the interpreter had to negotiate with the interlocutor, either because the latter did not understand her question or because the interpreter did not understand the answer; or also when she had to negotiate with me because she could not understand my question or I could not understand her answer. Such moments – although frustrating when experienced in real time – were precious during the analysis.

5.3 Constituting data and experience

5.3.1 Research stays in Kyrgyzstan

Table 5.2 summarises the phases of fieldwork with their different specific aims and foci.

Table 5.2: Main activities and points of focus during research stays in Kyrgyzstan

Time	Places, activities and topics
2014 – 2 months	
August	<i>Bishkek</i> Language course (Russian) Networking with scholars and development practitioners: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploration of current relevant topics for research
September	<i>Chui, Issyk-Kul, Naryn, Jalalabad, Osh and Batken provinces</i> Exploration of different contexts to identify a case study: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relation to the past and to land
2015 – 2.5 months	
June–July	<i>Issyk-Kul province</i> Refusal of Oktjabr to collaborate Exploration of other cooperatives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History and activities of the cooperatives
August	<i>Pjak</i> Exploratory fieldwork in Pjak with the Ak-Bulut cooperative

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History and activities of the cooperative, meeting members
September	<i>Bishkek</i> Interviews with development practitioners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of cooperatives in the country
2016 – 5.5 months	
March	<i>Pjak</i> Presentation of my research and fieldwork plan to key villagers
April–May	<i>Pjak</i> Ethnographic fieldwork <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ak-Bulut cooperative: meeting new members, clarifying history and activities • Agricultural practices today • Agricultural practices in the past
June	<i>Bishkek</i> Presentation of preliminary results (American University, Bishkek) Revision and adaptation of fieldwork plan, strategy and focus
June–August	<i>Pjak</i> Ethnographic fieldwork <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agricultural practices today • Agricultural practices in the past
September	<i>Bishkek</i> Interviews and meetings with scholars and development practitioners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion of preliminary findings
2017 – 2 months	
June–July	<i>Bishkek; Jalalabad, Osh, Naryn and Issyk-Kul provinces</i> Further discussions with scholars and practitioners in Bishkek; further exploration of cooperatives and agricultural practices in other regions <i>Pjak</i> Quantitative survey (conducted by interpreter)
August–September	<i>Pjak and Issyk-Kul province</i> Ethnographic fieldwork <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow-up of agricultural practices • Diverse economies in the village Visits to other cooperatives and agricultural enterprises in the region

5.3.2 A range of methods to engage with the field

I engaged with the field through a wide set of qualitative (and one quantitative) methods, as is usual within an ethnographic methodology, including oral histories, participant observation, and others (for oral histories see Abrams 2010; for all other methods see Crang and Cook 2007; and Flick, Kardorff, and Steinke 2004; for ethnographic participant observation see also Davies 1999). Fieldwork activities took place mostly in Pjak and the four neighbouring villages of Kok-Bulak *aiyl*.¹⁰ Besides the explorative phases in 2014 and in 2015, some other activities took place outside Kok-Bulak: I conducted interviews with key actors in the *rayon* centre (Cheken), in the *oblast* administrative capital (Karakol) as well as in the capital of Bishkek; I visited other cooperatives, farming enterprises and events (e.g. fairs) in the region. I also followed the extensions of the village community (in particular of my host family) outside the village: I visited villagers' relatives and friends in Bishkek, Karakol and other villages in the region, for friendly visits or for special occasions like marriages or family celebrations.

¹⁰ See §3.1.1. for the territorial administrative organisation in Kyrgyzstan. Pjak is one of the five villages (intended as separate settlements) composing Kok-Bulak *aiyl*. In this section, when I refer to Kok-Bulak I intend the whole administrative territory of the *aiyl*. In the manuscript, when I refer to the “village” I usually intend only Pjak. Pjak counts about 350 households.

At the beginning of fieldwork in Kok-Bulak I targeted villagers who were related to the cooperative Ak-Bulut in some way. It was Kumbat who indicated to me cooperative members, and often he introduced me to them. These persons indicated other villagers who were in some way related to the cooperative. Later, I diversified the typologies of villagers with whom I developed contact, especially in terms of age, gender, social and economic status and economic activities, and I also included villagers in my network who were unrelated to the cooperative as well as villagers who were not part of Kumbat's close personal networks. I became close to about 60 villagers and their families, visiting them regularly for formal interviews or informal chats, while with many others I had more sporadic interactions. Although I tried to diversify the villagers I would visit more often according to the variables just mentioned, it is clear that personal sympathy played an important role in determining the kind and frequency of interaction: some villagers were more open than others to welcome me in their houses and spend time with me – and I personally enjoyed the company of some more than of others. Furthermore, the time of the day and of the year in which I was present played a big role in people's availability to spend time with me, depending on the calendar of agricultural activities and social celebrations.

Formal narrative and semi-structured interviews

I conducted several sets of formal interviews with 32 main informants in Pjak and about 30 additional informants in the other villages of Kok-Bulak, for a total of several hundred interviews. I conducted several sets of interviews with the same persons throughout the three years I visited the village. Each set of interviews had a general topic and specific aims, including the role within Ak-Bulut or relation with it, agricultural practices (in particular how agricultural work in the different season is organised), and other cooperation practices in the village. I privileged narrative interviews with large open questions as the main inputs from my side, but I also conducted more standardised and semi-structured interviews. I developed different interview guidelines for each fieldwork phase and set of interviews: the guidelines fixed the main topics I wanted to discuss during the interviews and entailed both broad open questions and more specific questions that could serve to re-launch the conversation. With a few exceptions, these interviews were not recorded but I took live notes on my field book. The length of the interviews varied between a few minutes to several hours, depending on the availability and talkativeness of my interlocutors.

Oral histories

I conducted up to six sessions of oral history with each of 12 elderly villagers (above 60 years old) in addition to a dozen of one-time biographical interviews with other younger villagers. The oral histories covered the time span from childhood to the present day and sometimes included secondary memories of the time before the birth of the narrator. After an introductory session where I explained the principles and aims of my oral history project, each session was centred on a specific topic (e.g. an aspect of work in the Soviet farm, personal life, the establishment of private agriculture after the dismantlement of the

Soviet farm) and started with a general open question that usually lead to a long narration, which was re-launched with more specific questions or clarification questions. I developed guidelines for each session with the main topics I wanted to discuss. Each session, lasting between 30 minutes and several hours, was recorded.

Participant observation

I participated actively in village life during my stays in Pjak, living in the village and sharing everyday life with villagers. Focused observation was mainly directed to agricultural practices in the fields, household plots, houses, as well as in other locations in Kok-Bulak (streets, warehouse, etc.). I followed a dozen villagers in their agricultural activities from spring to autumn in 2016 and in the summers of 2015 and 2017. I participated in public events in Kok-Bulak, such as fairs, ceremonies, formal and informal gatherings as well as to private events such as celebrations, feasts and commemorations. I spent long hours drinking tea and chatting with villagers in their kitchens or gardens. With my host family, I shared most aspects of everyday life such as eating, cooking, cleaning, washing, joining for the summer *remont*, collecting fruits in the garden and preparing jam, going to the *banja* or to the bazaar, visiting friends and relatives, doing homework with the children and a lot more. Sometimes, informal chats over tea transformed into long analyses of the current political or economic situation or tales about past events; in some cases, I took notes. Every evening, I expanded my fieldnotes to include chats and observations that seemed most relevant.

I held a separate field book where I noted the evolution of my thoughts and feelings during the time I spent in Kyrgyzstan. I paid special attention to the emotions I experienced during particular encounters or situations and in reaction to what I had heard or seen during the day, as well as to the transformation of my affective attachments to villagers, places, situations and ideas. The aim was to observe the more-than-representational aspects of life in the village (especially embodied affects and emotions) on my own body, through the “impregnation” of the researching subject in local life (Olivier de Sardan 2008).

Interviews with civil servants and local authorities

I held semi-structured and open interviews with civil servants and local authorities at the *aiyl*, *rayon* and *oblast* levels, in particular (but not exclusively) with the responsible persons for agricultural issues. Some of the interviews were aimed at understanding the position of local authorities concerning agricultural development in general and cooperatives in particular and their role in promoting them. For these interviews, I had a common guideline that fixed the topics I wanted to touch on in the interview. Other interviews were instead aimed at collecting more general information about the functioning of local governance and administration, for instance about the tax or cadastre system. In this case, interviews were more open and tailored to each person. I did not record these interviews, but I took live notes on my field book.

Acquiring access to civil servants and local authorities was not always easy. At the *oblast* level, my interpreter Elzada helped me through her personal network of acquaintances. In the absence of personal contacts, we just showed up in an office and waited until someone would speak with us or give us an appointment for another day. At the *rayon* level, Kumbat had several acquaintances; however, they were rarely available for an extended interview and often skipped our appointments. At the *aiyl* level, I became friends with one of Kumbat's several good friends at the local administration. Although not always available, he sometimes took time to discuss with me in length and depth whatever topic I was proposing. The other civil servants and local authorities were less open and often quite suspicious of me; they either tried to indefinitely postpone our meetings or, when they accepted, their answers remained usually very vague.

Quantitative survey

In June 2017 I shortly visited Pjak to come back only one month later. I asked my interpreter Elzada to conduct a quantitative survey during my absence. The survey was planned for a duration of 10–15 minutes and was divided in three parts: general information about the household, its agricultural activities and its involvement in farmer organisations. Apart from some open questions, most questions required selecting pre-given answers that I developed based on the practices I had observed in the village in the previous years. For instance, the survey asked “Who participates in the fieldwork on your field?” and “Do these people receive compensation for their labour?” and proposed the following answers: family members from the same house, other relatives, neighbours by house, neighbours by plot, friends, others; and the options: I pay them a salary in cash, I pay them a salary in kind, labour exchange (they work on my plot, I work on theirs), no compensation, others.

Elzada filled 65 questionnaires with representatives of an equal number of households in Pjak (where there are in total about 350 households). We did not have a strategy to guarantee the representativity of the sample, since the aim of the survey was to reinforce my overview of agricultural and cooperation practices in the village rather than to produce statistically representative data about them. Several villagers refused to participate in the survey or answered with an explicitly suspicious attitude. In these cases, they explained that they either had no time or that they had already answered to a similar survey few days before: in summer 2017 several political groups conducted surveys in the framework of the campaign for the upcoming presidential election.

Visits to other cooperatives and enterprises

I visited other cooperatives and farming enterprises in the region between 2014 and 2017. I arrived at these cooperatives and enterprises either because someone had told me about them when hearing that I was working on cooperatives and agriculture, or because I saw their advertisements. The visits usually included a formal discussion with the owner about the history of the cooperative/enterprise and its

activities and a visit to its infrastructures and fields, accompanied by informal chats with the owner, his/her family and sometimes other members or employees.

Interviews with development workers

I conducted several semi-structured and open interviews with employees of local and international development organisations, mainly in Bishkek but also in Karakol. These interviews were aimed at understanding not only the specific activities of the organisation concerning the promotion of cooperatives and, more generally, rural development, but also their representation of the situation of cooperatives and of the agricultural sector in the country. I contacted these persons either through the website of the organisation or by visiting their offices. Since English is widespread in the development sector, these interviews were often in English, though with some exceptions in Russian (with or without an interpreter). I did not record these interviews, but I took live notes on my field book. The attitude of development practitioners towards me varied strongly, from enthusiastically collaborative to shut off due to a closed-door policy.

Document analysis

Through all these encounters I collected several and diverse documents, including (among others) documentation of cooperatives, statistics, legal documents (laws, strategies), project documents of development organisations, minutes of community meetings and cadastre maps. I did not have a systematic strategy for collecting specific types of documents; rather, whenever the opportunity arose during interviews or chats, I asked for a specific document.

5.4 Making sense of experience and constructing knowledge

The engagement with the field as described in the previous section constituted a large amount of empirical material, as summarised in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3: Empirical material

Transcripts	Interviews (including oral histories): recorded interviews were transcribed later; extended notes from unrecorded interviews were compiled the same day or soon thereafter based on live notes and memory.
Expanded fieldnotes	Informal conversations, participant observation: I wrote expanded fieldnotes the same day or little after the event, based on my memory and, if available, live notes; in case of doubt I checked them with the interpreter or later with the interlocutor.
Researcher's personal diaries	Participant observation
Documents and images	Documentation of the cooperative Ak-Bulut and other cooperatives, statistics, legal documents (laws, strategies), project documents of development organisations, minutes of community meetings, cadastre maps
Quantitative database	Quantitative survey

Data analysis, as the rest of the research process, was not a linear but rather an iterative process characterised by continuous back-and-forth between different corpora of data and theoretical or thematic readings – a process that started while in the field and that will extend at least until the final point of this manuscript. In practice, data analysis consisted of several activities happening in sequence as well as simultaneously: the procedure I adopted¹¹ corresponds roughly to Crang and Cook’s Grounded Theory-inspired procedure of coding and building categories (Crang and Cook 2007, 131–49; see also Cloke et al. 2004, 307–35; Flick, Kardorff, and Steinke 2004, 248–330).

Crang and Cook (2007, 134–40) suggest to start¹² with an extensive reading of the empirical material: the aim is to loosely note down important topics and themes that emerge from the reading process in a sort of loose “open coding”. The advantage of reading big portions of data extensively is that one can at least partially “recapture some of the emotional flavour and the interpersonal situations that produced the material” (*id.* 137): this is particularly important within a constructivist epistemology that acknowledges, as discussed above, that data emerge through the specific and contingent research process. In my case, this extensive reading was a back-and-forth consultation of interview transcripts, extended fieldnotes and personal diaries – but also pictures, objects, tastes, smells and sounds to recall their “emotional flavour”.

A second phase, also based on Crang and Cook (*id.* 140–2), is a more focused reading of the same material, or only of the parts that are deemed most relevant according to the previous open coding, with a more intensive and precise activity of coding. In this phase, different types of codes and categories can be used, based on emic or etic categories (but see the critique of this distinction in Cloke et al. 2004, 314–15), on the wording occurring in the original text or on theoretical categories developed by the researcher. The further engagement with the text passages ascribed to each code and category aims at identifying connections, relations, parallels, overlapping, oppositions between the previous codes and categories (Crang and Cook 2007, 142–46). This should lead to the emergence of further codes and categories. Crang and Cook suggest that it is important to write extensively the reflections, ideas and doubts that emerge during all these phases and to come back to them regularly. During this analysis process I mainly assumed an inductive approach, letting themes and categories emerge from my observations. These themes and categories directed me towards specific readings and conceptual framings, which in their turn flowed into data analysis, determining further analytical categories. In particular, as discussed above, my empirical observations led me to integrate Gibson-Graham’s diverse economies approach (2006a; 2006b, see §4.1), which I later used as a framework for analysis within the procedure described here.

While conducting this analysis, Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis was particularly useful, since it provides a more concrete framework for analysing how discourse is co-constituted in everyday life (Fairclough 2003; see also Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). For Fairclough, “language-as-discourse is *both* a form of action [...] through which people can change the world *and* a form of action which is socially and historically situated and in a dialectical relationship with other aspects of the social” (Jørgensen and

¹¹ This procedure was supported by the use of the Software NVivo but also included considerable amounts of paper that were coloured, cut, glued, re-arranged.

¹² But, again: the process is iterative.

Phillips 2002, 62). Discourse is thus analysed as a social practice that “both reproduces and changes knowledge, identities and social relations including power relations, and at the same time is also shaped by other social practices and structures” (*id.* 65). Fairclough proposes a three-dimensional model for critical analysis that focuses on three dimensions of communicative events: first, discourse is analysed as a text, focusing on its linguistic structure; second, discourse is analysed as a discursive practice, focusing on the way in which the text is produced and consumed; and third, discourse is analysed as a social practice, expanding its interpretation to broader social or cultural theories.

5.5 Writing the thesis manuscript

Writing is forcibly an interpretation process that is always partial; at the same time, it is also through writing that interpretations and meanings emerge. Following Gibson-Graham’s (2014) suggestion, I commit to a practice of thick description: as a result, in the next four chapters I often delve into illustrating the details of my research experience before providing a more theoretically informed analysis and condensing the relevant emerging knowledge in discussion sections. I have chosen to present my research experience mostly by using the present tense. The “ethnographic present”, however, should not be intended as expressing “a vague and essentially atemporal moment” or as “reflecting the ahistorical or synchronic pretense of anthropology” (Hastrup 1990, 45). It rather “preserves the reality of an anthropological knowledge” that “transcends the historical moment” (*id.* 45, 57) while simultaneously insisting on the situatedness of ethnographic knowledge in the embodied experience of the researcher.

A doctoral thesis’s manuscript is a form of text with specific codes, rules and requirements; however, several writing modalities exist (see Crang and Cook 2007, 150–206). For the present manuscript, I have opted for a generally traditional mode of writing, with some less-usual moves. In particular, in the analytical chapters I attempt to counter the illusory representation of coherence in the research process and instead to maintain visibility of the non-linearity of the research process, its fluctuations and detours in order to show that learning is about transforming oneself. I thus make this transformation visible to the reader, not hiding or reformulating in retrospective the assumptions and arguments I believed in different moments of the research process but instead laying them bare, even if these assumptions and arguments now seem, in hindsight, naïve, inaccurate or even dangerous. For instance, in Chapter 6, I first present the narrative of “failed cooperatives” in Kyrgyzstan as a newcomer to the field (as I was) would experience it; only in a second moment I will bring in further material that will allow me to deconstruct this narrative.¹³

¹³ This strategy resembles, and is indeed inspired by, how Gibson-Graham (2006b, 8–10) presents her deconstruction of economic representations.

Part II – Conclusion

Part II has outlined the conceptual and methodological approach with which I based my analysis of cooperatives and cooperation promotion in Kyrgyzstan, the Issyk-Kul province and Pjak. This approach allowed me to remain open to the unpredictability of cooperation experiences because it conceptualises the latter as relational practices that are not defined by an explicit collective goal or interest but that are rather unpredictable, constituted through everyday intimate relations and, in turn, constitutive of relations and subjectivities. Within this approach, research means first of all a transformation of the researching subject: her representations, affects and transformation along the research process become a central element in the analysis.

The next two parts of the manuscript engage with such an analysis of my empirical experience. Part III focuses on representations and practices of the promotion of cooperatives by development and governmental actors in Kyrgyzstan (Chapter 6) and by villagers in the Issyk-Kul province and in Pjak (Chapter 7). Part IV then expands the analysis to the diverse economies of agriculture in Pjak in the past (Chapter 8) and in the present (Chapter 9). The two parts and the four chapters are built in a similar way, following a strategy that exposes the messiness, fragmentation and intricate trajectory of the research process instead of obscuring them by ascribing in retrospective a coherence and linearity to this process. I start thus by introducing, sometimes in a way that might appear naïve, my impressions of the research objects when I started engaging with them. Only in a second moment do I bring in further empirical material that allows me to expand the analysis by acknowledging and engaging with the complexity of the researched processes. Each part and chapter, then, concludes with a section that relates this complexity to the conceptual reflections and theoretical approaches presented and discussed in the first two parts of the manuscript.

Part III – Promoting cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan: representations and practices

Part III analyses the representations and practices related to the promotion of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan. Chapter 6 approaches this topic from the perspective of the actors that, since the independence of the country, have been active in the promotion of cooperatives countrywide: international donors, development agencies, development workers and governmental actors. The chapter starts by illustrating the terms of the narrative, produced by these actors, that states that cooperatives in the country have failed. I then proceed to deconstruct this narrative and show that the promotion of cooperatives is itself a fragmentary process consisting of often contradictory practices and representations by the individual actors involved in this process. The chapter concludes by discussing how the narrative of failed cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan mirrors a broader developmentalist discourse that reproduces dichotomous categories on the basis of a teleological vision of development and modernity – a discourse that is common worldwide and especially in the Global South.

Chapter 7 engages with the other side of the promotion of cooperatives: the side of whom are considered the “beneficiaries”. I analyse how villagers reproduce, but also reinterpret, the narrative of failed cooperatives, illustrating this process by means of the example of cooperatives in the Issyk-Kul province and in particular of the cooperative Ak-Bulut in Pjak. I dig into a detailed analysis of the representations and practices related to Ak-Bulut and to other forms of agricultural activities and cooperation in Pjak and show that cooperatives are a much more complex, fluid and changeable concept than assumed by most scholars and development workers. Part III therefore concludes by restating the need to abandon the common definitions and categorisations (or fantasies) of cooperatives in order to be able to engage with processes of cooperation as they are already performed.

6 REPRESENTATIONS AND PRACTICES OF THE PROMOTION OF COOPERATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY KYRGYZSTAN

The topic of cooperatives was marginal in donor programmes in Kyrgyzstan at least until the beginning of the 2000s, when it gained visibility thanks to the Development of Trade and Service Cooperatives project. The project, implemented between 2003 and 2007, was funded by the German Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ, now the Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, or GIZ) and was the first in Kyrgyzstan to specifically and directly focus on cooperative development. The project aimed at creating a favourable environment for the establishment of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan through different measures: it engaged in lobbying ministries for the introduction of the promotion of cooperatives in the governmental strategies for agricultural development; it supported the parliament in drafting the new Law on Cooperatives, which was passed in 2004; and it established the Cooperative Union of Kyrgyzstan (CUK), an independent association aimed at supporting potential and existing cooperatives and representing their interests. Finally, it financed specific measures to directly promote the establishment of new cooperatives, in particular training sessions on cooperative organisation, and, in collaboration with private actors, credit and leasing facilitation for cooperatives. In the same years, the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) similarly provided training sessions on cooperative organisation and facilitations for cooperatives in the framework of its rural development programmes. Moreover, since the late 2000s JICA has organised and sponsored training sessions on rural development for cadres (including civil servants, members of parliament and cooperative leaders) at the University of Hokkaido in Japan; these training sessions include a module on the establishment and management of cooperatives.

Following the examples of GIZ and JICA, other development agencies active in Kyrgyzstan (e.g. USAID, SDC, DFID, the World Bank or ACTED) included the promotion of cooperatives as a component of their rural development programmes. Without specifically focusing on the promotion of cooperatives, several of these programmes offered credit and leasing facilitation for cooperatives and included the topic of cooperative organisation in their training programmes. Some also provided advice to policy-makers on the revision of legislation concerning farmer organisations, including cooperatives. Encouraged by these agencies, the government of Kyrgyzstan thus included the promotion of cooperatives in its national development strategies and partially revised legislation concerning cooperatives. Especially during Bakiev's mandate (2005–2010), the government promised, and sometimes realised, some specific measures aiming at increasing the number of registered cooperatives in the country.

As a consequence of these initiatives, the number of registered cooperatives in the country exploded in the 2000s.¹ Since the early 2010s, however, the interest of development agencies in promoting

¹ Especially because of the ambiguous definition of cooperatives in legislation, statistical data on cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan are hardly reliable. Governmental documents present differing figures on the evolution of the number of cooperatives after 1991 (see also Beishenaly and Namazova's review of official data, 2012, 18–25). Despite these variations, the different datasets report consistently a boom of registered cooperatives in the mid-2000s. This trend seems realistic if we consider the implementation of

cooperatives has reduced. Although the topic of cooperatives remains part of the training programmes of these agencies and has a fixed mention in governmental strategies for rural development, the role of cooperatives in these programmes and strategies, and in their implementation, is marginal. The number of cooperatives in the country seems to be decreasing (see previous footnote), further fuelling to the widespread narrative of “failed cooperatives” in the country. In this chapter, I analyse this narrative, how it is constructed, reproduced and sometimes questioned, by the actors that have actively promoted cooperatives in the country. I start (§6.1) with a review of existing academic and grey literature on cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan – a literature that generally agrees with the reading of “failure” of cooperatives.

6.1 The narrative of failed cooperatives by scholars

Specific literature on cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan is limited: its main corpus is composed by (often grey) literature derived from applied research commissioned by development institutions (Lerman 2013a; Lerman and Sedik 2009a; 2009b; 2014; 2017; Beishenaly and Namazova 2012; Van Rijsoort and Van den Berg 2012).² A few publications attempt to discuss the topic on a more conceptual level (Gardner and Lerman 2006; Lerman and Sedik 2018). Several of these studies do not focus specifically on Kyrgyzstan but analyse the situation of cooperatives in Central Asia or in CEE and FSU countries. These studies are rooted in the discipline of agricultural and development economics and usually present a gloomy picture of the current situation of cooperatives in these regions.

6.1.1 Service cooperatives to correct market failures

Studies on cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan base their understanding of cooperatives on the ICA’s definition and principles presented at the beginning of Chapter 2 (see e.g. Lerman 2013a, 7) and distinguish different types of cooperatives according to what Lerman (*ibid.*) calls the “Western classification” of cooperatives, reported in Table 2.2. These studies usually focus on agricultural cooperatives, probably because the agricultural sector presents the highest number of cooperatives. Authors point to the “unfinished agenda” of post-independence reforms and to persistent or new difficulties for farmers (Lerman and Sedik 2009a, see §3.1.2). The “curse of smallness” for farmers, due to the fragmentation of agricultural production, concerns in particular the access to markets for agricultural inputs and their

measures promoting cooperatives in that period. The dataset of the Ministry of Agriculture (reported in *id.* 19–20), which probably underestimates the number of cooperatives, shows a doubling of the number of cooperatives from 2005 (375) to 2006 (778) and a further doubling by 2011 (1428), followed, however, by a drastic decrease in 2014 (to 372). On its previous website, CUK counted 374 member cooperatives in 2011 (http://www.cooperativ.kg/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=30:istoriya-razvitiya-kooperativnogo-sektora-v-kr&catid=9:publikatsii accessed 14.07.2016); its new website counted about 220 member cooperatives in 2019 (<https://cooperativ.kg/spisok-chlenov-skk/> accessed 06.09.2019). According to the news site *kabar.kg* there were about 4,000 registered cooperatives in the country in 2014 (87% in agriculture or animal farming), out of which, however, only 274 were “functioning” and only about 200 were members of CUK (<http://www.kabar.kg/rus/economics/full/80419> accessed 14.07.2016).

² The last two references are reports commissioned by JICA and the Dutch foundation Agritertra, respectively. Both reports are not available online, which obviously dramatically limits their influence. The remaining publications, as one can note, are authored or co-authored by the same person (Zvi Lerman): many of them are edited by the FAO or the World Bank.

purchase conditions; the access to marketing channels for agricultural outputs and their sale conditions; and the access to machinery, information, credit and insurance (Lerman 2013a, 5; also Lerman and Sedik 2014; Abele and Frohberg 2003).

Economic theory often frames these difficulties as “market imperfections” or “market failures” and identifies in cooperative organisations a possible solution to balance them (e.g. Ortmann and King 2007, see §2.1.2). Lerman (2013a, 9 emphasis added) indeed notes that “in agriculture and other areas, *service* cooperatives fulfil the important function of correcting for market failure, by stepping in to provide missing services and counteracting monopolistic exploitation by private initiative”. In all his publications on cooperatives (not limited to Kyrgyzstan), Lerman strongly emphasises that only *service* cooperatives can effectively perform this function. He argues that production cooperatives, where members pool their smallholdings, cannot “exploit economies of scale and achieve higher efficiency” because “empirical studies in market economies show that economies of scale do not generally exist in primary agriculture and [...] that agricultural production cooperatives are substantially less efficient than individual and family farms” (*id.* 8).

In his work on “agrarian postsocialist transition”, Lerman (e.g. 2009; Lerman, Csaki, and Feder 2004; Lerman and Sedik 2009b; 2018) maintains that the individualisation of agriculture in ex-socialist countries is the main factor that led first to the recovery and then to the increase of agricultural production after the end of socialist regimes. He thus strongly argues for agrarian reforms for the privatisation of agricultural land and for the development of small- to medium-scale family farming. Since, however, he underlines that “transition” contexts are usually characterised by deeper “market imperfections” than established market economies, Lerman argues that (service) cooperatives can (and actually did) play an important role in these contexts. In their quick overview of agricultural cooperatives in “transition economies”, Gardner and Lerman (2006, 15) note that production cooperatives have been used as a way to replace former collective farms while service cooperatives as a means for farmers to obtain market power: they conclude that the former “have been overwhelmingly failures” whereas the latter “have been moderately successful”.

Agricultural economists usually support these arguments and the privileging of service cooperatives (see §2.1.2). Already in 1995, Deininger (1995, 1317), dealing with the question whether collective agricultural production could be a solution for “transition economies”, suggested that “in an environment characterized by high risk, incomplete markets for insurance, credit, inputs and outputs, cooperative organisations can perform an extremely useful function”. Deininger (*ibid.*) maintained the superior effectiveness of service cooperatives and the inefficiency of production cooperatives, and claimed for policies designed “to facilitate the emergence of competitive service cooperatives rather than relatively inefficient units of collective production”.

6.1.2 “A psychological resistance to cooperation”: explanations for the failure of cooperatives

As anticipated, scholars mostly frame cooperatives or the promotion of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan as failed. Lerman (2013a) notes that, despite the increased number of cooperatives, their presence in rural areas is too limited. Beishenaly and Namazova (2012, 12) call attention to the phenomenon of “fictive” cooperatives: cooperatives that were created in order to get facilitated access to donor resources or credit but that “have little or never pursued their activities”. According to Lerman and Sedik’s (2017, 236–37) calculations, “fictive” cooperatives could represent almost three fourths of all registered cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan. According to Beishenaly’s and Namazova’s (2012, 24) survey on 14 cooperatives in the country, farmers evaluate positively the membership in a cooperative, which they see as “beneficial” or at least “convenient”; however, the same survey suggests that most cooperatives are undercapitalised, lack a clear planning for the future and have difficulties in providing farmers with the needed services (*id.* 39–44). Therefore, the authors hint to a problem of long-term sustainability of cooperative activities, which are “very dependent on external factors such as support programs initiated by international organisations or the government” (*id.* 25, see also Van Rijsoort and Van den Berg 2012). Indeed, donors’ and governments’ strategies have mainly focused on incentives for the establishment of new cooperatives but rarely address the continuation of their activities in the medium- and long-term. Finally, both Lerman (2013a; also Lerman and Sedik 2013) and Beishenaly and Namazova (2012) point to discrepancies between different legislative texts concerning cooperatives, despite donors’ initiatives to support a revision of legislation. Such discrepancies have concrete implications, especially for taxation. Since it can be unclear to which legal category a cooperative belongs, it is also difficult to determine what type of tax scheme should be applied; this not only gives rise to confusion but also opens room for personal interpretation – and thus for corruption (Beishenaly and Namazova 2012, 14–17).

For Lerman and Sedik (2009b, 16), the failure of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan cannot be due to the unsuitability of the proposed model, since, they argue, “in transition economies, where the market environment is still underdeveloped and not fully function, *the benefits of cooperation appear to be self-evident*” (emphasis added). In line with other scholars of postsocialism (see Chapter 2), therefore, Lerman and colleagues explain this failure mainly with legacies from the socialist past. It is worth quoting a long example of this explanation since its framing widely shapes representations of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan as well as in other ex-socialist countries:³

The large collective farms [...] were administered under the label of cooperatives in the formerly socialist countries, even when they had not evolved out of voluntary associations but were imposed from above in a forced collectivization process. Consequently, among many of the rural population the concept of cooperation in agricultural production appears to have lost, if it ever had, the positive and idealistic connotations it has had in the traditional cooperative movement throughout Europe and North America. In its place, we find *a strong psychological resistance to cooperation, bred from years of abuse of the whole concept by*

³ Note that we have already come across their phrasing in Chapter 2.

socialist regimes. As noted by the Plunkett Foundation (1995), ‘The use of the word “co-operative” in Central and Eastern Europe will not only create the wrong impression, it will also create barriers to progress. The old style of co-operative or collective has no relevance in the new free-market approach’. (Gardner and Lerman 2006, 5 emphasis added)

In Lerman’s (2013a) survey on 1,000 randomly selected peasants in Kyrgyzstan, 42% of the respondents mentioned the preservation of the own independence as one of the reasons for not joining a cooperative. Lerman (*id.* 27) interprets this data as “reflect[ing] the ingrained influence of Soviet-style production cooperatives” on his respondents and thus as a further confirmation of the “psychological resistance” mentioned in the previous quotation.

In another study, Lerman and Sedik (2009a, 17) note that Kyrgyzstan’s government and farmers are progressively becoming more open to cooperatives; however, the authors also note the persistence of “a great deal of general confusion about what type of cooperatives are desirable (service cooperatives in the broad sense of the word) and what type of cooperatives should not be promoted (production cooperatives) in the light of experiences in market economies”. Lerman (2013a, 4), referring to the same study of the Plunkett Foundation mentioned in the quotation above, attributes the cause of this confusion to habits and concepts inherited from the former socialist regimes and notes that “instead of Western-style service cooperatives, the very concept of cooperative in Central Asia is automatically interpreted as a production cooperative, i.e. a model of the Soviet-style collective farm”. According to Lerman, this “misunderstanding” is also widespread among government representatives and is one of the causes for the inconsistencies within the legislative framework noted above. Furthermore, Gardner and Lerman (2006, 8 emphasis added) lament that “agricultural cooperatives in transition countries *are not really cooperatives* in the Western sense of the word”. Lerman (2013a, 23–24) finds out that 88% of registered cooperatives are classified as production cooperatives in the statistics of Kyrgyzstan’s Ministry of Agriculture’s and that, among the remaining 12%, there are “virtually no pure service cooperatives”. Again, Lerman interprets this data as the confirmation of a general confusion about different types of cooperatives – a confusion, again, issued from the persistence of the Soviet referent for cooperatives.

The solution proposed by Lerman and colleagues for improving the situation of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan – and in other ex-socialist countries as well – is “technical assistance from international donors” (Lerman and Sedik 2009a, 17), in particular in the form of “a special public awareness campaign [...] to explain what cooperatives are in market economies, how they function, and what benefits farmers derive from membership” (Lerman 2013a, 14). This “educational effort” should emphasise the difference between the desirable model of service cooperatives and the model of production cooperatives, which is to be avoided because of its lower efficiency (*id.* 14–15).

Beishenaly and Namazova (2012, 44) agree in identifying in the “lack of understanding” of the cooperative concept one of the causes for the difficulties of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan (see also Van Rijsoort and Van den Berg 2012). However, instead of focusing on the distinction between production and service cooperatives, the authors insist that, “in Kyrgyzstan, [ICA’s] cooperative principles are vaguely understood by the cooperatives members and other stakeholders” (Beishenaly and Namazova

2012, 37). Differently than Lerman and colleagues, Beishenaly and Namazova attribute the cause of this confusion to the fragmentation of information on cooperatives that international actors have brought in the country. Different agencies have promoted different visions of cooperatives in their programmes; as a result, cooperative members have “different understanding of cooperation [and of] their own rules and model of cooperation” (*id.* 12) and the legislative framework is “a patchwork composed of suggestions from different projects” (*id.* 14). Beishenaly and Namazova (*id.* 44) therefore conclude that “it is important to work on the conceptual basis of cooperative organisations, interpret cooperative principles and see to what extent and under what conditions they could be useful for Kyrgyz cooperatives”. This recommendation joins Lerman’s invitation to invest in the improvement of the conceptual understanding of cooperatives. However, Beishenaly and Namazova insist on the need to *adapt* the general principles of cooperation to the specific context of Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, they identify other causes for the difficulties of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan beyond the problem of “understanding”: they point more precisely than Lerman to concrete and pragmatic challenges, concerning in particular the capitalisation and the expansion of cooperative activities on the market, and suggest concrete measures such as the harmonisation of legislation, the reinforcement of knowledge and research on cooperative experiences and the improvement of financial services for cooperatives (*id.* 47–56).

6.1.3 An influential narrative with weak foundations

Lerman’s work on cooperatives has been influential in shaping scholars’ (in particular agricultural economists’) representations of a persistent “Soviet mentality” that limits the possibilities to develop successful cooperation in ex-socialist countries. Gardner and Lerman’s argument about the “strong psychological resistance to cooperation” is not only repeated with the same phrasing in several publications by Lerman and colleagues (e.g. Lerman 2004, 472; 2013a, 14; Lerman and Sedik 2009a, 16; besides the already mentioned Gardner and Lerman 2006, 5), but also regularly appears in studies on cooperatives and cooperation in ex-socialist countries by other authors (e.g. Lipton 2009, 218; Vidickiene and Gedminaitė-Raudonė 2012, 8; Atanasova 2014, 26; Theesfeld 2019, 357). At the already mentioned 2016 symposium of agricultural economists in Almaty, Lerman was the main keynote speaker. The idea of a “Soviet legacy” preventing cooperation in the region hovered in presentations and informal chats as unquestioned common sense.

At closer scrutiny, Gardner and Lerman’s statement reveals, however, weak empirical foundations. The phrasing appeared for the first time in a study on land individualisation reforms in Transcaucasia, where Lerman (2004) suggested that service cooperatives could be a solution to the challenges farmers were facing in the new context. *En passant*, Lerman (*id.* 472) noted that “unfortunately, there is a strong psychological resistance to cooperation bred from years of abuse of the whole concept by socialist regimes” but that, nevertheless, some forms of spontaneous cooperation had emerged after the reforms. In all its occurrences, this opinion is just *stated*: the only “evidence” mentioned in some cases in its support is the quotation of the Plunkett Foundation – a private institution supporting community business in the UK. The quotation only refers to “Central and Eastern Europe”, but is used as evidence for the same

phenomenon in contexts as diverse as Transcaucasia or Central Asia. Furthermore, the quotation stems from the foundation's "Review of 1994 Activities" – a document not available online and whose scientific value is questionable.

There are other examples of problematic generalisations in the existing studies on cooperatives in Central Asia. Remember Lerman and Sedik's (2009a, 16) statement about the self-evidence of the benefits of cooperation in transition economies. The authors present some aggregated empirical data in support of this statement for the specific case of Central Asian countries. However, they generalise their regional findings for the totality of "transition economies". In another paper, the same authors analyse aggregated data of land and labour productivity in Kyrgyzstan's agricultural sector and conclude that family farms present the highest productivity there (Lerman and Sedik 2018). They generalise this result as a universal rule of small/medium farms' higher productivity in comparison with larger farms. For this generalisation, they refer to another publication by Lerman (2013a), where he does not provide any reference or empirical evidence for this rule, even if it is a contested rule among economists (see e.g. Jones and Kalmi 2012; de Roest, Ferrari, and Knickel 2018). In yet another paper, Gardner and Lerman (2006) state the universal failure of agricultural production cooperatives worldwide generalising from aggregated data of US cooperatives.

6.1.4 Discussion: a narrative inserted in a developmentalist discourse

The studies reviewed in the previous sections emerged in parallel to the "technical support" by international actors to Kyrgyzstan's "transition" from socialism to market economy. In the preface of a volume collecting his publications on agricultural cooperatives in transition economies, Lerman himself states that this work was "part of a concerted effort to *provide policy advice* to former Socialist countries in Europe and Central Asia *in an attempt to help governments navigate the complex transition from centrally planned to market economy*" (Lerman, Sedik, and Csaki 2016, 5, emphasis added). It is not surprising, therefore, that these studies emphasise the need to privatise and individualise agriculture as a way to accelerate the transition towards a market economy. These studies are part of a broader current that sees cooperatives as means for economic development within market economies (see §2.1.2), and they therefore understand cooperatives (more specifically *service* cooperatives) as a way to support the development of a new class of private farmers within a capitalist system. It is also not surprising that, in this context, these studies insist on the inadequacy and inefficiency of socialist models of production cooperatives and on the non-compliance of these cooperatives with the principles of member democratic control and cooperative autonomy; this is indeed a way to mark a neat separation between the old and the new system aiming to "dissolve the past by the fastest means possible" (Burawoy and Verdery 1999a, 5 see §3.3).

What is problematic here, I argue, are the generalisations and assumptions that underpin these studies. First, these studies assume that the experience with socialist farms "left a deep imprint on the agriculture sector and the rural psyche, which has persisted since the beginning of the transition in 1989–1991 to this

day” (Lerman, Sedik, and Csaki 2016, 5): this “imprint” is always negative and concerns the totality of the rural population. Second, the consequence of this “imprint” is always the already discussed “strong psychological resistance to cooperation” in general and for *all* kinds of cooperation. Third, as a consequence, these studies entirely dismiss the very idea of production cooperatives in favour of service cooperatives – despite the existence of forms of production cooperatives that are successful cooperatives in all respects (e.g. Agarwal 2010, see §2.1.1). Scholars writing on the promotion of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan present a precise type of cooperative (service cooperatives of the Western type) as the only “real” cooperative, the only possible form of cooperative. This narrow and rigid definition of what a “real” cooperative should be prevents scholars from seeing other existing forms of cooperation (see §3.1.3) and thus from building their propositions for the improvement of farmers’ livelihoods on these existing forms of cooperation. Given this narrow definition of successful cooperatives, it is obvious that researchers conclude that cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan have failed – a failure based on a narrow definition of success.

This narrow and rigid definition, I suggest, emerges within a broader developmentalist discourse that produces clear hierarchies of knowledge, distinguishing between a knowledge that is considered to count and others that should be dismissed, forgotten, erased. The studies reviewed above often compare cooperative experiences in ex-socialist countries with the ones in the Global North and more or less explicitly make clear that the latter are exemplary and ideal models to be pursued. Remember in particular the “educational effort” suggested by Lerman (2013a, 14–15) to explain the desirable type of cooperative – the *Western* service cooperative – and what is not desirable: production cooperatives as issued from the experience of socialist farming. This kind of paternalistic and homogenising discourse, which creates a neat demarcation between those who know and those who do not know, who should explain and who should learn, is certainly not unique to the case of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan but mirrors the hegemonic discourse on development worldwide denounced by postdevelopment scholars (see Escobar 1995; also Pigg 1992; Cima 2015). In this context, all the imprecisions highlighted in the previous section, I suggest, are less a sign of the questionable scientific methodology of the authors than they are revealing of the homogenising gaze that institutions and several scholars from the Global North tend to have towards ex-socialist regions and their socialist backgrounds.

6.2 The narrative of failed cooperatives by the actors promoting them

When I started discussing cooperatives with development workers in Bishkek, I noticed that their narratives resonate with what I read in scholarly literature: both present a similar dismal picture of the situation of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan. Development workers present the failure of cooperatives in the country as a fact. They lament that “cooperatives have not functioned” (JICA, unpublished project document) and that too often farmers register in cooperatives just to have access to credit, establishing in this way what many describe as “cooperatives on paper”, or the “fictive cooperatives” denounced by Beishenaly and Namazova (2012). They explain this failure through arguments similar to the ones

discussed in Section 6.1 and identify its cause in a series of “lacks”. For the moment, my aim is not to question whether this failure is actual or not; in this section, I present these “lacks” as they are framed by development workers and governmental actors in Kyrgyzstan in their encounters with a European social scientist.⁴

6.2.1 On farmers and “society”: Soviet legacy and laziness

Development workers systematically lament that farmers, but also in general “people” in Kyrgyzstan, “have not understood” the concept and functioning of cooperatives:

People don’t understand the concept of cooperative with the model we propose [the service cooperative], but they mix the idea of cooperative with the idea of the Soviet farm, where everything is put in common and there is no private property. (Baburbek, GIZ, 19.05.2016)

According to development workers, people in Kyrgyzstan lack an understanding of the model of cooperative promoted by development agencies. They usually explain this lack with another lack: a lack of knowledge and education. They also point to the referent of the Soviet farm, insisting that, because of the legacy of the Soviet model of cooperatives, farmers today are not able to understand and apply the new model proposed. For development workers, the confusion between the “old” and the “new” or “modern” cooperative model is problematic in two ways. On the one hand, farmers cannot grasp the new model and thus, in the practical implementation of a cooperative, they include practices and structures of the old model, limiting the effectiveness of the new cooperative. On the other hand, farmers might have a reticence to engage in cooperatives because they fear reproducing a model (the Soviet farm) they do not wish to reproduce:

People think that the cooperative is like the Soviet farm. They think that the government will take the land and then create the cooperative. But now the land is private, you can join the cooperative without depending on the land of the government and keeping your land. (Sezim, CUK, 09.09.2015)

Here the assumption is triple: that farmers automatically relate cooperatives with Soviet farms; that farmers see the Soviet farm as a means of control by the state and a loss of autonomy; and that farmers do not want to be submitted to this control and lose their autonomy. For development workers, the implication of this lack of understanding is clear: “There is the need to explain to people the concept of cooperative” (Baburbek, GIZ, 19.05.2016). If the problem is that farmers do not grasp the difference between models of cooperatives, the solution is that those who know this difference better should be engaged in explaining it to them. Farmers need “education” about cooperatives; they need to be “convinced” about the clear advantages of modern cooperatives.

Civil servants at all levels reproduce a similar narrative: “Society is not ready yet for cooperation, because people lack the knowledge on how to cooperate” (Kasym, civil servant, *aiyl*, 04.08.2015). Civil

⁴ This analysis is mainly based on a dataset of 25 interviews with development workers and governmental actors at national, regional and local levels between 2015 and 2017 and on a set of official documentation collected both online and in person.

servants' observation that farmers lack an understanding about cooperatives is usually expressed in vaguer terms than those used by development workers. Civil servants rarely refer to an assumed confusion among farmers between the "old" and the "new" models of cooperatives. Rather, as in the quotation above, they refer to a more general and vague idea of "cooperation". Like development workers, civil servants insist that farmers need to be convinced of the advantages of cooperation.

Not only among development workers, but also among civil servants and villagers themselves (see Chapter 7), there is a widespread idea that, in Kyrgyzstan, people in general and farmers in particular are lazy. This laziness is often inscribed to a general "mentality" whose characteristics derive from historical processes, in particular the legacy of 70 years of Soviet regime in the country:

We had 70 years of Soviet Union and things cannot be changed fast. I advise people to follow the rules of cooperatives, but after 70 years of Soviet Union, now we need time to change things. The problem is that back then the government was doing everything, it was doing the plan [for production]. People didn't have to do anything, because everything was already ready for them. Now things have changed, but people think the same, for instance that the cooperative will do everything and therefore they don't have self-initiative. People don't want to invest in the cooperative: they don't invest but they wait for support. (Sezim, CUK, 09.09.2015)

In this narrative, the "legacy" from the Soviet experience is a habit of passively waiting for someone else to take care of one's own business and life. If under the Soviet regime this "someone" was the Soviet state or the Soviet farm, now farmers expect the cooperative – intended as an external entity – to care for and organise their economic activities. Sezim concludes:

People are lazy. [...] Everything for them should be organised and given. But now you have to think by yourself, you have to develop your own skills, be informed. The world is changing and you need to change too. But here people don't want to do anything. (Sezim, CUK, 09.09.2015)

In this view, farmers' failure is the failure to adapt to the new system – a system that requires individual entrepreneurship, to assume responsibility for one's own life and business and to overcome the expectation that someone else will do it instead. This lack of adaptation to the new structural conditions is deeper than the lack of understanding outlined above and requires a transformation that is more profound than just learning the practical terms of a new cooperative model. In this sense, development workers and civil servants sometimes conclude that "society" in Kyrgyzstan is not yet rife for the new model of cooperatives and that efforts to promote knowledge about this model might not suffice for its successful implementation. This is one of the justifications for the decreasing interest of development agencies for the direct promotion of cooperatives as a form of organisation among Kyrgyzstani farmers.

6.2.2 On governmental actors: contradictions and failed promises

According to development workers, not only farmers lack an understanding of the new model of cooperative, but also governmental actors:

The first problem is that there isn't a clear definition of what a cooperative is. Neither in the law, nor among people. Even at the ministry level people don't have a clear understanding of what a cooperative really is. (Talant, JICA, 13.07.2016)

For many development workers, the confusion in legislation mirrors thus the confusion of governmental actors about the precise terms of the new cooperative model. The reason for this confusion among governmental actors is similar as for farmers: the persistence of the Soviet farm as the reference for cooperatives:

For instance, when government VIPs visit the Issyk-Kul, they usually praise Otkjabr's⁵ achievements and indicate it as an example to follow. The problem is that Otkjabr is a production cooperative and it isn't how a cooperative should be. Praising Otkjabr is a contradiction of the policies in place, because Otkjabr is not the model of cooperative the government says it wants to promote. (Talant, JICA, 13.07.2016)

Development workers lament that the lack of understanding among farmers is also a consequence of the lack of understanding among governmental actors, who transmit contradictory messages about the type of cooperative that should be promoted.

Among the concrete measures for the promotion of cooperatives promised in governmental strategies since the mid-2000s and especially during Bakiev's mandate (2005–2010) are the improvement of the regulatory framework of cooperatives through the harmonisation of legal documents; the exemption of cooperatives from the VAT tax and the clarification of cooperative taxation; the preferential access to financial and credit services for cooperatives, especially for the leasing of agricultural machinery; and the development of knowledge and diffusion of information about cooperatives through information campaigns in villages through the development of specific training programmes in collaboration with local universities.⁶ Development actors, however, denounce that most of these measures have never been realised, especially because the central government lacks financial and human resources for their implementation.

Interestingly, civil servants at the local level join development workers in lamenting that the central government promised but never realised concrete measures for the promotion of cooperatives:

The plan [for the development of the agricultural sector] is there, but to implement it we need financing. The plan was proposed at the national level, but we didn't receive the budget to implement it. (Jibek, civil servant, *oblast*, 02.09.2015)

Remember that local governmental bodies depend on budget allocations from the central government; only the *ayil* can count on their own revenues, which are paltry (see § 3.1.1). Local civil servants thus complain that they have received several plans for promoting cooperatives from the central government, which include measures that should be implemented directly by local bodies. However, the allocation of

⁵ Otkjabr is the ex-Soviet farm now turned into production cooperative, introduced in Chapter 5.

⁶ See the *Concept of Agricultural Cooperative System Development in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2015–2017* (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2014).

responsibilities for the promotion of cooperatives is not accompanied by a parallel allocation of resources, leaving local civil servants with plans they are not able to implement.

If several development workers recognise the budget difficulties of the central government as a justification for its limited engagement in promoting cooperatives, others go further in their critique of the government's inactivity and maintain that the main problem is government's passivity and lack of will:

The Kyrgyz government is really doing very little: not only for cooperatives but in general for the development of the country. It's true that it doesn't have many resources, but the problem is that it's really difficult to work here with such a passive government. (Bob, UN, 12.07.2017)

Even if the government would have enough resources to implement the promised measures, its passivity would limit their actual implementation. Sezim brings several examples to show that, even if resources were available, governmental actors would lack the will to actually realise measures in favour of cooperatives. Since the government does not have a coherent strategic vision for the development of cooperatives in the country, Sezim has tried to lobby for such a strategic vision. She explains:

I even did the job that should be done by the government and wrote myself a strategic plan for cooperatives. I tried to promote this plan among different people in the government, saying 'Here! You don't have to do anything: it's already ready!' But the government has no interest and until now it didn't do anything with my plan. (Sezim, CUK, 09.09.2015)

Sezim often complains that civil servants do not understand the concept of the cooperative. Since I know that JICA offers training sessions on cooperatives to civil servants, I ask her whether these training sessions are helping in solving this problem. She replies:

It has been more than 10 years that JICA organises these workshops and even pays the trip to Japan. But it's nothing worth, people just go there like in a *kurort* [health resort]! They go for holidays and don't care about the contents of the workshop! (Sezim, CUK, 01.09.2016)

Later in the same interview, I tell Sezim that I heard from a civil servant that the administration of his *rayon* is organising training sessions on cooperatives for farmers and I ask her whether this could be a positive sign of some activism by local bodies. She replies:

That's nonsense! It's a lie! You see, that's typical of the government: they say they do this and that to promote cooperatives, they want to take the merit, to praise themselves. But in fact they don't do anything! (Sezim, CUK, 01.09.2016)

Sezim laments that the government does not listen to her advice on cooperatives and explains this lack of interest as due to the general passivity of civil servants – a legacy, according to her, of the Soviet experience. She also complains repeatedly that civil servants not only are not interested in the development of their country, but also that they lack any kind of competence and knowledge about the issues for which they are responsible. Again, she attributes this situation to the typical passivity of the Soviet citizen. Furthermore, she complains that not only civil servants are lazy and passive, but even that they praise themselves for achievements they did not contribute to realising. Her vision of governmental actors (a vision shared by several development workers) is thus discouraging. If, for the moment, I cannot

confirm that Kyrgyzstani in general lack trust in institutions, it is at least clear that development workers have no trust nor hope in governmental institutions.

6.2.3 On the Cooperative Union of Kyrgyzstan: “doing *remont*”

CUK’s general aim is to create and maintain a favourable environment for cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan. In particular, firstly, CUK represents the interests of cooperatives in the country. It engages in lobbying addressed to the national government, suggesting policies and measures in support to cooperatives. One of the results of such lobbying activities is the recent establishment of a training centre on cooperatives within the Kyrgyz National Agricultural University in Bishkek in 2019. Second, CUK delivers training sessions on cooperatives as part of training packages within the rural development programmes of aid agencies. Third, when development agencies look for partners for their projects, they sometimes refer to CUK to identify existing cooperatives or farmer groups to include in their projects. Usually this collaboration comprises small interventions like the renovation of buildings or the installation of irrigation infrastructure. Fourth, member cooperatives or potential cooperatives can solicit individual advice from CUK. Fifth, CUK serves sometimes as an intermediary between producers and buyers. Sixth, a microfinance fund is linked to CUK and grants credits to member cooperatives, who can also refer to the Fund for Guarantee and Stabilisation, established by the GIZ and linked to CUK, as a collateral to obtain loans from other banks. Finally, in the last few years, CUK has been active in positioning Kyrgyzstan in the cooperative movement in Asia. CUK officially joined the Asia and Pacific section of ICA in 2018 and, in collaboration with it, regularly organises and takes part to international meetings and forums on cooperatives.

Although CUK is actively engaged in all these activities, the CUK director herself laments that they remain limited in their actual scope. Along with some development workers, she notes that there is a gap between CUK’s planned goals and activities and the resources available to realise them:

Our resources are very limited: I’m alone working for CUK and I have a lot of things to do. Most of the time I’m in the field visiting cooperatives and doing some kind of *remont*⁷ there. When I’m in Bishkek, most of the time I have meetings with ministries for lobbying, or banks, or international organisations. My time in the office is very limited. (Sezim, CUK, 01.09.2016)

As Sezim explains, direct consultancy to member cooperatives is more about urgent necessities than about strategic visions. The link between buyers and farmers producers supported by CUK is always precarious, and the limited capital of the microfinance fund does not allow to offer advantageous credit conditions. CUK remains dependent on the financial support of foreign agencies, accorded either as donations or as a payment for the services of consultancy and training sessions offered by CUK. CUK’s budget can hardly cover the salary of the director, the only employee, whereas activity-specific expenses are usually covered by foreign sponsors.

⁷ Here intended as “troubleshooting”.

6.2.4 Discussion: building a hierarchy of knowledge and experience

As one could expect, the actors introduced in the previous paragraphs tend to attribute the responsibility for the limited success of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan to others and rarely to themselves. Whereas all actors analysed above attribute several lacks to farmers and people in general, development workers also attribute similar lacks to governmental actors. At the same time, actors that are directly responsible for the implementation of concrete measures for the promotion of cooperatives (in particular CUK and local civil servants) justify their partial realisation with the lack of economic resources: the responsibility for this lack is usually externalised to other actors (the central government in particular).

The attentive reader has probably noted that none of the sections above was dedicated to development agencies – one of the main actors of the promotion of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan. This is because the narratives I collected almost never attribute a responsibility nor lack to development agencies. Only Beishenaly and Namazova (2012, see §6.1.2) express a critical concern about the fragmentation of the promotion of cooperatives – a fragmentation that, according to them, increases the confusion lamented by several actors about the concept of cooperative. Besides Beishenaly and Namazova, only Talant (JICA) raises some concerns about the diminishing interest of international donors in promoting cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan. In any case, no intellectual or motivational lack is ever attributed to development agencies in this context. I suggest that this is due to the specific way in which the dominant discourse on cooperatives values and creates a hierarchy between different types of knowledge. In fact, a lack is always defined in the negative with reference to a positive term. What is missing then? What is the positive term?

“True” and “fake” cooperatives

When discussing the current situation in Kyrgyzstan, development workers – both orally and in written documentation – often refer to the publications presented in Section 6.1. Following these studies, they usually see in the strengthening of small to medium-size family farming the key for the development of Kyrgyzstan’s agricultural sector: service cooperatives are proposed as a tool for developing the sector in this direction. Similar to the literature, development actors present the service cooperative model in opposition to the production cooperative model, which they perceive as an obstacle to this development. Based on this and on the triple assumption about the Soviet referent discussed above, it is understandable that development actors try to distance the cooperative concept they propose from the assumedly negative model of the Soviet farm as much as possible, and that they underline that establishing a cooperative today is not a return to Soviet farms.

Indeed, development workers often emphasise that Soviet cooperatives were not “true” cooperatives: “The Soviet cooperative in fact was artificial cooperation; it wasn’t genuine, not voluntary and people were forced into the collective farm, which was controlled by the government” (Gulperi, Bio-KG, 08.09.2015). Development workers often underline the problems of the Soviet model. First of all, they associate the Soviet cooperative model with a top-down form of governance, where decision-making, ownership and control over land, infrastructure, but also labour, were strictly in the hand of a centralised

power (farm leaders, party representatives or more generally the Soviet state). In their vision the Soviet farm means anti-democratic governance and a centralised control over the means of production. Comparing these characteristics with ICA's cooperative principles, they insist that the Soviet model promoted "artificial cooperation" and that Soviet farms were "fake" or "pseudo-cooperatives" (see Theesfeld 2019, see §2.2.1). Similarly, they also insist that ex-Soviet farms that registered as cooperatives after Kyrgyzstan's independence (like Oktjabr) are not "true" cooperatives. Referring to these cooperatives, which maintain collective production activities and often use the same infrastructure of the former Soviet farm, Sezim explains:

In [this] type of cooperatives, the management is top-down. There is no communication between management and members, no transparency about the profit. All decisions are taken by the management and members have no voice in decision-making. The management is also inherited by the Soviet Union, they are the same people... and it has the same top-down style. Therefore members don't have trust in the management, which takes the money for itself and doesn't invest in the cooperative. (Sezim 09.09.2015)

Such cooperatives are thus considered to be "fake" cooperatives that have inherited the problems of Soviet farms, including a tendency to corruption and mismanagement by leaders.

In direct contrast to this model, development workers insist on the ICA's principles of voluntary membership and democratic member control and emphasise that the model of "modern" cooperatives they propose is built on democratic governance: "members have a voice in the decision-making; there is transparency on the profits and equal voice for all members who decide freely to join the cooperative" (Sezim, CUK, 09.09.2015). In this narrative, thus, members of "modern" cooperatives freely decide to join the cooperative and directly control decision-making, whereas members of Soviet cooperatives (but also of current production cooperatives like Oktjabr) were forced to join the cooperative and did not have voice in control and management of the cooperative. Development workers also emphasise that in modern cooperatives, members remain in control of land, which is kept in private property by the individual members.

Defining the "true" cooperative within the developmentalist discourse

While distancing the "modern" model from the Soviet model, development workers tend to distance the "modern" model also from the model of production cooperatives in general, merging the definition of "old" or "Soviet" cooperatives with the definition of production cooperatives *per se* (probably also because the only examples of production cooperatives in the country are ex-Soviet farms like Oktjabr). As a consequence, production cooperatives become *per se* "fake" cooperatives, although they are integral part of the cooperative tradition worldwide (see §2.1.1). It is important to note that, in principle, ownership of the means of production in production cooperatives can be both private or collective and that, as in the other cooperatives, democratic member control remains a basic principle (see Table 2.2). Development workers thus do not limit themselves to proposing service cooperatives as a tool for the development of Kyrgyzstan's agricultural sector; they also insist that this is the *only* cooperative model

that should be applied. They produce thus a neat opposition between the service cooperative model and the production cooperative model, as is the case also in the literature discussed above (§6.1). The first model (the “new”, “modern” model) becomes thus an expression of modernity and progress; the second (the “old” model) represents backwardness and being stuck in the past. I am not suggesting here that production cooperatives would be a better or even the best model for farmers in Kyrgyzstan and that they should be promoted there. What I want to underline is that this narrative silences existing or possible alternative forms of collective organisation beside the service cooperative model.

I argue that the narrative of failure is a consequence of this specific framing of cooperative models. Remember that Lerman and Sedik (2014) found that all cooperatives surveyed their study in Kyrgyzstan included forms of collective production; the authors therefore concluded that no “pure” service cooperatives existed in the country. Even in the case that these cooperatives would comply with all ICA’s principles and improve farmers’ livelihoods, they could never be considered “true” cooperatives within the dominant framing of development workers and agricultural economists; they can only be considered as “failed”.

Since the “true” cooperative model is the one proposed by development actors, it is clear that development actors have the widest and most precise knowledge about it. It is in this context that the “lacks” discussed above (especially the lack of knowledge and understanding) are to be understood. By framing the service cooperative model as the only “right” one, the dominant discourse does not only silence possible alternatives but also creates a hierarchy between the “correct” knowledge of development actors and the “wrong” knowledge of everyday “people” – reproducing the typical developmentalist discourse noted above. Such categorisations are deeply disempowering for the second category, which is always defined in the negative, as *lacking* something (development, the right knowledge) and whose knowledge and experience are dismissed as useless – or even prejudicial – for achieving what it lacks.

Furthermore, I suggest that the exaggeration of the divide between service and production cooperatives contributes to increasing the confusion about cooperatives that development actors lament. Although the latter insist that only “pure” service cooperatives are “true” cooperatives, neither the cooperatives established through their intervention nor the ones accepted as CUK members correspond to this ideal. In fact, even the few ex-Soviet farms turned cooperatives still existing in the country – so strongly criticised by development workers, including the CUK director – are accepted as CUK members because, as its director herself notes, these actors are too powerful to refuse.

One of the direct consequences of the narrative of failure is donors’ diminished interest in the promotion of cooperatives in the country. For instance, a World Bank report already stated in 2009, “Pressure for the rapid creation and development of cooperatives may also be counterproductive. Such institutions need to develop independently and internally, led by their members, and this requires time and may not provide quick solutions” (Guadagni and Fileccia 2009, 19). Since “society is not ready for cooperation”, donors conclude that the promotion of cooperatives is a project that cannot be successful. They also conclude that it is necessary to first have a favourable environment for cooperatives and to leave the wish to

establish cooperatives to farmers themselves. However, given the limited capacities of CUK and of the government to provide such an environment, it remains questionable whether this could ever happen.

6.3 Development actors: renegotiating cooperatives and development

The observation of the CUK director above about the inclusion of ex-Soviet farms turned cooperatives as members of CUK is a glimpse into the everyday negotiations that make up the concrete situated landscape of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan. Until now, I have presented “development actors” as a nearly uniform category that defends and promotes a precise model of cooperative corresponding to a common ideal. If it is true that the narrative of failure is common to the discourse most development actors produce in their interactions with me, the category of development actors is itself fragmented and ambiguous: it is therefore important to differentiate between the actors within this category and to acknowledge and analyse the internal differentiations.

6.3.1 Differentiations in the narratives of individual development actors

The two institutions that have engaged in promoting cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan the most (German GIZ and Japanese JICA) refer to the long tradition of cooperatives in their respective countries of origin. Although the basic principles are the same, the specific characteristics of cooperatives vary in the two traditions, however. In particular, German cooperatives evolved mainly from savings cooperatives supporting rural entrepreneurship, whereas in Japan the cooperative movement emerged from consumer cooperatives. Both agencies, as well as the other agencies active in the promotion of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan, have thus built on different cooperative traditions in their respective country of origin. This is visible, for instance, in the current legislation on cooperatives, where different passages carry the marks of the agency that collaborated in drafting the texts (see Beishenaly and Namazova 2012 above). For instance, an important difference between the German and the Japanese models is that cooperatives are considered commercial organisations in the former model, but non-commercial organisations in the latter. Because of their limited time frame, projects’ endeavour to harmonise legislation has been always partial: different projects by different agencies have focused on modifying specific passages of legislation without being able to revise all legislation concerning cooperatives. The fact that most training modules on cooperatives within rural development programmes are currently provided by CUK contributes to maintaining a certain coherence in the information farmers receive. Nevertheless, development workers seem to ignore the variety of possible cooperative models when they rigidly define what a “true” cooperative is.

Despite these different referents for the ideal cooperative model, the concrete measures implemented by development agencies for the promotion of cooperatives have been similar. The programmes aiming explicitly at the promotion of cooperatives encouraged formally registering cooperatives through incentives such as facilitating access to credit and providing information and administrative support for

the process of registration. As noted, measures for the support and development of already existing cooperatives were usually missing in these programmes. The focus on formalisation was probably also motivated by the need for concrete indicators for projects to guarantee accountability towards donors. This focus has been regarded critically by some development agencies, whose programmes have encouraged the formation of farmer groups around a specific concrete interest without insisting on their formalisation as cooperatives (see Schmidt 2012). Even among the main promoters of formalised cooperation, there is no unanimity about the advisability of a focus on formalisation. An interview with three GIZ collaborators (19.05.2016) shows this clearly. The interview was planned with Baburbek, a Kyrgyz in his fifties who worked for the agency at the time of a project on cooperatives. Two young female colleagues, Nazgul and Elvira, also Kyrgyz, joined the interview to help with translation, since Baburbek does not speak English and my Russian is insecure.

During the interview, Baburbek insists on the need for farmer groups to register as formal cooperatives: this would provide them advantages for access to credit but also for marketing their produce in larger amounts. He explains the limited success of cooperatives with the typical narrative of lack: farmers “lack awareness about the calculation of costs and benefits”, they have only a “short-term reference”, are “lazy” and “grant-oriented”. Nazgul translates Baburbek’s reflections, but, at one moment, she stops and starts a discussion with him, questioning the actual advantages of formal registration. After discussing with Baburbek, she summarises her position for me. She thinks that for farmers it is easier, and often even more advantageous, to sell alone at the local market: transaction costs and the administrative burden are lower, and the revenue – even if smaller – is immediate. She compares the situation with Germany, where in order to sell at the market one needs an authorisation and where, therefore, it is convenient to register in formal groups. When the interview with Baburbek is over, I remain alone with Elvira, who works on a project on organic farming. Like Baburbek, she insists on the necessity of formalisation: the certification of organic products implies a strict control of the production process, she explains, and formal cooperatives can provide this control. This scene suggests that the position of individual development workers about the specific focus of the promotion of cooperatives can vary even within the same organisation and that, when it comes to concrete measures, no uniform “ideal” of cooperative exists even among development workers.

Finally, there are some exceptions to the dominant narrative by development workers that defines service cooperatives as the only true cooperatives. I meet a few development workers – all Kyrgyz men over fifty – who seem not to be deeply convinced about this definition. For instance, a retired local project worker explicitly argues for the need to increase the average plot size by joining farmers’ production activities. Baburbek, the GIZ employee of the previous paragraph, insists on the need to promote service cooperatives and that production cooperatives are not suited for Kyrgyzstan because the “Kyrgyz mentality” is not suited to this model. The “lack argument” emerges again, but in a different form than above. In fact, Baburbek personally sees production cooperatives as a superior form of farm organisation. As referents for this argument, he explicitly mentions the production cooperatives of the Soviet Union and of East Germany, which cultivated large land surfaces and could compete with West German

enterprises. He also mentions, at the same time, large private agri-business enterprises in Western Europe and North America as successful examples of farm organisation. For Baburbek, being able to handle large surfaces of land and possessing all the necessary agricultural machines are the criteria to define the success of farm enterprises. Baburbek argues that Russians and Germans have a stronger attitude towards cooperation than Kyrgyz people. To confirm this, he reminds me that most of the big production cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan are managed by ethnic Russians. On the contrary, “Kyrgyz don’t unite” and are less keen to collaboration. Such an argument is not common among development workers; however, as we will see below and in the next chapter, it is widespread among farmers as well as among some governmental actors.

6.3.2 Discussion: situating the narratives of individual development actors

Baburbek’s argument above suggests that specific narratives on cooperatives emerge from specific relations in specific places and moments in time. Although I could not engage long enough with individual development workers to be able to grasp in detail their personal trajectories and lifeworlds, in this section I present some glimpses of how their narratives emerge from their specific position within the development sector and from their specific interaction with me as a social scientist from Europe.

Baburbek: navigating ambiguous models of modernity

Baburbek explicitly states that the criteria to define a successful farm enterprise include its size and its endowment with agricultural machinery; he refers here to both large Soviet farms and private capitalist agri-businesses. Both these models – despite their oppositions – embody the vision of modernity as the technological domination of nature or, in the specific case of agriculture, as its mechanisation and concentration in large enterprises. The Soviet model of modernity is well known among Kyrgyzstani citizens, especially those of Baburbek’s generation who have experienced Soviet modernist propaganda in the first person. The examples of Western European, North American but also later Russian or Kazakhstani large agri-business enterprises have been equally well known in Kyrgyzstan at least since the 1990s. Not only do the mass media regularly present images of such big enterprises abroad – foreign development or commercial agencies also spread this image, for instance when they invite local development workers, civil servants or businesspeople for trips abroad to visit successful examples of farming enterprises. Simultaneously, however, some of these same agencies promote service cooperatives in support of small farmers in the country, i.e. a form of agriculture that does not correspond to this idea of development and modernity. As already discussed, in the narrative of these agencies, service cooperatives are the “correct” form of cooperatives to be promoted in Kyrgyzstan while production cooperatives are blamed as inefficient and undemocratic.

Baburbek seems well aware of this narrative on cooperatives and, when speaking with me (probably associating me with expat workers whom he knows well), he praises service cooperatives and laments the various lacks that limit the success of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, however, he

explicitly affirms his ideal of large-scale farming, which seems to contradict his narrative on cooperatives. As a way to navigate the contradiction between the promotion of small-scale farming and his ideal of large-scale enterprises, Baburbek develops an “ethnic” explanation: the “Kyrgyz mentality” prevents the realisation of the ideal model. In this way, the negative pole of the hierarchical categorisation between “modern” and “backward” is strengthened and even assumes an ethnic (and essentialising) colouration. I am not suggesting here that Baburbek is fully making up this narrative for me without believing in it; what I am suggesting is that this specific narrative emerges in a particular situated context through specific contingent relations.

Nazgul and Elvira: emancipation through development work?

The interview with the three GIZ collaborators is interesting also for what it reveals about the relation of the two young women to their older male colleague. In Kyrgyzstan, strong hierarchies based on gender and age (among other things) shape social relations (see Chapter 9). Young women rarely contradict older men. The fact that Nazgul starts a discussion with Baburbek during our interview is unexpected and surprising for me. This might be a sign of the emancipation of young women through development work noted in Section 3.2.2 (see in particular Féaux de la Croix 2013). By questioning not only Baburbek’s statement, but also the policy of her employer, Nazgul gives a glimpse into the opportunities for emancipation that a career in the development sector opens up to young women in Kyrgyzstan.

Elvira, on the contrary, remains silent during the whole interview. When we are left alone, her explanations of the role of cooperatives for organic farming is imbued with development terminology – for instance the need to focus on “institutional development” and to increase the “social responsibility of farmers”. It seems that Elvira is able to mobilise a specific language of development that allows her to maintain her position within the development sector – and to legitimise this position in front of me. At least in the framework of the interview, she does not question the assumptions and arguments implied by this language. This hints to Pétric’s (2013, see §3.2.2) observation that Kyrgyzstani development workers have adapted to the schemata proposed (or imposed) by international organisations.

Sezim: building hierarchies of knowledge

My meetings with Sezim (and non-meetings, i.e. the several times she declined my invitations to meet) are also revealing of the individual strategies development workers put in place to navigate the development sector.⁸ Sezim, an ethnic Kyrgyz in her fifties, worked for GIZ in the cooperative project before becoming the director of CUK. Among the development workers I meet, she is one who produces the strongest hierarchy between the definition of “true” cooperatives and the lack of understanding by farmers and governmental actors. In her statements, she emphasises this through emotions that range from disillusion and discomfort to rancour and anger. She depicts herself as one of the few persons who have

⁸ Also in Sezim’s case, I did not have the possibility to investigate more in detail her personal history and professional trajectory.

really understood what a cooperative is and almost the only one who engages actively to support cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan. She blames ministries for not responding positively to her lobbying activities. She complains that farmers have still not grasped the concept of cooperatives, that they are and are lazy and passive, looking only for immediate gains – and she accuses their Soviet past for these attitudes. She also complains about the limited resources available to CUK and about the burden of work she bears, with little recognition by others, to support cooperatives.

Sezim refuses my invitation to collaborate more closely and justifies her refusal with the fact that she is too busy with her work. This is surely true, given the lack of personnel at CUK discussed above. Perhaps, however, other factors play a role in her refusal. Maybe my identity as a social scientist interested in learning about cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan is not immediately understandable for Sezim: she is probably used to expats who come to Kyrgyzstan to *explain* what a cooperative is on the basis of experiences in the Global North, not the way around.⁹ Maybe Sezim is so much trapped in her fantasy of an unrealisable desire prevented by a series of scapegoats (the lack of understanding of the government, the passivity of farmers, the lack of resources from donors) that she is incapable of “passing to the act” (Healy 2010, 503, see §4.3.1).

What is sure, however, is that Sezim bases her position as CUK director on a developmentalist discourse that values her own knowledge (and that of few others) and blames all others – the ones who do not support, understand, or collaborate with her. Or, at least, this is the identity she performs when meeting a European social scientist interested in the topic of cooperatives. It is important to notice that I only have rare second-hand information on the content of Sezim’s training sessions on cooperatives. Although I suggested participating in such training sessions in which both Sezim and farmers who I knew would be in attendance, they always avoided inviting me. When I asked Sezim or these farmers to tell me the details of the training, nobody ever gave me clear explanations, and their answers always remained vague. I also could find nowhere written material from these training sessions: Sezim always refused to share it with me, and the farmers I met who had participated in such training sessions claimed that they could not find the material anymore. It is possible, thus, that the content of training sessions is different from the vision of cooperatives that Sezim shares with me: maybe, like Baburbek, Sezim has integrated the habit of praising service cooperatives and blaming production cooperatives when speaking to expats, but when talking to farmers she is less rigid in her definitions – and does not want me to see this ambiguity.

Roku: building local knowledge through academic and grey literature

During a lunch with Roku, a young Japanese woman (05.07.2017), she describes with pride a programme for school meals for children promoted by the UN development agency for which she works. She explains that, when the organisation started the project, its collaborators noticed a lack of trust among villagers and a lack of “community-building activities”. As a way to build trust and a strong sense of

⁹ See also the reaction of Stanislav to my proposition to work with his cooperative (Chapter 7).

community, the project decided that the families had to contribute to their children's meals at school either financially or by bringing food. Making the link with agricultural cooperatives, Roku underlines that one of the reasons for their limited success is a similar lack of trust among villagers, which reduces their willingness to join a group of farmers, but also a lack of trust in formal institutions in a context where – she emphasises – leaders often divert material contributions to collectives' activities for their own private purposes. Roku's argument that trust among villagers and community ties are lacking in Kyrgyzstani villages clashes with my experience as an adopted villager in Pjak, where I could personally experience the strong social ties that shape the everyday life of local communities (see Chapter 9).

Roku explains that she came to Kyrgyzstan only a few months before, without much previous knowledge about the country. As her colleagues, she is used to short-term assignments (two to three years), after which she moves to another country and another programme. The amount of work required of her current position is quite large; she notes that she does not have the time to study the local context deeply, but she is trying to build up regional knowledge through existing reports and studies. Indeed, during our lunch she often explicitly refers to the FAO-commissioned studies by Lerman and colleagues. These studies, as discussed above, often point to the lack of trust as a reason for the limited success of community development initiatives in ex-socialist countries of CEE and the FSU. For Roku and her colleagues, this reading not only provides a simple explanation for the difficulties encountered by their project in village communities, it also offers a simple answer to these difficulties and a source of legitimation for the activities – and the approach – promoted by their project. Whether other kinds of cooperation practices and community ties actually exist in Kyrgyzstani villages remains unknown for the project collaborators – and, in the end, not relevant for their mandate.

6.4 Governmental actors: navigating ambiguity

When speaking with civil servants and local authorities, one can quickly understand why development workers complain about their big promises not followed by concrete deeds. My interviews with governmental actors are often frustrating: I have the feeling that my interlocutors put in place a series of strategies to avoid answering my questions. Many of these interviews are in fact long monologues in which my interlocutor explains in general and vague terms the government's plans to support farmers, for instance through the establishment of cooperatives. Whenever I try to ask more precise details about the concrete measures that are planned or already implemented, the reaction is usually either some further vague monologues or blatant diversions of topics.¹⁰ Another strategy consists in mixing Kyrgyz (which I barely understand) and Russian (which I understand), to leave no time to my interpreter to translate neither my questions nor the answers and to interrupt her translation and start speaking about another topic. Most of the times, I cannot obtain anything deeper than these general statements.

¹⁰ One can observe this same strategy by governmental representatives on other occasions, for instance during community meetings when the audience starts asking questions to and raising demands of the government.

Only in rare occasions, after insisting for a long time to have more concrete information, my interlocutor finally admits that the local administration does not have enough resources to implement the planned measures and that, if any, some measures are implemented by development agencies. An interview with Nurlan, a civil servant at *ayil* level, is a good example of this:

Nurlan: The [governmental] strategy 2010–2015 [on the promotion of cooperatives] included the diffusion of information on cooperatives to people in order to convince them to establish cooperatives. [...]

Ottavia: What concrete activities were realised in the framework of this strategy at the *ayil* level?

Nurlan: We provided information to people. We provided to people flyers and brochures with information about the establishment of cooperatives. In the flyers are explained all pro and contra, advantages and disadvantages of cooperatives. [...] (Nurlan, *ayil*, 04.09.2015)

This conversation takes place in Nurlan's office in the *ayil* administration building – an office he shares with several colleagues but which, however, is rarely full, often leaving us the opportunity to sit alone with the interpreter. His desk is tidy and quite empty: his piles of papers are hidden in the drawers. Some of them are also stored in an old, small fridge, which now serves as a shelf and, equipped with a padlock, also as a safe. While explaining the information-sharing activities on cooperatives mentioned in the extract above, Nurlan starts rummaging in his drawers, then opens the fridge with a key and continues his search there. He is looking for the flyers and brochures he is talking about but cannot find them. He gives me some flyers he finds in the fridge, but they are not the ones he was looking for. He comments that they had a lot of flyers but probably they have distributed all of them. The flyers are advertisements of foreign private companies for agricultural machines, with pictures of big tractors and combines (Fig. 3). I continue the conversation:

Ottavia: Who produced the flyers you distributed? [...]

Nurlan: The flyers are delivered at the workshops. There are flyers from NGOs and from the organisers of the workshops. We [the local administration] don't have enough budget for developing our own flyers. (Nurlan, *ayil*, 04.09.2015)

This conversation seems to confirm that governmental actors tend to overstate their deeds and to assume the merit for activities they did not contribute to realise. Nurlan, however, notes the other side of the coin: he complains that, sometimes, when development organisations conduct training sessions or other activities in the village, they do not inform the local administration, which feels “bypassed” and delegitimised. Indeed, local administrations have to rely on external resources (usually from foreign donors) to implement their plans: the risk is that external actors take over the tasks of the local administration, which, as a consequence, becomes even more invisible to villagers – giving them one more reason to complain about a government that “doesn't do anything”. In the next sections I unpack the strategies of governmental actors – again, recognising their plurality and individuality – to navigate this ambiguity.

6.4.1 Meanings of cooperatives

Speaking with governmental actors also seems to confirm that their knowledge and understanding about cooperatives are very limited. When I ask details about the precise type of cooperatives they intend to promote, my interlocutors usually put in place similar avoidance strategies as the ones described above. When they do engage in some more specific explanations, it is clear that my question has a different meaning for them. Emerging from my background readings on cooperatives, my question is directed to understand the kind of internal governance, member activities and ownership relations, among others, that governmental actors imagine for the cooperatives they wish to have in the country. For my interlocutors, however, these categories do not seem to be pertinent to my question. Two moments in particular clarify this misunderstanding.

The first moment occurs during the same interview with Nurlan quoted above (04.09.2015). After he states the local government's willingness to promote cooperatives, I ask him which specific type of cooperatives he has in mind. Elzada, the interpreter, translates the question but Nurlan does not understand it. I try to clarify my question mentioning that there can be different types of cooperatives according, for instance, to their internal governance, to the kind of ownership relations or to member tasks. What follows is a chaotic conversation between Nurlan, Elzada and me. Elzada discusses my question with Nurlan, trying to clarify it further; Nurlan gives an answer, which Elzada translates back to me; not happy with the answer, I try to reformulate the question to Elzada, who translates it back to Nurlan; Nurlan, again, starts discussing with Elzada, trying to understand the meaning of my question, then gives another answer. This loop repeats itself several times.

I am not satisfied with Nurlan's answers because they do not address the typical criteria with which scholars and development workers define different types of cooperatives. I receive no information from Nurlan about internal governance, ownership structure or member activities. He does not mention the need for democratic governance or centralised control, of private or collective ownership, of collective production or marketing activities. In his answers, Nurlan mentions what for me are random examples of private business activities: a slaughtering house built by a man in the nearby village, which now provides jobs to villagers; private investors who came to the village and invested in some business; a foreign organisation that sponsored the renovation of some public building in the village.

The second moment is an interview with Nadyrbek (01.09.2015), who is responsible for the agricultural sector at the *rayon* administration. Again, when he states that his office has plans to promote cooperatives, I ask which type of cooperatives is envisioned. It is worth quoting an extensive passage from this interview, because it is revealing for the point I want to make in this section. Nadyrbek replies to my question:

There are two ways of developing a cooperative. First, each household owns a plot of land. They organise together, for example fifteen households, in one cooperative. In average, every household owns one to two hectares of land, but the size is not equal for each household. The people who join the cooperative should pay a membership fee proportional to the land size they own. The profit of the cooperative is shared among the members

according to the size of the land. The second type are farmer unions that already exist. They have already big plots, around twenty to thirty hectares for one union. If they can show good results, they can acquire more land from the public land, they can even buy it. In this way they can become bigger and enlarge the union. The idea is to join existing farmers unions, so that you will have even bigger unions. (Nadyrbek, 01.09.2015)

I ask some more details about the difference between the two types of cooperatives. Nadyrbek further explains:

The difference between the first and the second type is that the first are private households owning a land share. These cooperatives are small. The land usually is small, also the membership fee should be small, for example just a cow. Since they are small households with small land plots, this kind of cooperative will grow slower. For the second type, these are cooperatives that already have big land, machines, experience. The fee can also be higher and they can grow faster. (Nadyrbek, 01.09.2015)

In order to better understand the distinction, I ask Nadyrbek to put two cooperatives we both know in one of the two categories. Ak-Bulut, Kumbat's cooperative in Pjak, was established in 2005 mainly as a service cooperative, where members carry out their production individually. Oktjabr is the ex-Soviet farm turned cooperative mentioned above, where members privately own land plots and pool them together for collective cultivation by the cooperative. Nadyrbek explains:

Nadyrbek: Ak-Bulut is in the first category, it is small. In autumn Ak-Bulut will join with Tüshün [another cooperative similar to Ak-Bulut, of which Nadyrbek is the chairman] but we will see the results of this merger only next year. But also with the merger the size of the union will still be small. On the contrary, Oktjabr is in the second category. Because it exists since the Soviet time and of course they have a lot of experience. Maybe Tüshün together with Ak-Bulut will become like Oktjabr in ten years!

Ottavia: So, are you saying that Oktjabr is an example of the ideal cooperative the government wants to develop in the country?

Nadyrbek: Yes! (Nadyrbek, 01.09.2015)

Nadyrbek's affirmative answer to my last question does not necessarily prove that his – or more generally the government's – ideal of cooperative are production cooperatives and not service cooperatives. From his argumentation here and from Nurlan's disorientation regarding my questions, we can conclude that both men lack the specific knowledge of the categorisation of cooperatives as formulated by ICA, scholarly literature, and development workers. However, these two examples also suggest something else: that this categorisation (the distinction between production and service cooperatives, the different forms of governance, etc.) might be not very relevant for governmental actors in Kyrgyzstan. Nadyrbek seems not to care whether land plots in the second type of cooperative are privately owned or property of the cooperative or whether members have a voice in management. What is important is that a cooperative is big and has machinery and experience. This resonates with Baburbek's ideal of cooperatives as big and endowed with modern machines discussed above. The specific knowledge they lack about the "Western classification" of cooperatives (as Lerman 2013a, 7–10 calls it, see above), is probably not very relevant for Nadyrbek and Nurlan.

The scene with Nurlan brings us even one step further. When asked about the type of cooperatives the local government would like to develop, Nurlan does not mention examples of what Western scholars and development practitioners would consider a cooperative. Instead, he mentions some successful businesses or activities in the region – activities that bring job opportunities or renovated buildings to the local population – and shows some random flyers of modern agricultural machines. What if even the concept itself of cooperative as a member-owned enterprise, in the end, is not very relevant in the specific local context and if, instead, what counts is that an economic activity brings whatever material benefit it does to the local population? For the moment, this remains an intuition; I develop it in Chapter 7.

6.4.2 Ideals of modernity and development

Having a look to current governmental agricultural policies beyond the promotion of cooperatives is useful at this moment to contextualise and expand the reflections of the previous sections. By 2004 the distribution of land shares and other assets from the ex-Soviet farms can be considered finished. Several scholars identify in this moment the start of the third phase of agrarian reforms, which aims at further developing and reinforcing private agriculture and agri-business focusing on service and infrastructure (Lerman and Sedik 2009a, 4). Ten years later, however, the *National Strategy of Sustainable Development of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2013–2017* (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2013, hereafter NSSD 2013-17) states the limited success of these reforms:

The reforms fell short of expectations: ill-conceived government policies have led to this strategic industry acquiring the forms of *subsistence farming and low-value (small-commodity) agricultural production*. [...] the small size of land holdings leads to *primitivism production and is a significant limitation for effective agricultural production*, increase of the capital-and-labor ration and growth of productivity. (NSSD 2013–17, 86, emphasis added).

This analysis identifies the main problem of the agricultural sector in the fragmentation of agricultural *production* and points to the ineffectiveness of small-scale farming, which is defined as “primitive”. As a solution, the strategy proposes the “concentration of lands among effective owners” (NSSD 2013–17, 88) and the support to “efficient agricultural producers” with more than 100 hectares of land, including cooperatives that integrate small peasant farms (NSSD 2013–17, 89). The newest strategy (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2017, hereafter NSSD 2018-22) maintains this direction, suggesting that “important measures for the development of the agro-industrial complex will be to overcome small-scale production, create medium and large processing complexes, develop logistics and reduce the role of intermediaries in commodity markets” (NSSD 2018–22, 22).

This analysis and the solution it proposes are in opposition to the vision of the development actors and agricultural economists discussed above, who instead underline the effectiveness and higher productivity of small-scale farming in comparison with larger farms (Lerman and Sedik 2018). Commenting the statements of the Kyrgyzstani government on post-independence reforms, Lerman and Sedik (2009a, 14) note:

Ministry of Agriculture officials remain dissatisfied and highly sceptical of [the] achievements [of land reform]. They view land reform as a destructive process that dismantled the capital-intensive and highly commercialized large-scale farms and drove Kyrgyzstan to highly fragmented small subsistence farms.

The vision expressed in the governmental strategy suggests that the government's ideal for the agricultural sector corresponds to a form of agriculture based on large-scale agro-industry exploiting economies of scale through capital intensification. This vision neglects the important contribution of family farming for rural livelihoods and food security in Kyrgyzstan – during the Soviet regime as well as today – and worldwide. It seems at the same time to ignore the risks related to land concentration, which often leads to a dual agricultural sector with a growing divide between wealthy agro-industrial enterprises and the subsistence agriculture of a poor rural population which has to accept poorly paid jobs in the private enterprises (e.g. Mitchell 2002; Verdery 2003).

For Lerman and Sedik (2009a, 14), this vision originates in the government's attachment to the ideal of Soviet large-scale and highly mechanised agriculture; they observe that, "in promoting this view, [Ministry of Agriculture officials] ignore the well-documented chronic inefficiency of the Soviet model of agriculture and the recent evidence of superior performance of family farms in all CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] countries, including Kyrgyzstan". In noting this, Lerman and Sedik take the occasion to highlight once more the inferiority of the Soviet economic model. At the same time, they assume that the Soviet model is the referent for the government, ignoring that the rest of the world, including large parts of the Global North, are full of examples of large-scale agro-industrial businesses. In fact, in my interviews with governmental actors, they often refer with desirous envy to examples of large-scale farming from Western Europe or North America – examples often transmitted by foreign agencies or enterprises that sometimes even invite governmental representatives to organised trips to visit these examples in person. I suggest that, if it is probable that the Soviet referent plays a role in the government's vision, what is more relevant for such vision is the ideal of modernity and progress through agro-industrial business more generally – be it Soviet or Western. This ideal is constructed in opposition to the "primitivism" of small-scale farming and creates again a dichotomous narrative in which one pole represents the fullness and the other is defined in the negative for its lacks (of development and modernity).

In our interviews, civil servants reproduce the vision expressed in the governmental strategies of an agricultural sector that should tend towards land concentration and the establishment of large farming enterprises. When speaking of cooperatives – as we have seen for the case of Nadyrbek – they underline their advantages related to the possibility to increase plot size through land pooling. In this sense, it is clear that they have in mind some form of collective *production*. In particular, they point to the problem of land degradation due to limited practices of crop rotation: according to them, a proper rotation that allows soil regeneration is possible only on big land plots.

6.4.3 Discussion: navigating ambiguity

The governmental vision that emerged in the previous section contrasts the vision of international agencies, which since Kyrgyzstan's independence have pushed towards another mode of agricultural production: small- to medium-scale private farming supported by service cooperatives. At the same time, the Kyrgyzstani government has also produced specific strategies for the promotion of cooperatives, which declare the goal of developing service cooperatives and which are thus in line with the vision of international agencies. I suggest that this ambiguity (or even contradiction) in the statements of governmental actors is not necessarily due to their "lack of understanding" of cooperatives, but it could be part of a (fully or partially) intentional strategy to please foreign actors while maintaining a vision of large-scale agricultural production as the goal for the development of the national agricultural sector.

This argument seems to be confirmed by the variable positions governmental actors assume of cooperatives in different contexts. Remember how Talant complained that, when visiting the Issyk-Kul province and giving speeches to a broad public of citizens, governmental representatives praise the example of Oktjabr, a big production cooperative. As we will see in Chapter 7 (and as we have already seen in the case of Nadyrbek), residents of the Issyk-Kul province often bring Oktjabr as an example of ideal agricultural enterprise. Praising Oktjabr might therefore be a way for governmental representatives to acquire sympathy among the local population. On the contrary, during a Forum on Cooperatives organised by CUK and the Asia and Pacific section of ICA, the invited governmental representatives emphasised the importance of "modern" service cooperatives in their speeches.

By navigating contradictory visions of cooperatives and development in this way, the Kyrgyzstani government was able in the last three decades to attract important resources from foreign organisations, as the numerous rural development programmes implemented in the country since independence demonstrate. I am not arguing that in the last three decades "the Kyrgyzstani government", as a unitary actor, has deployed a coherent and fully intentional strategy consisting in openly supporting a discourse in which it does not believe while hiding its true agenda in order to cheat foreign donors and win their resources. First of all, I have shown in the present section that "the Kyrgyzstani government" is not a unitary actor but rather an assemblage of individuals, papers, laws, buildings, fridges transformed into safes, etc. Secondly, the material presented in this section also shows that actors' strategies are rather constituted of sets of multiple, often contradictory and always situated discursive and material practices. In this regard, the Kyrgyzstani government – or the Kyrgyzstani state more generally – is constituted through a process of improvisation as noted by Jeffrey (2012) for the case of Bosnia: it is performed within a specific structure of available material and symbolic resources ("resourcefulness"). Governmental actors navigate between the limited financial resources of the government and the opportunities offered by international donors. They mediate their own aspirations between changing ideals of development and modernity, "making do" with what is at hand in always partial and never fully predictable trajectories (see also Reeves 2014).

6.5 Conclusion: representations and practices of the promotion of cooperatives

The entry point for the analysis in the present chapter was the narrative of failure of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan. We have seen that the discourse on cooperatives by scholars and development actors resembles the broader developmentalist discourse denounced by postdevelopment scholars. It is a discourse that creates dichotomous categories based on the valuation of specific knowledge and experience (rooted in the Global North) over local knowledges and experiences. The dominant discourse on cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan narrowly defines what is the “true” – or at least the only desirable – form of agricultural cooperatives: this form coincides with the service cooperative model where farmers maintain individual production and use the cooperative as a way to increase their power in the agricultural market by marketing their produce collectively and accessing services (such as credit and extension services) that would be more difficult to access individually. This cooperative model corresponds to the idea of cooperatives that development programmes have promoted worldwide as a way to strengthen private farming within market economies (§2.1.2).

As a consequence, the definition of “successful” cooperatives is narrow, limited to those that fully correspond to the model promoted. The model, however, is an ideal; to be realised in practice, is necessarily negotiated and adapted to the specificities of the local context – specificities that are hardly considered in the formulation of the model, which is proposed worldwide in the most different contexts. The definition of “successful” cooperatives is also biased because it is based on a hierarchisation of knowledge that privileges a knowledge that has emerged from particular experiences in specific contexts in the Global North. This knowledge – and the categories it proposes – is not so relevant or pertinent in the specific context of contemporary Kyrgyzstan. It is not surprising, then, that local actors refer to other categories and knowledges and that their ambiguous narratives and actions can be interpreted as originating from a general “lack of knowledge”. On these premises, the failure of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan lamented by scholars and development actors seems a self-fulfilling prophecy rather than the unintended consequence of development intervention.

In his illuminating paper titled “Is Good Policy Unimplementable?”, Mosse (2004) draws attention on the relation between developmental policies and practices. He shows that, rather than policies directly defining practices, it is the way around: policies emerge out of situated practices and are the results of negotiations of legitimacy and authority. The “success” or the “failure” of a project, thus, is not determined by the concrete actions that follow its implementation; instead, success and failure are the results of processes of legitimation within “wider networks of support and validation” (*id.* 658). In this sense, I argue that the “failure” of cooperative in Kyrgyzstan is the result of a specific legitimation process that values a particular model of service cooperative in particular and a particular kind of Western knowledge more generally while delegitimising local past and present experiences of cooperation.

Negotiations and performances

Although development actors lament the confusion created by the ambiguous statements and actions of the Kyrgyzstani government, in the present chapter I have shown that the promotion of cooperatives by development actors is not a coherent unitary project either. Rather, it, like every development programme (see Mosse 2005; Olivier de Sardan 2005) is a set of situated, ambiguous or even contradictory, practices. In their encounter with a European social scientist, development actors negotiate their legitimacy through the performance of a discourse that values a specific knowledge and a specific idea of cooperative. I interpret the fact that I am prevented from observing their performances in other contexts (in particular in the framework of the training sessions on cooperatives provided to farmers) as an indication that, in other contexts and with other audiences, the same actors might perform a different discourse – maybe increasingly valuing the experiences of the specific audience to which they talk. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that, in practice, CUK accepts ex-Soviet farms turned into production cooperatives as its members and supports existing cooperatives that do not correspond to the ideal model.

This performance is always situated in the particular personal trajectories of individual development workers. On the one hand, their subjectivities are constituted in the specific context of the development sector, whose dominant discourse shapes their aspirations and knowledge references. On the one hand, through their performances, these actors legitimise both the dominant developmentalist discourse and their own personal position as development workers in the sector. Their specific discursive practices shape at the same time the context of the development sector and its discourse.

These observations are valid also for governmental actors, who equally negotiate their legitimacy – and the legitimacy of the Kyrgyzstani government and state more generally – through specific reinterpretations and performances. By navigating different discourses, they can sometimes attract foreign resources in the country or in their village. At the same time, however, by outsourcing the implementation of measures to promote cooperatives to external actors, they weaken their own legitimacy, making themselves – or rather the “state” more generally – even more invisible. Also in their case, their performances are always situated in their personal trajectories. They adapt their performances to their specific audience to increase their legitimacy as competent and active civil servants or governmental representatives. At the same time, they negotiate their aspirations within this specific context. Remember the case of Nurlan pulling out what for me were random flyers of private sellers of agricultural machinery: for Nurlan, the selection of flyers was probably not as random as for me, but partially represented his ideal of development and modernity.

Promoting cooperatives in the context of post-independence economic liberalisation

The practices and discourses discussed above all take place in the specific context of post-independence Kyrgyzstan. In this context, international institutions have promoted reforms aimed at the liberalisation of the national economy, paralleled by the dismantling of the centralised state in favour of state withdrawal from economic activities. Although of course post-independence economic liberalisation is not a coherent

unitary project but rather a series of situated practices that can be ambiguous and even contradictory, I argue that this particular context offers the conditions for the emergence of a discourse on cooperatives as presented in this chapter and provides a legitimisation framework for this discourse. The scholarly work on cooperatives in the Central Asian region is both a product and a constituent of this specific framework. Indeed, in the aftermath of the Cold War, Western knowledge and experience is valued over local ones: this is a consequence of the idea that Western capitalism has won over Soviet socialism and at the same time it contributes to reinforcing this idea.

In this context, the type of cooperative that can be legitimised most easily is the model (already promoted in other countries of the Global South) of service cooperatives that can support the emergence of a new class of peasant farmers – and thus contribute to the establishment of a market economy system. Also, the kind of subjectivity that can find more legitimacy within this context is one linked to economic rationality and individuality (see §3.3). In fact, the promotion of the service cooperative model is based on the ideal of the peasant farmer as an autonomous entrepreneur – and at the same time it contributes to its emergence. When Lerman and Sedik (2009b, 16) affirm that the benefits of cooperation are “self-evident” in transition economies, they assume a purely economic rationality driving individual behaviour.

Similarly, when development actors explain the advantages for farmers to join a cooperative to me, they list exclusively direct economic benefits such as access to credit and leases. Only on one occasion did I hear about a broader emancipatory role of cooperatives, during the Forum on Cooperatives organised by CUK and ICA-Asia and Pacific in Bishkek. One of the invited guests, an Indian woman who represents ICA-Asia and Pacific, affirmed: “We have to consider not only the economic gains but also the social goods brought by cooperatives” (Indira, ICA, 30.06.17). She referred in particular to the potential of cooperatives for the emancipation of women – one of the favoured points made by cooperative promoters to further promote cooperatives in the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (see ILO/ICA n.d., also §2.1.2). Also in this case, however, the emancipation of women is based on their role as active entrepreneurs who can gain autonomy through economic activities within a market economy. As Fraser (2015) would phrase it,¹¹ such an emancipation is linked to marketisation but does not consider broader politics of redistribution – and is therefore compatible with, and easily legitimised within, the context of post-independence Kyrgyzstan.

In this framework, we have seen that the Kyrgyzstani government – and its representatives and civil servants – is hardly able to find its legitimacy. The dominant discourse on economic liberalisation also implies the partial dismantlement of the centralised state. When governmental actors attempt to gain legitimacy by reproducing the dominant discourse – for instance by performing “grand statements” about their plans to support cooperatives or the private sector – they contribute at the same time to their delegitimation, especially if, because of limited budget possibilities, these statements are not followed by concrete actions.

¹¹ I am thankful to Bruno Meeus for pointing out this relation to Fraser’s work.

Pasts and futures

Different to what authors have observed for other international initiatives for local cooperation in Kyrgyzstan (see §3.2.2), it seems that the discourse on cooperatives does not include the mobilisation of representations of past (pre-Soviet) cooperation traditions to foster cooperation in the present. On the contrary, the only reference to past experiences of cooperation is the Soviet farm – and this reference is always strongly negative. The lack of references to the pre-Soviet past is probably due to the fact that it does not offer examples of formalised cooperation among producers as individual entrepreneurs or peasant farmers. On the other hand, the mobilisation of the Soviet farm as a negative reference is understandable within the dominant discourse discussed in this section, where legitimacy is gained through the reference to Western experience and the devaluation of local (Soviet) experiences. At the same time, however, the repeated and emphasised mobilisation of the Soviet referent (even if in the negative) might also contribute to its persistence – and certainly contributes to its essentialisation – making it more real than it would be otherwise.

The discourses on cooperatives analysed in the present chapter are also projected into the future. They all promote some sorts of ideals: of cooperatives as “pure” service cooperatives, of development as the emergence of private small farming within a market economy free of “imperfections”, or of modernity as the establishment of large agri-business. These ideals can be considered “fantasies” in the Lacanian sense as interpreted by Byrne and Healy (2006; see also Healy 2010 and §4.3.1) because, in fact, they can never be realised in their fullness and, at the same time, they produce the conditions for which they cannot be realised. The different “lacks” which actors identify as the causes of cooperative failure, in fact, are scapegoats that are produced through the narrative of failure itself. In particular, the “confusion” and the “lack of understanding” lamented by development actors are (also) consequences of the latter’s discourse.

I am not arguing here for one or the other cooperative or development model (but I have drawn attention to the risks related to land concentration). My point is rather – following Healy and Byrne (2006) and Gibson-Graham (2006a, see also §2.1.3 and §4.3) – that the current discourses on and practices of the promotion of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan, by focusing their aspirations to a projected ideal future, foreclose the possibility to engage more openly with existing relations and practices of cooperation that are imperfect but at least exist in the here and now. For instance, they prevent scholars, development practitioners and farmers from engaging in more concrete reflections on how existing ex-Soviet production cooperatives like Oktjabr could transform their internal governance in a more democratic way or how farmers could expand the collective activities – related both to production and to services – of their existing cooperatives.

7 MAKING SENSE OF COOPERATIVE EXPERIENCES IN THE ISSYK-KUL REGION AND IN PJAK

To reach the region surrounding the lake Issyk-Kul (Fig. 2) from Bishkek, the traveller leaves the western bus station by bus or shared taxi and goes up the Chuy Valley following the river along the Kazakh border. After a relatively comfortable two-to-three-hour ride on the brand new, Chinese-sponsored route,¹ she reaches the pass that separates the Chuy province from the Issyk-Kul province and she enters the hydrographical basin of the Issyk-Kul lake, one of the world's largest. The first impression of the region is far from the idyllic postcards one can find in Bishkek, with the deep blue lake surrounded by green mountains with snow-capped peaks (Fig. 4). The traveller instead has to pass through the industrial ruins of Balykchy – the town at the western edge of the lake once well connected by rail to Bishkek. It is only a bit further on the shore of the lake that her gaze finally meets the astonishing blue of the lake and, if weather allows, reaches the white peaks embracing the lake (Fig. 5). This particular place moves me every time I travel from Bishkek, as I feel the grandiosity of the landscape opening my chest with a sense of belonging.

Traces of populations in the Issyk-Kul region date back to as early as the stone age. The first agricultural activities appeared around 1000 BC by groups of Scythian and Turkic origins (Benfield 1998: 56–8). Although the basin of the lake is surrounded by high mountains, passes connect it to what today corresponds to the Xinjiang autonomous region, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan's Naryn province, plus the already mentioned connection to the Chuy Valley. For almost 1500 years after the birth of Christ, the region was traversed by the routes connecting Eastern Asia and Europe known as the Silk Road. Until the nineteenth century the region was inhabited by various groups of different origins (from the Turks of South Siberia to the Kalmaks of West Mongolia) and with different types of livelihoods (from the Kyrgyz/Kazakh nomadic herders to the sedentary and Islamised Kalmaks). Settlements were mainly near the lake shores, yet not directly at the lake to avoid flooding – for instance in Karakol, Barskoon and Balykchy (Benfield 1998, 55–72; Levi 2007). With the discovery of new, especially naval, trade routes in the fifteenth century and the consequent diminished importance of the region as a connection between East and West, the population on the territory of today's Kyrgyzstan mainly stabilised: different groups lived in separated areas under the control of regional Khanates (Benfield 1998, 67–70; Levi 2012).

With the occupation of Central Asian territories by the Russian Empire in the second half of the nineteenth century, sedentarisation in what is today northern Kyrgyzstan accelerated (see Benfield 1998, 73–80; Brower 2003). First, a flow of Slavic peasants from Russia and Ukraine settled on the land most suited for agriculture: around the Issyk-Kul, particularly the alluvial lowland between Kyzyl-Suu (formerly Pokrovka), Karakol and Tyup and later the alluvial fans on the northern shore as well as the drier land in the west (Benfield 1998, 75). A second sedentarisation flow was started by the migrant

¹ The Chinese government sponsored the repair of the road connecting Bishkek to Balykchy in the early 2010s. Between 2016 and 2018 further work was done on the road between Balykchy and Karakol on the northern shore of the lake; previously, the two towns were connected only by partially unpaved and always bumpy roads on both the northern and southern shores.

Dungan (Chinese Muslim) population fleeing Chinese repression after their rebellion in 1877; these groups settled close to but separate from existing Slavic settlements (*id.* 78). Until the beginning of the twentieth century, Kyrgyz groups remained mainly nomadic, although they had established forms of winter settlements. With the outbreak of the First World War, the Russian Empire urged contributions to its warfare efforts (in the form of food and money) from all its provinces: this provided the impulse to the forced sedentarisation of Kyrgyz groups (*id.* 80).

After the October Revolution in 1917 and the establishment of Soviet rule over the territory of today's Kyrgyzstan, settlement structure and agricultural activities in the region of the Issyk-Kul did not change much initially, except for the establishment of a few small collective farms (*id.* 99). A more radical – and violent – process of collectivisation started only later, after Lenin's death in 1924 and with Stalin's accession to power (*id.* 99–102; Pianciola 2001; Loring 2008; 2014). As of 1935, private property and individual agriculture or animal husbandry were abolished and substituted with collective farms, while rural settlements were restructured to serve their new functions as centres of the new collective farms and to absorb the new wave of migrants from the rest of the Soviet Union. The industrial plants of Balychky and Karakol were established in response to the threat to industrial activities in western Soviet Union during the Second World War (Benfield 1998, 103; Florin 2016). After the War, the extensive expansion of agricultural activities to the mountainsides and in the remaining dry lands around the lake further transformed the landscape of the region; later, from the 1960s into the 1970s, smaller collective farms were merged into larger state farms to exploit economies of scale and advance mechanisation (Benfield 1998, 103–6).

Today, cultivation mostly concentrates in the humid planes on the eastern and north-eastern sides of the lake (Fig. 6 and 7, see KHMI et al. 2006), where the climate is milder and more humid than in the drier west and south-west. Grain crops occupy almost half of the arable surface of the province; forage crops and potatoes occupy the rest.² Since Soviet times, the northern shore of the lake and its resorts have attracted tourists from Bishkek and other urban regions of the FSU; more recently, a new category of tourists – backpackers from Western Europe – has been attracted by the region, especially by the trekking region around Karakol (Kantarci, Uysal, and Magnini 2014).

In the present chapter, I describe my journey in the Issyk-Kul region to meet cooperatives of different types and discuss the narratives of failure that emerged through my interactions with their members. After an exploration in the Issyk-Kul region (§7.1), I focus on Pjak, on the cooperative Ak-Bulut and, more marginally, on the cooperative Kara-Jer. I first describe and discuss how members of both cooperatives introduced their cooperative to me (§7.2) and how, later, they admitted and explained the decline (or “failure”) of Ak-Bulut (§7.3). The chapter describes my failed attempt to find a functioning cooperative – and even to find a cooperative as a defined object *tout court*. The chapter therefore concludes (§7.4) by showing how villagers assemble meanings and practices around the concept of cooperative – a concept that is fluid and undetermined and that escapes my attempts to fix it in clear boundaries and categories.

² See <http://www.stat.kg/en/opendata/category/2371/> (accessed 24.09.2019).

7.1 Approaching cooperatives in the Issyk-Kul

7.1.1 Meeting Oktjabr

When I step out of the bus in Karakol for the first time, in August 2014, I stumble upon a talkative Peace Corps volunteer³ who brings me to the local American Corner⁴ in order to find some useful contacts for my research. As soon as I mention my interest in agriculture, the librarian immediately suggests that I visit the cooperative Oktjabr, the biggest farm in the province: Cheken is not far and a friend of hers lives there. I do so and stay there for three days, during which I meet Oktjabr's director Stanislav and some of its members.

In the early 1990s, the Soviet state farm Krasnyi Oktjabr (literally Red October) dropped the adjective and was transformed in the cooperative Oktjabr. The cooperative was able to maintain collective production and a good part of the farm's assets during the process of asset distribution (see Fig. 7). Also thanks to several foreign investments – including from development projects and private investors – the cooperative managed to acquire new assets, in particular some big, modern irrigation machines, of which Stanislav proudly shows me a picture. After the crisis of production in the early 1990s, Oktjabr could re-establish its reputation as a seed breeding farm in the Issyk-Kul region; besides its specialisation on potatoes and grain seeds, it is also active in fodder production and animal breeding.

Despite this success, the number of cooperative members is constantly decreasing. After Kyrgyzstan's independence, many ethnic Slavs left the country: regions like Cheken, Karakol, or the northern Issyk-Kul, which were widely inhabited by ethnic Slavs, suffered a significant decrease of their population (Bandey and Rather 2013). Several of the ex-workers of Krasnyi Oktjabr thus left the town; the ones who remained are aging and the cooperative has difficulties finding new members. Despite these difficulties, Stanislav and the other members I meet are hopeful for the future and express their pride in having been able to preserve the cooperative and to “stay together” despite the profound changes of the last three decades. Stanislav in particular emphasises that he and his colleagues are still in the cooperative not only for the economic gains it brings but also for their willingness and pleasure to work together.

I go back to Cheken in July 2015 to propose to Oktjabr's members to focus my research on their cooperative. I am hopeful because I believe that a collaboration with an external researcher could be useful for Oktjabr: for instance, I could investigate the reasons why young farmers are not interested in joining the cooperative and help rethink a strategy to acquire new members. In a meeting with Stanislav, I explain the plan for my research and my ideas for collaboration. A long discussion with Stanislav

³ The Peace Corps is a US governmental programme that enrolls young volunteers for missions abroad, usually targeting social and economic development activities. Volunteers should stay in the same assignment for two years and are encouraged to learn the local language and integrate in local communities. According to the official website, there are currently 88 volunteers in Kyrgyzstan, who mostly work as English teachers in villages (<https://www.peacecorps.gov/kyrgyz-republic/> accessed 25.09.2019). The figure of the Peace Corps *volontior* is well-known by residents of the province and certainly shapes the way villagers perceive me.

⁴ Similarly to the Peace Corps programme, the American Corner programme is part of the US “soft power” strategy worldwide (Quigley and Rieffel 2008). American Corners are public libraries whose purpose is to provide “comprehensive and up-to-date information about the United States, and thus promoting mutual understanding between the American and Kyrgyz people” (<https://kg.usembassy.gov/education-culture/american-corners/> accessed 25.09.2019).

follows, during which he constantly repeats the expression “*nemnogo ponyatno*” (“I didn’t understand everything” or “I understand very little”). Stanislav does not see the point of my research; he does not see the benefits either for me or for them. After two hours, he announces that in any case he cannot decide alone about my proposition: the management board should give the final answer. As one could expect after the discussion with Stanislav and his *nemnogo ponyatno*, the board’s answer is negative: its members do not see any benefit in the proposed collaboration, either.

7.1.2 Looking for other cooperatives

In the following days, my interpreter Elzada approaches the situation in what she calls “the Kyrgyz way”: she starts from the few contacts we have and makes phone calls nonstop asking for further contacts and information. Stanislav gave us the number of the CUK director, which helps us get the names of five cooperatives (ex-Soviet farms) in the Issyk-Kul and Chuy provinces but the phone number of only two of them. Our other contact is a friend of a friend of a friend of Elzada who works in a bank that had a special loan scheme for cooperatives: we add to our list some other cooperatives who took a credit from the bank. We also visit some local administration offices, where we find lists of cooperatives, yet mostly without a phone number or contact person. Out of the 30 phone numbers of cooperative members on our list, only few still work, probably because SIM-card turnover is very high in Kyrgyzstan. We collect mostly negative answers: our interlocutors explain that they are not linked to any cooperative; there is no cooperative in the village; the cooperative does not exist anymore or does not carry out any activities at the moment – often they add that, in any case, they do not have time for us to visit. One man invites us to visit him in his village, but when we arrive there are no traces of him nor of the cooperative: he does not reply to our phone calls, and nobody in the village can give us any useful information.

In the end, we can visit only three cooperatives in the province. The first cooperative, Nurdeen, specialised in animal breeding, has a similar story to Oktjabr: the cooperative was also created from a Soviet farm in the early 1990s, inheriting its workers and assets. The reaction of Nurdeen’s director is also similar to the one of Stanislav: he does not seem enthusiastic about my proposition and says that, in any case, it is the management board that should decide. Also in this case, the board’s decision is negative.

The second cooperative, Jemish, in Ak-Korgon, is of a different type: it was created in the wake of a development project in the 2000s. Residents of Ak-Korgon have specialised in the production of apricots, which make up most of their cash income. A group of about 30 villagers registered as Jemish in order to access a facilitated credit schemes for cooperatives promoted by GIZ. Its chairwoman is currently in contact with CUK for a prospected trial with a drop irrigation system. According to the woman, Jemish’s main aim is to unite apricot producers to achieve better marketing prices; however, when I visit the village in mid-July during the peak of apricot ripening, this seems not to work. The private traders who have come to Ak-Korgon with their lorries agree among them to offer a very low price for the apricots. They speak with a village leader, who agrees with the price also because, as rumours denounce, he will

receive a commission on each box of apricots the traders buy. Tension rises and several villagers gather around the leader's house, trying in vain to negotiate higher prices. For what I can observe in these days, Jemish members also suffer under the pressure from traders and have to agree, like everybody else, to the ridiculous prices offered by traders. Jemish's chairwoman does not explicitly refuse my proposition for collaboration, but she is not enthusiast either: she says it is up to me to decide and she does not mention any management board or member consultation.

The third cooperative is Ak-Bulut in Pjak: the cooperative is similar to Jemish in that it was created in 2005 with the support of a rural development project. As we will see in much more detail later, my first interactions with Kumbat, Ak-Bulut's chairman, give me the impression of an active and successful service cooperative – an impression disproven by my further observations in the village. Contrarily to all other directors or chairpersons, Kumbat and his family are very welcoming.

During my visits in Kyrgyzstan in the following years, I meet members of other cooperatives. In general, the stories I collect are very similar to the four examples presented above. Ex-Soviet farms have difficulties in maintaining their members. Younger cooperatives have difficulties in maintaining their activities and finding financial resources: often, after registering for a punctual material benefit, these cooperatives do not pursue collective activities and exist, therefore, only on paper (see Chapter 6). Even Kara-Jer, a cooperative established in 2016 with the strong support of CUK's director, who provided them contact with a Japanese firm interested in buying medical herbs from members, seems to have already stopped its activities in 2017, since the Japanese firm did not renew the trade agreement (see §7.2.3/4).

7.1.3 Discussion: failed cooperatives in the Issyk-Kul?

The results of this first overview of cooperatives in the Issyk-Kul region seem in fact to confirm the idea that experiments to promote cooperatives have mostly failed. First, the institutions (especially CUK and local administrations) that are supposed to promote cooperatives in the region cannot even provide a simple list of registered cooperatives and a contact number. Second, the activities of the cooperatives established through the support of development projects seem to strongly depend on this external support. Ak-Bulut, Jemish and Kara-Jer have been able to organise collective activities with the support of foreign or local agencies; however, they have not been able to continue such activities since these agencies stopped their support. Something similar probably happened to the several cooperatives whose contact persons told Elzada on the phone that their cooperative did not exist anymore. Third, the only cooperatives that seem to conduct collective activities are ex-Soviet farms that maintain collective production; however, also these cooperatives seem to suffer from shrinking membership, which also means a reduction of land pooled in the collective plots.

Finally, a suspicious attitude towards a foreign social scientist interested in local cooperatives seems very common, with the only exceptions of Ak-Bulut's chairman, one member of Kara-Jer and few members of other cooperatives. Needless to say, this fact cannot be taken alone as an indicator of the "failure" of

cooperatives: several other factors probably play a role in people's attitudes towards my research and my person. Certainly, the proposition of a stranger to spend several months in a village asking questions about one's business is something few would agree to accept without reservations. My proposition of collaboration also implied a certain investment of time for cooperative members to answer my questions, discuss my research and take care of a stranger in their village – an investment that probably many considered excessive or useless. Indeed, Stanislav's repeated *nemnogo ponyatno* suggest that members can hardly picture what benefits a collaboration with me could bring to them.

Whereas this suspicious attitude might in part be due to my limited persuasion skills or to the vagueness of my research ideas at that time, I suggest that it is also inscribed in a broader discourse that valorises a certain kind of knowledge (and therefore also some disciplines) over others. Oktjabr has already collaborated with foreign institutions, and Stanislav shows me several business cards of foreigners who have passed by his office in the last years: he explains that these were development workers looking for project partners, private businessmen looking for business partners, and also natural scientists interested in developing new sorts of locally adapted crops or in experimenting with animal breeding techniques. Stanislav explicitly expresses his astonishment in seeing a European researcher coming to Kyrgyzstan to *learn* how cooperatives work here; usually, he continues, foreign researchers come here to *teach* something, or at least to bring some material resources. Stanislav concludes that if my aim is to learn about cooperatives I should go back to Europe, especially to Germany: the Germans are indeed those who came to Kyrgyzstan to teach their long tradition with cooperatives.

We see here how Stanislav, in line with the developmentalist discourse emerged in Chapter 6, reproduces the separation between Europeans, who have the “right” knowledge about cooperatives, and Kyrgyzstanis, who lack this knowledge and should therefore learn it from Europeans. This hierarchisation also concerns academic disciplines and their objects: the technical agronomic expertise of natural sciences counts more than the knowledge produced by social sciences. At the same time, the material presented in this section reinforces the hypothesis, which emerged in Chapter 6, that the reticence of development actors to open their training sessions for cooperatives to my observation might be linked to their (conscious or unconscious) will to perform a certain kind of subjectivity in their relation to me. Cooperative members, similarly, might be unwilling to openly reveal their cooperative practices to me: they know well that these practices do not correspond to the ideal model propagated by development workers and, therefore, they also think that their practices do not correspond to what they imagine I (as a not clearly definable European researcher, development worker or *volontior*) expect.

7.2 Performing cooperatives in Pjak

My prolonged stay in Pjak allowed me to dig deeper into the processes discussed in the previous section. In particular, my observations in the village in 2015 suggest that villagers perform a specific idea, or ideal, of cooperation in our encounters: they attempt to present me with an image of a cooperative that

could correspond to what they assume is my own ideal of a cooperative, rather than explaining their own ideal of, or experience with, cooperatives to me.

7.2.1 Encountering the cooperative Ak-Bulut

Elzada finds Kumbat's phone number at the bank in Karakol (see above); when she calls him, he invites us to his house right away. Elzada and I jump in a taxi and go to Pjak. Over two hours, we sit with Kumbat in his living room. His wife, Dinara, sits with us serving tea, but also runs from the kitchen to the living room bringing more bread, more jam or some eggs, insisting repeatedly that we drink and eat more. Both are very friendly and hospitable. Kumbat and Dinara know Elzada already: they met a couple of times when Elzada was working as an interpreter for some development projects in the region; last time, she accompanied some representatives of an aid agency who wanted to visit Ak-Bulut's warehouse to evaluate whether the cooperative was suited to receive a loan for its renovation. Having lost any confidence in my ability to deal with locals after Oktjabr's refusal, I let Elzada lead the conversation. She quickly introduces me and my research, underlines my interest in agricultural cooperatives and explains what just happened with Oktjabr. Kumbat tells some quick information about Ak-Bulut and comments on Oktjabr's refusal, but Elzada avoids asking further questions on these topics. Kumbat and Dinara ask some general questions about Switzerland and about me; then start remembering with Elzada the time she visited the village while working for a development project. The conversation turns to funny anecdotes about the several expat workers who visited Pjak in the past. Before leaving, Dinara insists that we can come back whenever we want, that I can live in their house however long I need, and that I can even marry her youngest son.⁵

I come back to Pjak some days later and explain to Kumbat and Dinara that I need to collect some more information about Ak-Bulut before deciding where to settle down for the following months of fieldwork. During the three days I stay at their place, they show again their hospitality and warm welcome: Dinara cooks the potatoes they grow in their household plot and prepares delicious salads with the tomatoes from the greenhouse in their garden. We spend a lot of time eating, drinking tea, and chatting about Switzerland, expats in the village, their children and grandchildren and Kumbat's career as an agronomist.

Kumbat also organises moments to formally present the cooperative to me. First, after Dinara has cleaned up the table, we stay in the living room while Kumbat takes out bunches of papers, files and folders from the shelves. Looking confusedly for some more papers in further shelves, Kumbat comments, laughing, that this is Ak-Bulut's office. We spend the afternoon reading and commenting on the papers, which include Ak-Bulut's registration act, minutes of meetings, documentation of training sessions, but also a lot of random papers of other projects and institutions. Then, the next day, Kumbat organises a meeting

⁵ In Kyrgyzstan, it is common to offer one's own relative or friend (a daughter, cousin, brother, or others) as a spouse to young unmarried strangers (women or men, foreigners or locals) after a short interaction. This practice is usually a way to express appreciation for a person one has just met rather than a serious marriage proposal. As a practice that is revealing of a very normative approach to marriage, however, it can be disturbing.

with two men he presents as members of Ak-Bulut. One is about the same age of Kumbat (who was born in 1949); the other is younger and works in the local administration. Both men wear nice suits and the traditional Kyrgyz hats for special occasions. We speak shortly about Ak-Bulut, what happened with Oktjabr, general ideas of cooperation, my person and history. In the afternoon, we visit another member of Ak-Bulut in the nearby village, an old friend of Kumbat, with whom we have an informal chat in his garden. Finally, Kumbat shows us Ak-Bulut's warehouse: a big building dating back to the Soviet time.

As anticipated, the impression I have after the three days in Pjak is of a well-functioning service cooperative with eight branches in the five villages of the Kok-Bulak *ayil*. Kumbat is the chairman of the mantel structure of these branches, each consisting of five to ten households. It is only the mantel structure that was officially registered in 2005 as the Ak-Bulut cooperative, with about 20 members. The official organs are the board and the council (each composed of three persons) and the member assembly. The membership fee was initially set at 1000 soms (15 USD)/year, but later was increased to 4000 soms (58 USD)/year, as reported in the minutes of meetings. Members do not meet on a regular basis but rather whenever there is an issue to discuss; minutes are taken for every meeting, and a fee is applied for members who arrive late.

The following activities emerge from Kumbat's papers and explanations: the cooperative buys agricultural inputs such as oil, seeds and fertilizers in bulk, then resells them to members; it purchases and breeds new sorts of seeds (potatoes especially, but also wheat) and resells them to members and non-members; it organises training sessions about farming techniques; it owns a tractor, available for members and non-members (but cheaper for the former); it owns a warehouse, where members can store their potatoes. Through the cooperative, members have facilitated access to credit: they received loans to buy the tractor, renovate the warehouse and buy new seeds. Most of these activities were initiated by the development projects that were active in the village in the late 1990s and 2000s. Through the cooperative, these projects were able to introduce new seed varieties to the village, organise trials for new local varieties and provide further agricultural inputs or infrastructure to farmers. For instance, the glasshouse in Kumbat's garden was built by a development organisation for a trial with potato seeds. Kumbat and the other members underline that, since when the projects stopped their activities, Ak-Bulut reduced some of its activities, but continues most of them successfully. They also emphasise that the cooperative allows individual farmers to minimise costs by joining with others for some specific activities, while maintaining individual cultivation.

7.2.2 Performing Ak-Bulut: a double developmentalist narrative

The cooperative I described in the previous section corresponds well to the model of service cooperative promoted by development actors. After the two brief visits to Pjak, I decide to settle in the village to engage with Ak-Bulut for the rest of my fieldwork. I tell Kumbat that I would like to meet other members of the cooperative. Kumbat gives me a list of persons: in the next days, Elzada and I walk around Pjak and the nearby villages to meet these "members". The quotation marks are imperative here since, when I

ask them about their role in the cooperative, many of these persons deny to be members; others confirm that in the past they participated to some activities of Ak-Bulut but add that there have been no activities for several years; only one defines himself as current active member, while others, like Ulan, simply observe: “Of course I’m a member of Ak-Bulut! But only on paper... The cooperative exists only on paper, we don’t have collective activities” (Ulan, 28.07.2015).

As foreshadowed in the Introduction chapter of this dissertation, this first tour to meet Ak-Bulut’s “members” leaves me with a strong sense of frustration and disorientation: the cooperative presented by Kumbat a few days before seems not to exist; “members” affirm that now they conduct all their agricultural activities alone, and the cooperative seems to have no relevance – if it ever did – in their everyday. Ak-Bulut’s past activities were supported by some development projects, which organised training sessions and distributed agricultural inputs in the village through already existing groups of farmers that had emerged after the dismantlement of the local state farm. Some project workers suggested that Kumbat and his friends register as a formal cooperative to profit from facilitated loan schemes for cooperatives. When the project finished, however, most of Ak-Bulut’s activities stopped.

I realise that what I saw in my first brief visits in Pjak was a *performance*, by Kumbat and the other members, of a specific idea of cooperative in the specific situation of their encounter with me. In order to understand this performance, it is important to consider first of all the positionality of the “actors” who take part to it, including especially Elzada and me. Elzada already knew Kumbat and Dinara from having worked as an interpreter for foreign aid agencies. Kumbat and Dinara have long experience in welcoming expat workers in their house. More in general, the foreigners who end up in Pjak or in other villages in the region (like the ones who ended up in Stanislav’s office) have usually a specific profile: whoever passes by and asks about agricultural activities and livelihoods is either a development worker looking for a suitable context to start some project or a tradesman looking for business or investment opportunities; more rarely, some *volontior* (e.g. Peace Corps volunteer) settles down in a village to teach English in the local school. Given this background, although Elzada insists that I am not linked to any institutions other than my university and that I am not here to start a project or a business, villagers probably make at least an unconscious link between me and their image of expat workers. Indeed, during these first days, Kumbat and the other members point time and again to specific material needs of their cooperative: for instance, it would need funding to organise further training sessions or money to renovate the half of the warehouse that could not be renovated with the previous loan. While noting these “wishes”, they also underline that, today, nobody supports them as farmers and as a cooperative.

Kumbat is familiar with expat workers and their idea of cooperatives: when meeting me, maybe following a conscious strategy or, more probably, an unconscious habit, he tries to offer me (or perform for me) an image of his cooperative that he knows I will like. This performance includes the formality of the meeting with the two members, both dressed up with suits and hats, or the display of official documents with seals and signatures, minutes of meetings and colourful flyers. The performance also includes two specific narratives. The first narrative emerges in relation to Oktjabr. Kumbat seems to know that Oktjabr is not what expat workers consider a “true” cooperative; in addition, Elzada tells him about our negative

experience with Oktjabr. Kumbat and the other members comment that Oktjabr's refusal of my proposition is a sign of its shady practices and corrupt management, which steals land from the old people who are not able to cultivate it or who moved back to Russia. While pointing to the problems of Oktjabr, they underline that Ak-Bulut is different, better: Oktjabr members cultivate the land together, whereas Ak-Bulut's members cultivate their land individually; Oktjabr's management is top-down, whereas Ak-Bulut is managed democratically; Oktjabr's leaders keep its profit for themselves, whereas Ak-Bulut's members keep their own profit from their individual land cultivation. Kumbat sums all this up, stating that Oktjabr tries to keep the old Soviet system, whereas Ak-Bulut has successfully adapted to capitalism. As I mentioned in Chapter 6 and above, in other occasions people in the region (and also Kumbat and the members I meet in these first days) mention Oktjabr as an example of a successful farming enterprise. My suspicion is therefore that in our first meetings, Kumbat and the other members insist on marking a distinction between Ak-Bulut and Oktjabr in the same way as development workers in Chapter 6 exaggerated the distinction between "modern" and "old" cooperatives – as a way to produce a clear divide between "right" and "wrong" knowledge and to legitimise themselves as possessing the "right" one.

The second narrative emerges in relation to my being Swiss. It must be noted that several of the expat workers who visited the village in the past years worked for a Swiss agency: in fact, Ak-Bulut was registered as cooperative in the framework of a Swiss-funded development programme. Kumbat therefore notes:

It was Peter Schmidt⁶ who explained us what it means to be in a cooperative. The several times he came in the village, giving training sessions and drinking tea with us, he explained us that being in a cooperative means that you produce privately but then buy together seeds and oil and you can also have for instance a camion in common, or a tractor. (Kumbat, 14.07.2015)

In this quotation, we see the developmentalist discourse perfectly reproduced: the European expat *knows* about cooperatives and comes to the village to *explain* and *teach* the true meaning of cooperatives (i.e. the specific model of Western service cooperatives). More in general, in the mentioned meeting, Kumbat and the other two members underline that "the Swiss"⁷ played an important role in supporting farmers in the difficult time of the 1990s and 2000s. They ask several questions about agricultural production and organisation in Switzerland; their questions reveal their idea that in Switzerland everything works well and depict Switzerland as a model for agricultural development. The idea that Switzerland is a model for Kyrgyzstan, or that Kyrgyzstan is a "second" Switzerland that one day will reach the "first" Switzerland in terms of development (as expressed literally by a former president of Kyrgyzstan), recurs throughout my conversations in Pjak and in the whole country during my visits.

⁶ Peter Schmidt (original name) was a development worker of the mentioned Swiss programme (see Schmidt 2012). Kumbat and Dinara often mention his name in our chats. I have the impression, however, that they use his name – a common German name that is very easy to remember – to refer in general to any expat worker who visited the village.

⁷ Again, "the Swiss" is probably a synecdoche to refer to expat workers more generally. In their narration, villagers tend to mix up different projects and expat workers: when speaking with me (a Swiss), they probably emphasise the role of the Swiss as a way to honour and please their interlocutor.

In the “performance” of Kumbat and the other members during our first encounters in Pjak, they thus not only reproduce the separation between the “modern” cooperative ideal as the only “true” one and the “old” Soviet model as a “wrong” one. They also reproduce the specific developmentalist hierarchy of knowledge. In this sense, especially Kumbat acts as a “development broker” who is able to navigate different representations and to translate the meaning of a project (or an ideal of cooperative) into different languages (Mosse 2004, 647; see also Bierschenk, Chauveau, and Olivier de Sardan 2002; Olivier de Sardan 2005). In his encounter with me, Kumbat is able to speak the language he imagines I am more at ease with and to reproduce the representations about cooperatives and development that he imagines I am expecting to find. Although I am not a development worker and do not have the same representations, nor interests, that a development worker would have in the same context, Kumbat’s performance in the end is successful: I decide to settle down in Pjak because I think that Ak-Bulut is a successful cooperative.

7.2.3 Encountering the cooperative Kara-Jer

Aisha, a woman in her forties, is the only member of the cooperative Kara-Jer in Pjak. I meet her by chance in 2015 while looking for Nurbek, whom Kumbat indicated to me was member of Ak-Bulut. Instead of Nurbek, I find Aisha sitting with his wife in the kitchen, who invites me to have tea. Aisha is very talkative and monopolises the conversation, asking questions about Switzerland and my research and telling stories about the village and her engagement in different groups and projects. The next year, as I visit Mirislam for a session of oral history, I meet Aisha again, sitting in the kitchen chatting with Mirislam’s daughter-in-law. We have tea together and Aisha, again, monopolises the conversation. This time she asks a lot of questions about cooperatives in Switzerland. She explains that she is part of a group of farmers from different villages of the Issyk-Kul region and that this group is thinking about establishing a new cooperative, which they will call Kara-Jer. They had already some meetings with Sezim, the CUK director, who explained the advantages of joining a cooperative to them. Aisha summarises the advantages of cooperatives as Sezim explained them to her:

Sezim explained these advantages. Usually farmers sell their produce by themselves, there is a variation in price. For example, last year it was 90 soms [1.3 USD] for potatoes, now only 5 [0.07 USD]! But with the cooperative you can have a fix price. [...] Also, with the cooperative we could have access to cheaper machines, for example for ploughing. You can have access to cheaper loans with a lower interest rate at the bank. (Aisha, 15.04.2016)

As a further advantage of joining the Kara-Jer cooperative, Sezim mentioned that a Japanese company is interested in investing in the construction of a starch plant in the region: members of the future cooperative could sell their potatoes to the plant, which would be managed by the Japanese company but would offer job opportunities to the local population. Despite these advantages, Aisha is not convinced about the necessity to join a cooperative. She wonders:

I don’t see any advantage in being a cooperative. For example there is the ADK [*Aiyldyk Den sooluk Komitet*: Village Health Committee], which gives advice for free. There is a

committee and its members explain for free, for example, how to treat sicknesses of animals, and so on. Why should we be in a cooperative where we have to pay and where it's not clear where the money goes, like in Ak-Bulut, if there are other groups that do things for free? (Aisha, 15.04.2016)

ADKs are local groups of volunteers who conduct health-related activities such as prevention campaigns or hygiene advice. They usually receive financial support from the local administration, foreign donors or private companies. If the aim of a cooperative is to give advice to farmers, she does not understand why farmers should pay for this advice when other organisations such as ADK are giving advice for free.

Some months later Aisha decides to join Kara-Jer, which is officially registered as a cooperative in June 2016, counting at that moment around 150 members in the whole Issyk-Kul province. Aisha is now enthusiast about the cooperative and was able to convince her husband to pay the annual membership fee of 10,000 soms (146 USD).⁸ I ask her what made her change her mind; she explains that it is because of the possibility to sell easily her produce. With the same group of farmers that now is registered as Kara-Jer, last year she could sell the valerian plants she grows in her garden for 60,000 soms (876 USD): they had stipulated an agreement with the same Japanese buyer who is now interested in buying more medical plants through the cooperative. Aisha concludes that 10,000 soms are not much if paying the membership fee means being able to stipulate further contracts with buyers like that one.

Batma is Kara-Jer's chairwoman. She is an ethnic Kyrgyz in her fifties from a nearby village and has a long experience as a development worker in the country. She explains the reasons for establishing the cooperative:

With the cooperative we investigate the demand in the market, the market needs and the needs of customers. Then we tell the producers what is needed in the market, the price and amount, and we market the things together. The common use here is the opposite: first you produce and then you look for customers. But sometimes you won't find customers and won't be able to sell. Or you sell through several intermediaries, but this is not profitable. [...] With the cooperative we want to show a new model. The customers define the price and the volume, then you plant. But now people are blindly planting things, without considering the needs of the customers. (Batma, 30.07.2016)

Batma also underlines that her main role as chairwoman is to look for partners and stipulate trade agreements to secure the purchase of members' produce. Like Aisha, Batma thus focuses in particular on the possibility for farmers to adapt their production to the demand of the market, thereby increasing the gains they can extract from the marketing of their products and at the same time reducing their dependency on volatile market prices and demand. For Batma, this is a structural change in the way agricultural production is organised: she underlines repeatedly that promoting this change is what motivates her to engage in the Kara-Jer project.

⁸ This is a considerable amount: an average pension in the village amounts to about 5,000 KGS (73 USD)/month and the average salary countrywide is about 15,000 KGS (219 USD)/month.

7.2.4 Performing Kara-Jer: defining the “true” cooperative

When speaking of Kara-Jer, Aisha and Batma focus on the collective marketing of products cultivated individually by members. They both also emphasise that a cooperative should emerge from the will of its members, not be imposed from above. They explicitly compare the new cooperative, Kara-Jer, with other cooperatives they know in the region, especially with Ak-Bulut. They define Kara-Jer in opposition to Ak-Bulut, thereby building a dichotomy between the “true” cooperative Kara-Jer and the “fictive” or “failed” cooperatives Ak-Bulut. First, Aisha criticises the lack of transparency about Ak-Bulut’s accounts. Nobody knows where the money generated through the warehouse and the tractor goes: Aisha suspects that Kumbat’s family is enriching itself with these businesses. She insists that this will be different for Kara-Jer: the accounts will be transparent and members will discuss how to handle the revenues. Second, both Aisha and Batma point to Ak-Bulut’s top-down and centralised management. Aisha even suggests that the cooperative has fallen apart because Kumbat had too much power and started giving orders to the other members, who then left the cooperative because they did not want to take orders from him. Kara-Jer, on the contrary, they underline, will be managed democratically by its members. Third, more generally, Batma, criticises what she calls “family cooperatives” (in which she includes Ak-Bulut), implying those cooperatives that are created by some members of the same family just to get access to grants and credit.

For Batma, a true cooperative is based on “people’s will”, not on the will of one person like Kumbat. Kara-Jer is different, she insists:

Kara-Jer was really formed from the will of people. These are people who are active, who go to the training sessions and the gatherings. These people are willing to work together, they are ready to work together. These people are now part of the cooperative. [...] For these people now it makes sense to work together. There is a change in awareness. They understand that it is important to go to the gatherings and that if they don’t participate there will be a fine.⁹ I think this change in awareness is the greatest achievement of my work. People are now reaching the level of understanding that allows them to work together!
(Batma, 30.07.2016)

Batma reproduces the narrative of the “lack of understanding” to explain the failure of cooperatives – a failure in the sense that most of the registered cooperatives are not “true” ones. She defines her own cooperative in opposition to this and as the result of a “change in awareness” that is, in turn, the result of her hard work as a development worker. She insists on the neat demarcation between the “true” cooperatives that emerge from the will of “active people” and the “fictive” cooperatives that are registered by one person just to have access to some resources. Both Ak-Bulut’s members and Kara-Jer’s members, therefore, reproduce the divide between “right” and “wrong” cooperatives, presenting their own cooperative in opposition to negative examples of “fictive” cooperatives.

⁹ The fact that members are fined if they do not participate to meeting makes me wonder if their participation is as spontaneous and voluntary as Batma affirms.

7.2.5 Discussion: “Don’t write this in your thesis”: performing development

Although I become good friend of Aisha, and despite my insistence, I will never be invited to Kara-Jer’s meetings and I will never be able to observe the cooperative in the making. It seems as if nobody involved in a cooperative was willing to open it up to my direct observation. It is important to insist that I am not suggesting that Kumbat or other persons “lie” to me when they perform a particular kind of cooperative, or that they “betray” me and pursue their hidden interests. Rather, I suggest that they probably try to please me as their interlocutor (whom they associate with an expat development worker) and at the same time to embellish themselves by presenting something they think will correspond to my own ideal of cooperative. I also suggest that this performance is not necessarily conscious, but rather an automatism, a habit developed through several similar situations – of encounters with expat workers who transmitted a specific idea of cooperative.

My reading here is further strengthened by another recurrent practice during my whole stay in Pjak and in Kyrgyzstan more generally. Sometimes, when telling me about some behaviour they seem to judge as shameful, my interlocutors add: “Don’t write this in your thesis!”¹⁰ This concerns, for instance, tales about drunkenness, bribery, or quarrels between family members. In parallel to this, some villagers insist on what I *should absolutely* write in my thesis, especially activities or habits of which they are particularly proud, for instance Kyrgyz hospitality, Kyrgyz traditions, the beauty of the landscape or the taste of local food. For instance, whenever I visit Aisha, she usually prepares a table full of bread, jams, candies, honey and meat and often observes that, in this way, she wants to show me the hospitality of Kyrgyz people so that I will write “only good things” about them in my thesis. Once, I share with her my puzzlement after having collected several positive accounts of water management in the village, which contrast with a few very negative accounts that revealed major conflicts and discriminations. Aisha’s comment explicitly confirms my reading above:

People don’t want to tell you negative things. They don’t want to give you a negative image of the country. There was once a project that did a survey in the village and found out that things here weren’t working so well. So they decided to do the project somewhere else because here things weren’t working well enough. So, in general people prefer to tell strangers that everything is fine! (Aisha, 31.08.2017)

Although they do not express this explicitly, it is therefore very probable that, when villagers tell me about the activities of Ak-Bulut or other cooperatives, they select for their narrations events and activities that they perceive as “good” and “honourable”, while avoiding mention of issues of which they are less proud. In this sense, I argue that the performance of Ak-Bulut (or Kara-Jer) as a successful cooperative is a way of villagers, and especially of Kumbat, to convey an image of their activities that I will judge as positive and honourable: the image of a “modern” cooperative that corresponds to the ideal they have learned from expat workers. This is a way to perform a status as developed in two senses: economically (the activities are successful) and culturally (they have learned the meaning of cooperative/development).

¹⁰ Some other times, they tell these stories to my interpreter in Kyrgyz, asking her not to translate them to me. I cannot say how many of these stories were then actually translated to me and how many were not.

7.3 Explaining the decline of Ak-Bulut

In my discussions with villagers¹¹ in Pjak, many praise the past activities of Ak-Bulut and underline its contribution in supporting their individual agricultural activities. Often, also, they remember how Ak-Bulut was well known not only in the village, but also in the district and in the province. Why, then, have its activities declined? Why do villagers not try to revive these activities, if they consider them so beneficial? More generally, if they consider cooperatives important for supporting their activities, why there are no active cooperatives in the village? This section presents the answers villagers gave me when directly asked. My main aim here is not to understand *why* Ak-Bulut's activities declined, but rather, how villagers explain this decline. I focus specifically on the decline of Ak-Bulut's activities as explained both by villagers involved in these activities and also by others who were not. It is important to note that, as explained above, despite the initial enthusiasm of its members, Kara-Jer stopped most of its activities one year after its establishment since the Japanese enterprise did not renew the trade agreement with the cooperative. In summer 2017, Batma laments that, although she is running all the time to find buyers for the cooperative, her quests are fruitless. In the meantime, understandably, several members refused to pay the expensive membership fee.

Ak-Bulut was mainly active in the second half of the 2000s. At that time, it mainly served as a reference point for development projects active in the region, which used the structure of the cooperative to channel and distribute resources to farmers. These resources consisted in particular of seed, other agricultural inputs (fertilizers, pesticides, oil) and knowledge about cultivation techniques. At the same time, thanks to the material support and technical advice of projects, the cooperative¹² was also able to conduct seed breeding activities: it imported new seed material, reproduced it and sold the new seeds in the village and in the province. These activities were mainly managed by Kumbat first and later by his son Tuman (an agronomist like his father) and relied on the support of development agencies. When asked about the decline of Ak-Bulut's activities, villagers explain that when the external support by these agencies stopped, the cooperative was not able to continue its activities as before. Also, meanwhile Kumbat (born in 1949) became a *pensionier*, as he describes himself: he turned 60 in the late 2000s and suffered of several health issues which have limited its mobility (since an operation in 2015, he cannot ride his horse nor drive a car). Tuman took over several of his father's activities in their private plots, in the household as well as in the cooperative. However, after a big investment gone wrong, in 2014 Tuman decided to leave with his wife for Russia, where he hopes to collect enough money to pay back the huge debt he contracted.¹³

¹¹ Sections 7.3 and 7.4 are mainly based on conversations conducted in 2015 with villagers whom Kumbat indicated as members of Ak-Bulut. Since the concept of "member" is very fuzzy, I prefer to speak of "villagers" instead of "members".

¹² For the moment, I refer to "the cooperative" as an entity with unity and agency; I will problematise this later (§7.4).

¹³ I never met Tuman, although every year Kumbat and his wife repeated that "next spring he will come back!" In 2018, he finally extinguished his debt and came back to Pjak – only to leave few months later for Kazakhstan, where salaries are higher. Tuman's unlucky investment consisted of sowing potatoes in a big plot of un-irrigated land. He lost his money because of a particularly dry and hot summer. Tuman's story also exemplifies the dramatic consequences of the extremely high interest rates in the credit sector and of the lack of any insurance mechanism (see also Chapter 9).

The reasons for the decline of Ak-Bulut's activities seem thus to rely quite banally on external and very material factors: the end of project support, the decline of Kumbat's health and the onset of Tuman's debt. This reveals Ak-Bulut's dependence on external resources and on individual persons, which limited its sustainability in the long term. This seems to confirm what was already discussed in Chapter 6 about donors' focus on establishing new cooperatives and their neglect of their long-term sustainability. However, when discussing the story of Ak-Bulut with villagers, and the possibility to join/create a cooperative more generally, other explanations emerge.

7.3.1 Lack of support by the state

Villagers very often complain that the state does not support them. Statements such as “the government doesn't do anything”, or “the government doesn't support us” are recurrent when speaking with people in the whole country. In particular, farmers expect the government to facilitate access to credit for them; to provide access to agricultural inputs, agricultural machines (including repairs) and information (for instance about market prices); and to directly purchase their produce or stipulate international trading agreements to facilitate its export. Farmers formulate these complaints and expectations in general when referring to the agricultural sector but also specifically when asked about cooperatives; however, they rarely formulate specific expectations about how the government should support cooperatives. They usually vaguely state that the government should “show farmers the advantages of working together” by supporting cooperatives: only in this way farmers would finally understand the importance of working together and join a cooperative.

Villagers see the inactivity of the government as caused by its lacking political will and interest for their everyday material struggles but also by its corruption. They often complain that the government is only good at collecting taxes, whose revenues are then diverted into the pocket of ministries and civil servants. Sometimes, they make a distinction between the central and the local government: they perceive the central government to be very far from the village, composed of elites who sit in the “White House” in Bishkek and do not care about village life. Although villagers complain about the taxes they have to pay to the local government, they also sometimes recognise that the local government itself has been “abandoned” by the central government in that it does not receive the necessary budget that would allow it to be more active. In these complaints, villagers often refer back to the role of the state in Soviet time: they compare the inactivity of the contemporary government with the Soviet state, which “provided everything” – education, health, employment, and agricultural inputs.

Nazira (born in 1958) is the director of the kindergarten in Pjak and Kumbat's neighbour. Every time I meet her in the street, she explains how busy she is: the kindergarten commission is visiting and she is preparing *borsoki* to welcome them; she has a meeting in Karakol with a foreign organisation that supports schools in Kyrgyzstan; she is going to the *aiyl okmotu* to ask for money for the annual *remont* of the kindergarten building. In short, Nazira seems to be always busy looking for funds to guarantee the basic functions of the kindergarten: it is not about extra expenses, she explains, it is about the coal to heat

the classrooms in winter, or about the meals children are supposed to receive in the kindergarten. Nazira often compares the current situation to Soviet times when, according to her memories, everything was provided to schools and kindergartens; now, instead, she even has to run around to find money even for the cleaning products for toilets.

According to Nazira, her husband was active member of Ak-Bulut until he died several years ago. Since then, Nazira has not been active in the cooperative, but she still thinks that cooperatives are very important for farmers. However, she notes, Ak-Bulut has failed because the government did not support it: “the lack of support by the government made people passive; they are not motivated to engage in the cooperative anymore” (Nazira, 18.08.2015). Nazira praises Tuman for sharing his knowledge with villagers and helping them with their agricultural activities through the cooperative. However, she laments:

If we would have at least some attention from the government! At least a gratitude letter! [...] Tuman would be cheered up. Probably it is because of this that he lost his interest [in the cooperative]: there was not even gratitude from the government. (Nazira 18.08.2015)

For Nazira, thus, the problem is not only the lack of material support to cooperatives from the government, but also the lack of recognition for the deeds of people who engage for the cooperative or in the community. She remembers with nostalgia the Soviet state, which not only provided material support to farms (and kindergartens), but also rewarded the effort of workers with medals and certificates.

7.3.2 Lack of understanding among farmers

Kumbat identifies another reason for the lack of success of cooperatives in general and of Ak-Bulut in particular. During one of our chats, he starts drawing on a piece of paper and making calculations of how much land gets lost through the land plot fragmentation. His conclusion is that, on a plot of fifty hectares, at least five hectares are lost to borders between the small plots, additional irrigation channels, streets for cars and walking paths. Moreover, it is more efficient to work on bigger plots with tractors than on smaller plots, which require more time and oil. Bigger plots also allow a proper rotation of crops, which helps in maintaining soil quality. Although Kumbat finds that the benefits of joining agricultural activities – in the sense of joining agricultural production on larger plots – are evident, he repeatedly states that “people don’t understand the value of working together”.

Kumbat has also an explanation for this “lack of understanding” among his fellow villagers. He traces back the reason to the organisation of Soviet agriculture, where the production process was fragmented and each worker was responsible – and thus aware – of only a small part of the production process. Only few people on the Soviet farms, including Kumbat as the chief agronomist, had the overview over the entire process and were aware of its complexity and specificities. Simple farm workers were not aware, for instance, of the importance of crop rotation. When they later received individual plots, they started cultivating them without a specific knowledge of the cultivation process and thus without understanding the benefits of a joint production on larger plots.

For Kumbat, the fragmented knowledge over the production process in Soviet farms also produced a fragmented sense of responsibility among workers over the collective property of the farm. This was evident when Soviet farms were about to be dismantled and farmers could use their machines on their individual plots. At that time, Kumbat remembers, “people were using the machines of the *kolkhoz* without caring, without paying; they just used the machines and left” (Kumbat, 04.09.2015). Kumbat laments that this attitude has remained among villagers and brings the example of Ak-Bulut’s tractor as evidence of this. The cooperative bought a tractor, facilitated by a leasing scheme for cooperatives. The initial idea was to manage it collectively among the members. However, conflicts soon emerged about the prioritisation of use among individual members and about the responsibility for maintenance and lease payment. Members thus decided to “privatise” the tractor: Nurbek took over the responsibility for maintenance and for the leasing payment; since then he uses the tractor privately, selling its services to Ak-Bulut’s members as well as to other villagers.

Kumbat concludes that, given the situation and “mentality”, private responsibility is better and more efficient than shared responsibility in this specific context. But this is not the optimal solution, which, for him, is the collectivisation of the agricultural process, especially of production. When expressing these ideas, Kumbat does not hide his frustration for his fellow villagers’ lack of interest – and understanding – about cooperatives. He was used to discuss this frustration with expat workers, who comforted him by noting that changes in mentality cannot happen from one day to the next. In Switzerland, Kumbat adds, people have been working in cooperatives for 200 years. “Maybe Kyrgyzstan will become like Switzerland one day and people will be able to work together”, he concludes (Kumbat, 04.09.2015).

Batma and Aisha also give similar judgement to farmers’ competence and understanding. In their case, however, their complaint about the lack of understanding among farmers is directed not to their own “colleagues” at Kara-Jer, but to the members of other cooperatives (in particular Ak-Bulut) and to farmers more generally. In the quotation above, Batma laments the common habit of farmers to produce “blindly” without looking in advance for buyers; she underlines how she sees her task as a development worker and cooperative chairwoman to make farmers’ practices more “modern” and better. When comparing Kara-Jer with Ak-Bulut, Batma and Aisha also imply that Ak-Bulut’s members, and Kumbat in particular, have not understood the “true” meaning of a cooperative.

7.3.3 “Kyrgyz mentality”: laziness and passivity

Nazira’s complaints about farmer passivity above suggests that this is the other widespread explanation for the limited success of cooperatives. Villagers blame a “Kyrgyz mentality” that renders farmers passive, lazy and risk-averse. For instance, Nurbek complains:

I am in the cooperative. But the problem is that other people of the cooperative are passive, they are only watchers. They have doubts about the cooperative, so they just watch. This is our mentality in Kyrgyzstan. Outsiders only watch the situation passively, they watch the evolution and think: ‘If the evolution is ok, then I’m with you; if the evolution isn’t ok, then I’m out’. (Nurbek, 02.08.2015)

When blaming this mentality, usually villagers do not speak of themselves but of their fellow villagers, like Nurbek in the quotation. Sometimes, however, they also include themselves as influenced by the “Kyrgyz mentality”. For instance, Nazira, while praising Tuman for his engagement in the cooperative, laments with a sense of fatalism that herself, like the other villagers, is not able to be as active as Tuman: the “Kyrgyz mentality” here seems rather a justification for the status quo and for her inactivity. In other cases, villagers lament the lack of leaders who are able to mobilise them in collective activities. Adis, for instance, notes:

Adis: After the land reform, all were focused on the private, but now we start understanding the profit of being together [pooling land to cultivate together].

Ottavia: Do you have some plan to come together with other people, to organise together?

Adis: For the moment there is no strong person who can lead and gather people, who could serve as a gathering person. There is no person who can bring together people and explain to us how to be together. (Adis, 01.08.2015)

In this case too, Adis externalises the responsibility for the lack of collective activities, for which he thinks a “strong person” is needed, a person who can guide and “explain” how to organise in a collective. Similarly to Kumbat, Adis and other villagers hope that one day “Kyrgyzstan will be like Switzerland”, i.e. that farmers can work together in cooperatives. However, like Kumbat, they lament that more time is needed to change the “mentality” that currently prevents them to realise this hope. For Batma, this change in “mentality” (or “awareness”, as expressed in her quotation above) has already happened for some (few) farmers, also thanks to her own engagement in explaining another, better and more modern, way of organising agricultural activities. Batma also implicitly suggests that the persisting old mentality (implying laziness and passivity) limits in general the opportunities of farmers and in particular the success of cooperatives.

7.3.4 Establishment of markets and loss of solidarity

When villagers speak about the decline of Ak-Bulut, they also refer to the gradual establishment of markets in the village, which have rendered cooperative activities partially superfluous. Baktigul (born in 1954) comments on the evolution of collective activities in the village and on the history of Ak-Bulut:

When the cooperative started in 2007¹⁴ people were poor, they were looking for support and they were open to everything to receive support. It was difficult to have seeds, oil, fertilisers, everything. Many people didn't cultivate their land because of the lack of these inputs. Therefore people were really open to start a cooperative. With the cooperative it was easier to get the needed inputs: we could buy them together and have cheaper prices. With a juridical face it is also easier to get credits. And now? I don't know what happened... maybe everybody has become wealthy? There is no interest in organising in the community

¹⁴ Note that the cooperative officially registered two years earlier in 2005; however, as we will see later, the same group of farmers was already involved in the activities of at least two rural development projects since the late 1990s. Note also that the highest point of production crisis in the village (when it was most difficult for farmers to find agricultural inputs) was earlier than 2007. However, what is more important than the exact date for Baktigul here is the reference to a remembered past when villagers were in a precarious economic situation but supported each other by joining in collective activities.

anymore. People prefer to work privately than in group. Before people didn't have the cash. Now everyone has cash in his pocket. [...] People before had no seeds, now they buy what they need. [...] Before there was poverty and the tendency was to get together. Now there is wealth and we are pulled apart. (Baktigul, 29.08.2015)

We can read Baktigul's statement as the account of a gradual process of marketisation of economic activities in the village. After the crisis in the 1990s and early 2000s, villagers adapted to the new structural conditions and transformed into relatively wealthy peasant farmers managing their private agricultural activities individually and without the support of the cooperative. This account seems to confirm the idea of some agricultural economists (e.g. Deininger 1995, see §2.1.2) that agricultural cooperatives can be used as a tool to support farmers in the "transition" from a planned economy to a market economy – a tool that becomes superfluous once a "fully functioning" market system has been established. Indeed, other villagers besides Baktigul suggest that the establishment of markets is one of the reasons for the decline of Ak-Bulut's activities. Adis for instance explains:

When Ak-Bulut started ten years ago there were no other people breeding seeds and providing new sorts. Since then many private producers saw that it was profitable to deal with seeds and new sorts, they saw that there was some profit. Nowadays there are more than 100 small entrepreneurs who deal with seeds. [...] This is the natural law of competition. There are many competitors and only the strongest stay. And Ak-Bulut is not one of the strongest. [...] Business is business. [...] You must organise correctly, organise the accounts, you need economists, agronomists, et cetera, to run the business. (Adis 27.08.2015).

Here, Adis suggests that Ak-Bulut could be successful as a seed breeding company in a context without competition; however, when competition increased with the expansion of markets, it failed to adapt to the new context – lacking entrepreneurial business skills – and thus suffered under the "natural law of competition". Daniar and Sultanbek, two well-off farmers, confirm this idea when they note that Ak-Bulut and other similar cooperatives are destined to disappear since farmers gradually understand that it is better to produce on their own and, thanks to the expansion of markets, can find the necessary inputs outside the cooperatives.

7.3.5 Discussion: "pseudo-cooperatives" and their affects

An example of failed cooperative?

If observed through the lenses of the institutionalist approaches discussed in Chapter 2 (§2.1.2 and §2.2.1), Ak-Bulut can be easily interpreted to be a typical "pseudo-cooperative". Its failure in this sense is quite banal and can be easily explained with its non-compliance with Ostrom's (2000) principles of cooperation. First of all, the boundaries of the group are not clearly defined: it is not clear who are its members and, even the ones who are officially registered in its documentation state that they have little or no connection to the cooperative (see also §7.4.1). Second, there are no clear rules in place that define the roles and responsibilities of members, financial participation in the cooperative or share of revenues.

Third, there is no clear definition of democratic governance processes in the management of the cooperative. Finally, since membership is loose and responsibilities of members are not defined, there are also no monitoring of activities, no sanction mechanisms and no formal mechanisms to solve disputes and conflicts.

Ak-Bulut's failure parallels the examples of other cooperation initiatives in Kyrgyzstan and in other ex-socialist countries in CEE and the FSU, whose success, according to several scholars, has been limited by "an inherited behaviour promoting a pseudo-implementation of rules and organizations" (Theesfeld 2019, 354, see §2.2.1 and §6.1). Other factors hampering cooperation seem to resonate with what has been observed by institutionalist scholars in the mentioned contexts (e.g. Theesfeld 2019). In particular, we see a discrepancy between formal structures (existing only on paper) and informal behaviour. Also, a deterioration of social capital (expressed in villagers' narrative as the loss of solidarity), as noted for instance by Theesfeld (2019), Kaminska (2010) or Gerkey (2013), seems also to be at the basis of villagers' decreasing interest in collective activities. Furthermore, there seems to be among farmers a longing for a form of agricultural organisation that reminds the governance of the Soviet farm, where (according to villagers' memories) a centralised management took care of production and marketing, but also of workers. It seems also probable that these expectations, projected onto the cooperative, limit farmers' active engagement in its activities, thereby increasing their and the cooperative's dependence on external support or individual leaders.

In order to increase the effectiveness of cooperation initiatives, institutionalist scholars suggest to pay more attention to their adaptation to the specific local context and to provide more information about the formal structures proposed (see §2.2.1 and §6.1.2). Concerning the second point, there is certainly confusion among villagers about the cooperative model proposed by development projects. At the same time, however, the performance of "modern" cooperatives discussed in the present section shows that (at least some) villagers know quite well this model – and indeed perform it in their encounter with a European researcher. Concerning the adaptation of the model proposed to the local context, there is certainly a discrepancy between the notion of formality implied in the model and the largely informal relations that structure life in the village. However, the reconstruction of Ak-Bulut's history reveals that the cooperative was registered with the support of a development project specifically as a way to access facilitated credit schemes and not necessarily as a way to transform farmers' agricultural practices. From its beginnings, therefore, the formalisation of the cooperative seems to have been mainly a strategy to access specific resources through a "stamp" on paper. This strategy can also be seen as a way to adapt the model of cooperative to the local context, as scholars recommended. In fact, the formalisation of the cooperative allowed to renovate a warehouse, buy a tractor and give farmers access to a credit to renovate their seed material. In this regard, the strategy was successful. At the same time, however, the fact that during its first years of activity the cooperative served mainly as a structure to distribute project resources probably reinforced its dependence on external support; it is not surprising, then, that when the flux of these external resources stopped, the activities of the cooperative declined.

The narrative of failure and its affects

Baktigul's quotation in Section 7.3.4 reveals a sense of loss as well as a sense of disorientation in finding herself in a context she can only partially understand. "And now?" she grieves, "I don't know what happened...". This same sense of disorientation is often expressed in villagers' accounts of the current situation:

I don't know how to describe it. [...] We [members of Ak-Bulut] are not active anymore. Maybe it is because everyone became wise and knows already everything, or everyone became rich and we don't need these things [Ak-Bulut's training sessions] anymore. Yes, at the beginning we were active. And now? I don't know... Everybody has become an academician and knows everything so that nobody needs training sessions? I don't know... (Nazira, 18.08.2015)

Above, we have seen that when villagers lament the inactivity of the government, they often do so while comparing the current situation with their memories of the Soviet state. In this comparison, references to the past are not mobilised with the intention to say something about the past itself, but rather as a way to express something about the present – to express a perceived *loss*. We have also heard Adis lamenting the lack of leaders in the village – leaders who would be able to bring farmers together into a cooperative. Later when remembering his experience as a worker in the local Soviet farm, Adis (born in 1969) comments that, at that time, there were leaders who knew about the cultivation process and organised villagers to work together. Also in this case, the reference to the past reveals a perceived loss in the present: a loss of leaders and leadership.

A similar mechanism emerges from villagers' memories about past cooperation and solidarity. In the quotations from Baktigul and Nazira, we see how they mobilise the reference to a recent past (when villagers were poor but *together* and cooperated and supported each other) as a way to emphasise that, in the present, farmers work individually and have lost the value of working together and helping each other. Nazira observes, with a note of scorn and irony, the arrogance of villagers who consider themselves "academician", who think that, they know everything and do not need the support of others. Baktigul's observation that people are now rich reveals a similar scorn, not without a note of irony: Baktigul knows that villagers are not rich, but highlights the arrogance of those who, being a bit better-off than before, think they can handle everything by themselves, without cooperating with or helping others. Nazira, Baktigul and many other villagers express nostalgia for the loss of cooperation and solidarity caused, according to them, by the gradual individualisation and monetisation of economic and social activities. Several villagers indeed complain that "now you have to pay for everything", whereas they were previously used to nonmonetized exchanges and to helping each other without the mediation of money. Baktigul concludes with a lapidary statement that summarises the sense of loss of a past that consisted of

stronger social relations and solidarity: “Democracy¹⁵ made people cold, support to each other was left behind” (Baktigul, 29.08.2015).

Through the mobilisation of nostalgic memories, villagers express a sense of abandonment in relation to the role of the state in structuring their lives and securing their well-being. They voice a sense of nostalgia for a past in which, in their recollection, the state cared for agricultural production but also for villagers themselves, securing their jobs and livelihoods. The activities of development projects in the village have in part substituted the state in the provision of some resources; however, this support has mostly stopped today. Villagers express a similar sense of abandonment when they lament that Ak-Bulut’s activities have declined because of the lack of external support, by the state or whatever other institution. Villagers also express a sense of abandonment in relation to the perceived decline of sociality and mutual support and their substitution through market relations. This sense of abandonment is accompanied by a sense of disorientation but also of fatalism, which underlies villagers’ narrations of the past, the present and the future. While lamenting the loss of solidarity, they note at the same time that, in the current specific context, “private is better” – not because it is better in the absolute sense, but because, they insist, “people’s mentality” today does not allow for an alternative. They lament that “others” are too lazy, or lack the right knowledge or understanding, for cooperatives to succeed.

7.4 Assembling Ak-Bulut as a cooperative (or as something else?)

It has become clear throughout the previous sections that Ak-Bulut is difficult to grasp as a formal cooperative: a formally bounded institution with clear membership boundaries and internal organisation. During my fieldwork in 2015, I had the impression that the object of a cooperative escaped my observations: every time I thought I grasped it, it dissolved, revealing a new, unexpected facet. It seemed, indeed, that Ak-Bulut (white cloud in Kyrgyz) dissolved each time I tried to touch it and that the only thing I was able to observe was some indirect light reflected on one of its facets. In this concluding section I present some of these reflections and facets: connections, links, references or allusions that emerge, implicitly or explicitly, when I speak with villagers about cooperatives in general or Ak-Bulut in particular. The section maintains the messiness to mirror the confusion provoked by the fleeting and always partial reflections produced by the multiple facets of Ak-Bulut. Neither I, nor the development workers who have visited Pjak nor villagers themselves, can fully grasp the “object” of Ak-Bulut: we can only observe its reflections and conclude that such an “object” does not have a single essence. Rather, its multiple and sometimes contradictory fragments are assembled again and again, in an always transient way, into something that sometimes resembles a cooperative and sometimes something else.

¹⁵ Here, “democracy” refers in general to the new socio-politico-economic system introduced with reforms after Kyrgyzstan’s independence, not to the specific political organisation of the newly independent republic. Villagers refer to the present historical period as “democracy” or “capitalism”, often interchangeably.

7.4.1 Personal networks and membership on paper

While speaking with villagers whom Kumbat (or other villagers) indicated as Ak-Bulut's "members", it becomes clear that the definition of "membership" is not linked to a formal registration or to the regular payment of a membership fee. Rather, Kumbat indicates as members villagers who are part of his networks of relatives, neighbours and friends and with whom he collaborates, in different ways, in agricultural or other activities. Other villagers indicate as members persons who they know are close to Kumbat or who have participated at least once in one of the training sessions provided by any development project through the mediation of Kumbat. On the other hand, formal registration as a member does not necessarily mean collaboration with Kumbat or "the cooperative" in practice. I start chatting with Batyr while walking in the village: he is not part of Kumbat's networks and nobody ever related him to Ak-Bulut. I ask him whether he knows Ak-Bulut and he answers: "Of course I know Ak-Bulut. Maybe I am even a member, maybe they put my name on the paper [laughing]! But actually I don't have anything to do with them" (Batyr, 29.08.2015). Formal membership – intended as the official registration on a paper – is thus rather the fulfilment of a formal procedure without concrete consequences. What counts more, in practice, seems to be the inclusion within personal networks that exist beyond the formalised membership of the cooperative.

We saw in Chapter 6 that several development workers complain that farmers register in cooperatives only as a way to have a formal status that allows them to access specific credit schemes and facilitations. It seems, indeed, that this is the case at least for Ak-Bulut: several villagers affirm that being or not in a cooperative does not change anything for their agricultural practices. Remember Nadyrbek's plan to merge his cooperative (Tüshün) with Ak-Bulut (§6.4.1): when he explains this plan to me, I am surprised, since nobody in Pjak, even not Kumbat, ever mentioned this when I asked about the cooperative and its activities. After having met Nadyrbek, I ask Kumbat about this merger; he explains: "They won't do any activity, it's just a merger on paper. You know, they are just some thoughts of Nadyrbek: he wants to buy a tractor later, but for the moment these are just thoughts" (Kumbat, 04.09.2015). When I ask him whether he thinks that the merger is a good idea, he replies: "Yes, I think it's a good thing. And anyway it is harmless: it won't change anything!" (Kumbat, 04.09.2015). It seems indeed that the formal structure of the cooperative is emptied of its meaning and that it remains just a stamp on paper.

7.4.2 What counts as working together?

Villagers often lament the difficulties they face as farmers today: in particular, they point to the fragmentation of land plots and limited financial resources as the causes of a persistent crisis. They (not only Kumbat, as he claims above) lament that the small size of plots limits the possibilities for proper crop rotation to maintain soil quality. Soil productivity is further reduced by the limited use of fertilisers, which are too expensive. Better seed material could improve productivity, but again good seeds are expensive and hardly affordable. Moreover, most farmers cannot afford to purchase agricultural machines, which would anyway not be profitable on small plots. Marketing small amounts of agricultural

goods limits the possibility to establish agreements with buyers and exposes farmers to the volatility of market prices. In sum, farmers complain about the low profit they can get from their agricultural activities in comparison with the high expenses they face, consisting mainly in the land tax and in the purchase of agricultural inputs. They describe themselves as trapped in a vicious circle of low productivity and limited access to financial resources, which in turn limits their access to better quality inputs and thus leads to a further decline in productivity; all this in a context of volatile market prices for their produce but inflation in prices of consumption goods.

When farmers think of agricultural cooperatives, they focus on the advantages of collective production on bigger plots, which, according to them, would solve several of the problems just mentioned. They see the advantages of cooperatives mainly in the opportunity to increase plot size and thus to increase soil productivity through proper crop rotation. Indeed, they sometimes mention Oktjabr as a successful example of cooperative: since it cultivates big plots of land, it can avoid the aforementioned problems of plot fragmentation. Referring to cooperatives, farmers mention only secondarily the advantages of collective marketing and the facilitated access to credit and leasing; other advantages – such as better access to information – are only mentioned incidentally. Furthermore, usually farmers state that today they “work individually”, although in fact they cooperate informally with other farmers, for instance exchanging seeds or labour in the fields (see Chapter 9). When they speak of “working together” or of “cooperatives”, farmers seem thus to intend specifically collective production: they seem not to consider as “cooperation” other collective activities that might occur, formally or informally, in the village.

At the same time, when they speak specifically of the cooperative Ak-Bulut, villagers mobilise another idea that does not necessarily match the idea of joint production – and thus their ideal of cooperative. “Members” of Ak-Bulut refer to the cooperative usually in the third person (rather than in the first person as “we” or “our”) as an external institution that supports them in different ways, but in which members themselves do not actively engage. Ak-Bulut is not a framework in which to “work together” or to engage; it is rather a separate entity that, for instance, provides seeds, training sessions, or, simultaneously, a private seed breeding company that sells (or rather, was used to sell) good seeds in the region. This is not the case for Aisha and Batma, who describe Kara-Jer as a typical service (mainly marketing) cooperative: they make clear that production remains individual and that members join the cooperative looking for better marketing opportunities. Aisha usually speaks in the first person plural when referring to Kara-Jer: she includes herself *actively* in the cooperative and explains for instance that she helps organising the meetings of the cooperative, which sometimes she hosts in her house, where she prepares food and tea for participants. It seems thus that for Aisha, Kara-Jer is not a separate entity that supports her private activities, but something in which she sees herself as an active part.

7.4.3 The Soviet referent and Oktjabr

When hearing some of the statements by villagers presented in this chapter, it seems straightforward that their direct referent for cooperatives is the Soviet farm: a farm with strong leaders and joint production. In

fact, the Russian term for cooperative (*kooperativ*, also used in Kyrgyz) is the same used to refer to Soviet farms. However, if one delves a bit deeper into these statements, she will note that, when villagers *explicitly* refer to the Soviet farm, they usually do so to emphasise a distinction between current cooperatives and Soviet *kooperativs*. This distinction is centred on land ownership. As Adis notes, “Pooling our land together, as Oktjabr does, wouldn’t mean to go back to *kolkhoz* time. This is impossible, because land now is private, and the state cannot take it!” (Adis, 01.08.2015). For Adis, as for other villagers, it is clear that a production cooperative like Oktjabr is not the same as a Soviet farm. When they imagine to join production on collective plots, farmers therefore do not intend a return to the Soviet farm model – at least not in terms of land ownership.

In the previous quotation, Oktjabr is again mentioned as an example of successful cooperative. Adis elaborates:

Oktjabr has machines, big land. They can make profit from this. They have the opportunity to buy new machines. And the members are provided with bread and work. I have only two hectares, how can I do rotation on only two hectares? Oktjabr, they have big land, and they can do the rotation. (Adis, 01.08.2015)

Indeed, villagers, who often complain about the few and old machines available in Pjak, can admire one of Oktjabr’s big irrigation machines every time they pass it on the street from or to Karakol. What counts for Adis, as for several other farmers, in his definition of success is the size of land plots and the endowment with agricultural machines. This vision resonates not only with the one of Oktjabr’s director but also with the one of governmental actors discussed in Chapter 6. I argued there that such vision emerges from ideas of development and modernity that relate to the model of both Soviet agriculture and Western agri-business.

Whereas sometimes villagers praise Oktjabr’s management for its economic achievements, they also express suspicion about its managers’ practices. Common in Kyrgyzstan is the idea that the management of cooperatives like Oktjabr is top-down and not transparent in the best case, or involved in illegal practices and corruption in the worst. This idea is also reinforced by the media coverage of cases of corruption and other scandals concerning this kind of cooperatives. Therefore, many villagers are not surprised that Oktjabr refused to collaborate with me: they are sure this is due to its illegal practices, which its managers do not want to open to the scrutiny of an external person. Adis too expresses these suspicions in some occasions, but other times, as in the quotation above, praises Oktjabr for its economic success and sees it as an example of farm enterprise to which he aspires.

7.4.4 Farmer unions during reforms

When villagers refer to Soviet farms in relation to current cooperative experiments, they underline the different regimes of property of Soviet farms in comparison to current cooperatives. However, they mobilise also another more recent past referent: the groups of farmers that emerged in the early 1990s. When villagers received individual shares of land, they initially formed groups of four to five households

to carry out agricultural production collectively; these “farmer groups”, however, did not last long, and most of them separated within one or two years. When I meet Kairat (born in 1951) the first time, I explain to him that Kumbat indicated him as a member of Ak-Bulut and that I would like to ask him some questions about his activities in the cooperative – for instance about the training sessions they organised or the agricultural inputs they bought together. While we are still standing in his yard, he answers: “I don’t have anything to do with Ak-Bulut. I do all my agricultural activities alone and I don’t buy anything from the cooperative. I didn’t have any training sessions with them” (Kairat, 27.07.2015). After an awkward initial moment, in which I insist that Kumbat told me that he was an active member and Kairat reiterates that he has no relation to Ak-Bulut, he invites us in his house. While chatting over tea, he explains his position:

At the time of the first land reform, I convinced my fellow villagers to keep our land together and work as a cooperative. But people were really lazy, they didn’t do anything, they didn’t work. I had to do it all alone with my family. But at the time of harvesting the others wanted the profit. I tried to keep the cooperative together, but it was very difficult because people didn’t want to engage, they didn’t want to work. So I decided to dismantle the cooperative, we divided our land and each of us started working alone. There were so many problems with the cooperative, so many headaches! So I decided to say “thank you and goodbye!” As soon as the others got their own land, they started working hard, sending all the members of the family to work in the fields. [...] It’s really a pity that we are not working together anymore. I’ve tried to keep people together but nobody really understood the sense of working together, they were just lazy and didn’t want to work! Therefore I abandoned all projects of cooperatives and I’m not involved in Ak-Bulut or similar things. I just work for myself and things are going well. Probably Kumbat told you my name because I was the leader of the cooperative after the first land reform. But after this I didn’t have anything to do with cooperatives. (Kairat 27.07.2015)

Kairat’s initial reticence in the yard and his later explanations reveal his frustration for the failed experiment with cooperatives in the 1990s. We can also sense a certain rancour towards his fellow villagers who, according to him, were responsible for the failure of this experiment because of their laziness and lack of understanding of the “sense of working together”. Kairat draws a direct and explicit relation between the failure of these experiments and his current unwillingness to engage in collective activities with other farmers. This explicit reference is not uncommon among villagers, especially among those who have never been involved in Ak-Bulut’s activities. It seems therefore that, if there is a “psychological resistance” to cooperation as suggested by some scholars (see §2.2.1 and §6.1.), this resistance is due to villagers’ experience with farmer groups in the 1990s rather than to their experience within Soviet farms.

7.4.5 Farmer groups in the framework of development projects

When development projects started their activities in the village, as in the case of Ak-Bulut, they often built on existing groups of farmers, like the ones just mentioned. The group that registered as Ak-Bulut was not the only one in the village. Indeed, when speaking about cooperatives, villagers often mention the activities of development projects. For instance, when I first meet Aziza (born in 1952), we initially have

an awkward moment of misunderstanding. We arrive to her house in a nearby village because Kumbat had given us the name of Aziza's husband, Zamir, as the leader of Ak-Bulut's local branch. Zamir, however, tells us that it is his wife, who is active in community activities, and suggests we speak with her. When we ask Aziza about her role in Ak-Bulut, however, she does not understand what we are talking about. She starts telling about other groups in which she is active. There was a women's group in the village, which received training sessions on how to grow vegetables organised by an enterprise that was selling vegetable seeds. She participated to several other training sessions, organised by different organisations and on different subjects: cooking vegetables, pruning fruit trees, producing dairy products, etc. She adds that she was, or maybe she still is, the chairwomen of one women's group: maybe Kumbat confused Ak-Bulut with this group, she suggests. She explains that the position as chairwoman did not imply much work; the group just needed a name to put on a paper and she was the only one who accepted to give her name. When I ask about the activities of Ak-Bulut, several other villagers similarly start telling about other groups in the past and in the present – groups that are usually initiated and supported by development agencies and that often last only for the duration of their projects.

7.4.6 Cooperatives as private businesses

Rather than collective activities, those that are sometimes presented as “Ak-Bulut's activities” by Kumbat or other villagers are in fact private activities of Kumbat, his sons (especially Tuman, before he left for Russia) or others. For instance, what some refer to as “Ak-Bulut's tractor” is now Nurbek's private property (and business); Nurbek himself considers this activity as part of the cooperative and himself as one of its few active members. Ak-Bulut's warehouse is registered as Kumbat's private property; his sons manage the warehouse, including its revenues, which, according to Kumbat, are barely enough to cover the expenses for the use and maintenance of the building. Also, Ak-Bulut's seed breeding activities were in fact mostly managed by Kumbat with the support of the international projects (through training sessions and in the form of seeds and other material such as the glasshouse that now stands in his garden). When I first meet Adis and ask him about Ak-Bulut's activities, he briefly states that “Ak-Bulut gives support at the district but also at the province and republic levels. Ak-Bulut breeds potato seeds and in this way it gives support at all these levels” (Adis, 01.08.2015). In our next conversation, I ask him what he meant with that statement. He explains:

There was a moment when in the province, we needed potato seeds. Ak-Bulut planted seeds on 0.15 hectares and sold the products in the whole district and also in the province. The support is in the sense that Ak-Bulut developed new sorts of potatoes and sold them in other districts in the province. (Adis, 27.08.2015).

It seems thus that villagers mobilise Ak-Bulut as a way to refer to Kumbat's private activities; or conversely, they label Kumbat's private activities as activities “of the cooperative”. If cooperatives have some concrete meanings beyond the “stamp” on paper, they seem to indicate rather the private activities of whom are defined as their leaders. This is also the case for Nadyrbek's Tüshün Cooperative mentioned above. Although Nadyrbek explains to me that the cooperative is composed of eight families who carry

out joint production, it turns out later that, for instance, there are no official meetings of members to decide about the merger with Ak-Bulut: what Nadyrbek calls the cooperative Tüshün is in fact his own private business.

This is the case also for other cooperatives. Remember Jemish, one of the cooperatives I visited before settling down in Pjak (§7.1). The chairwoman's daughter bought the former local Soviet farm warehouse but did not have enough money to renovate the building. By joining the cooperative in 2011, she could receive a credit (taken in the name of Jemish) to renovate the building. As far as I could understand in the few days I stayed in Ak-Korgon, the woman is now managing the warehouse privately: she is the owner of the building, and villagers (members and non-members) pay to store their products there. The woman is also trying, through the cooperative, to gain the support of development agencies to start other activities in the warehouse; in particular she plans to establish a small fruit processing activity, which she would, again, manage privately.

A similar case is the Tokoi cooperative in a village nearby Pjak. Sultanbek, Tokoi's chairman, tries to convince me to do my research on his cooperative since, he insists, Ak-Bulut is destined to disappear. According to Sultanbek, Tokoi is a cooperative that deals with wool: it has a cleaning point for wool and a workshop for the production of carpets. Sultanbek explains that the cooperative is the intermediary between members and buyers: whenever there is a demand for a carpet, members organise to use the facilities of the cooperative to clean their wool and produce what is demanded. Sultanbek illustrates the cooperative as an important business in the village which offers to villagers employment and the opportunity to process their wool. However, when I try to investigate more about the organisational structure of the cooperative – for instance the difference between members and employees, the role of members or the governance structure – it turns out that Tokoi is rather a form of private business owned and managed by Sultanbek for which he employs villagers as wage labourers.

In the quotation above, Adis describes what actually was Kumbat's private business of seed breeding not primarily as a business intended as an economic activity aimed to generate material profit for its owner (which indeed it was and did) but rather as an activity that offers support to others and provides a benefit for the broader community. The overlapping concepts of cooperative, private business or community-supporting activity – or rather the non-relevance of their distinction – is confirmed by a meeting with Daniar, a deputy of the local council in Kok-Bulak. When I explain to him my interest in cooperatives, he proposes to accompany me on a “tour” to visit some examples of successful cooperatives in the village. I am quite surprised to hear that there are several other cooperatives in Kok-Bulak. Besides Tokoi, Daniar shows me a small brick plant installed in the yard of a well-off family and an artificial pond where people pay a fee to catch fish. Both, like Tokoi, are rather small family businesses, neither registered as cooperatives nor organised as a member-owned enterprise. Certainly, Daniar's “cooperative tour” can also be read as a performance of development as discussed above: he organises this tour to show to the foreign stranger the “best” activities in the village, regardless of whether these are part of formal cooperatives.

7.4.7 Cooperatives as substitutes of the government

Finally, in rarer occurrences, villagers link Ak-Bulut or cooperatives in general to an idea of local government. When asked explicitly to list some of the activities of Ak-Bulut, they sometimes mention the community meetings that are regularly organised by the local government as part of their official tasks. During one of our chats, Kumbat explains that for him, Ak-Bulut's activities (for instance the distribution of agricultural inputs, the breeding of locally adapted seeds or the attempts to unite farmers in a collective) also represent a way to compensate for the enervating inactivity of the local government. In this sense, Ak-Bulut seems to have taken over some of the tasks of the local government, or at least the tasks villagers expect from it.

7.5 Conclusion: rethinking Ak-Bulut, rethinking the economy

It has become clear throughout the chapter that the boundaries not only of Ak-Bulut as a cooperative, but also the concept itself of a cooperative, are all but fixed, rigid and unambiguous. Ak-Bulut (or cooperatives in general) is not a defined object, or an object that can be defined as such. It is rather a particular idea *towards which* some practices and some representations sometimes converge (and sometimes not); it is also a particular idea *from which* some practices and representations sometimes emerge (and sometimes not). These ideas, practices and representations all contribute to constitute Ak-Bulut – but always in a transient, fluid and never determined way. The rigid and narrow definitions commonly assumed and promoted by scholars and development practitioners (discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 6) do not allow to grasp this complexity and therefore, I argue, are at best inadequate for engaging with farmers and their agricultural activities. At worst, they are dangerous because they underpin narratives of failure – of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan but also, more broadly, of entire societies to achieve “development” or “modernity”. These narratives become part of a hegemonic discourse that is reproduced at different scales – from the central offices of FAO in Rome to the kitchens of villagers in Pjak – and that produces disempowering affects of failure, inadequacy and abandonment.

This hegemonic discourse also assumes and simultaneously produces a neat distinction between the economic sphere and other spheres (e.g. society, politics, environment): both institutionalist scholars and development practitioners assume that some activities (e.g. joining a cooperative) are purely economic and are based on a specific kind of economic rationality (i.e. I maximise my profit by joining a cooperative). At least since Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (2001 [1944]), however, scholars have made clear that the separation between the economy and other spheres – or the disembedding of markets from economic institutions and social relations – is a historical, socio-political process that started not earlier than the Industrial Revolution. Edward P. Thompson (1991, 260–61; see also 1966; 1971) showed, for instance, that popular riots during the Industrial Revolution were aimed at protecting “a paternalist model of food marketing” (based on patronage relations) from the advancement of markets.

Whereas many scholars have interpreted Polanyi's and Thompson's analyses as suggesting that markets – or market economy more generally – are a form of economic organisation disembodied from moral and social relations (e.g. Götz 2015), others have instead argued that Polanyi's and Thompson's analyses show that markets are *always* embedded in social relations and moralities or, even, that markets per se *are* social and moral constructs (e.g. Krippner 2001; Narotzky and Besnier 2014; Palomera and Vetta 2016; see also Thompson's own clarification of his first conceptualisation of moral economies, 1991, especially p. 271). It is not markets that are separated from social, moral or political relations or that are disembodied from these relations: it is a particular kind of economic theory, especially the one inspired by Friedrich von Hayek, that models markets as a separated and disembodied entity. Nor are these models themselves disembodied from social, moral and political relations: they emerge in specific historical contexts and they promote and produce specific social, moral and political relations in their turn (see e.g. Thompson 1991, 268–69; Narotzky and Besnier 2014).

It becomes therefore secondary (or actually pointless) to analyse how markets become disembodied – for instance how markets “penetrated” a Kyrgyzstani village and substituted previous forms of solidarity and cooperation. The relevant question concerns instead the political and material consequences of modelling the disembodiedness of markets since, as Narotzky and Besnier (2014, 12) summarise, “models are instruments for the exercise of power. In short, models are attempts to control a messy reality through abstraction: control through knowledge production and epistemic dominance and control of human action through the performative force of not only the designs themselves but also the relations they privilege.” In the context of transformation after socialism, the economic models that informed neoliberal reform programmes conceptualise markets as disembodied autonomous entities. The policies and recommendations based on these models could only pursue the deregulation, privatisation and liberalisation of the economy and the parallel roll-back of the state; other possibilities and alternative approaches were impossible, and even unimaginable, on the basis of these models (*ibid.*, see also Stenning et al. 2010; Pavlovskaya 2004). Even the institutionalist approaches reviewed in Chapter 2 – which emerged as a critique to classic economic theory – assume a separation between the economic sphere and other dimensions: therefore, their recommendations cannot extend beyond a limited repertoire of “rules-in-use”, economic incentives and sanction mechanisms (see especially Singh 2015; §2.2.2).

In his illuminating analysis of twentieth-century Egypt, Mitchell (2002, 4) showed that the separation between the spheres of economy, society and state as we know it today is the result of specific situated policies, material practices and political interests and that the *discipline* of economics played a crucial role in this process (*id.* 118, drawing on Callon 1998). Similarly, Çalışkan and Callon (2009; 2010) showed that “the economy” is a construct constituted through a series of practices, discourses and devices that include also, and especially, the models and theories produced by economists (see also MacKenzie et al. 2007). The two authors therefore suggest to shift our attention from “the economy” to the process of *economisation*, intended as the process that constitutes “the economy” as commonly intended – or of *marketisation* in the particular case of “market economy” (Çalışkan and Callon 2010). This brings us back to Gibson-Graham's (2006b) project to rethink the economy “as we knew it” and build a new

language that can allow to imagine other forms of economic practices – where these practices are to be intended as intrinsically social, moral and political.

In this chapter, we have seen that villagers link the concept of cooperative to a series of institutions and activities that cut across the spheres of economy, society and the state and include the realms of private farming, economic entrepreneurship, solidarity and mutual support, state responsibility and non-profit institutions. This observation invites us to abandon the common understanding of economy promulgated by both classical and institutionalist economic theory and instead to embrace the reflections of the scholars mentioned here above towards an understanding of the economy as an inherently social, moral and political construct – an understanding that allows simultaneously to interrogate the political and material consequences of hegemonic economic models. Before going back to Pjak with this renewed perspective in Part IV, however, I will discuss and summarise the main reflections emerged in the two chapters composing Part III.

Part III – Discussion and conclusion

Hegemonic discourse and subjection process

The analysis in the two chapters composing Part III has revealed that the narrative of failed cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan is part of a broader hegemonic discourse that produces a hierarchy of knowledges and experiences – a developmentalist discourse like the one denounced by postdevelopment scholars (e.g. Ferguson 1990; Escobar 1995). Part III revealed in particular two manifestations of this discourse at different levels: from scholars and development workers to governmental actors and villagers. First of all, the hegemonic discourse manifests in narrow and biased definitions of what a “true” cooperative is. Scholars, development workers and, to a lesser extent, governmental actors argue that the “Western” service cooperative is the only “true” cooperative because it is the only that complies with the “genuine” principles of cooperation; villagers in Pjak underline that “true” cooperatives are the ones with a democratic and transparent governance and that emerge from bottom-up from the “will of people”. All these actors reinforce their definition of “true” cooperatives by comparing the “true” model with examples of “fictive” cooperatives: many insist that Soviet farms, but also existing production cooperatives in the country, are not “true” cooperatives. Kumbat defines Ak-Bulut (which he considers a “true” cooperative”) in opposition to Oktjabr (which he considers a “fake” cooperative); in her turn, Aisha defines Kara-Jer as a “true” cooperative in opposition to Ak-Bulut as a “fake” cooperative.

Second, the hegemonic discourse manifests in actors’ implicit or explicit references to a broader teleological vision of development and modernity. The ideal of a particular kind of development emerges from governmental strategies or project documents but also in personal encounters with a European researcher. It emerges for instance when Nurlan shows me the brochures of modern agricultural machines, when a GIZ employee explains his vision for a modern agro-industrial sector, when villagers hide practices they consider problematic or “backward”, or when Kyrgyzstani in general wish that “Kyrgyzstan will become like Switzerland one day”. In this case too, the ideal of development and modernity is defined through its comparison with a backward Other, which can consist, for instance, in the “Kyrgyz mentality” of laziness, in persistent practices of corruption, or in villagers’ “lack of understanding”.

The hegemonic discourse thus typically produces dichotomous categories (e.g. true/fake cooperatives, developed/backward subjects or places, those who know and teach/those who don’t know and are taught) that it ascribes either to a positive pole of fullness (e.g. Economy, Development) or to a negative pole of lack (e.g. non-Economy, non-Development) (see Gibson-Graham 2003). The hegemonic discourse thus produces a hierarchy that values as universal a specific kind of subject, knowledge or experience while devaluing other possible or existing subjects, knowledges and experiences. This happens through processes of othering, like the ones just mentioned, or for instance when villagers express their admiration for Switzerland because there, contrarily to Kyrgyzstan, people have learned how to be in a cooperative and now are prospering; when Dinara and Kumbat remember how “Peter Schmidt” taught

villagers to be in a cooperative, but then note that they have not learned so well; or when Stanislav is genuinely surprised and disoriented by hearing that I came to Kyrgyzstan to study its cooperatives and he suggests that, if I want to study how cooperatives work, I should go back to Germany. These processes of othering create dichotomies at different scales, from the local and regional (big/small cooperatives), to the global (agro-industrial enterprises/small farming, Switzerland/Kyrgyzstan, Europe/Central Asia).

I have argued, at the end of Chapter 6, that the hegemonic discourse provides a legitimation framework for policies, representations, practices and also for individual subjects. This legitimation framework is specific to the particular historical context of contemporary Kyrgyzstan discussed in Chapter 3 – a context also shaped by the end of the Cold War, which proclaimed the victory of the West – with its model of development, knowledge and expertise – and the defeat of the East – with its alternative (but maybe even not so alternative, see Gibson-Graham 2006b) model (see Verdery 2002; Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008). In this context, development programmes have shared the assumptions of structural reform programmes – assumptions concerning in particular a specific kind of subject with a specific kind of economic rationality; a teleological vision of a specific kind of development; and a specific separation of the economy from other spheres (see Chapter 3). The type of cooperative that can find legitimacy within this specific context has been indeed the service cooperative model intended as a tool to support the establishment of a market economy.

I argue here that this legitimation framework also determines a process of subjection that makes some subject positions available while precluding others (see e.g. Gibson-Graham 2006a, 23–52) and that concerns not only villagers but also governmental actors, local and foreign development workers and any person who enters in relation with this specific context (including a Swiss researcher). Development projects or initiatives to promote cooperatives are in this sense governmentality devices within this subjection process (see e.g. Watts 2003). In the context of the promotion of the Western model of service cooperative, subjects are assumed to be, and *should* be, simultaneously, individual producers (peasant farmers) who act as entrepreneurs to maximise their economic profit and do not wait passively for the help of the state or other institutions – they should be *biznesmans* (Pétric 2013); and citizens attuned to the mechanisms of representative democracy and democratic management – they should be *demokrats* (*id.*). The value of these subjects is defined according to their position, or “stage”, within a specific (determined and linear) trajectory of development towards the establishment of a market economy freed of “imperfections”, where individuals-entrepreneurs can finally achieve well-being, and of a liberal democracy freed of pre-modern patrimonialistic practices, where individuals-citizens can make their voice heard. In this vision, the key for this evolution towards well-being and emancipation is the economic sphere (see Fraser 2013).

Subjects who do not comply with subject positions made available by the hegemonic discourse are devalued and dismissed as Other and as lacking something – they are for instance the “unempowerable” subjects observed by Kim et al. (2018). Subjects are not devalued and dismissed “by” the hegemonic discourse as a superposed external entity but they integrate themselves the hierarchies and categories of the hegemonic discourse and frame according to these hierarchies and categories their own

representations – of cooperatives, agriculture, development or themselves. What results, since what these subjects observe corresponds rarely to the ideal of the hegemonic discourse, is a sense of inadequacy, frustration and powerlessness that concerns not only individuals but also entire generations, population groups and places in Kyrgyzstan as well as throughout ex-socialist countries of CEE and the FSU (see e.g. Humphrey 2002).

Discontinuities of power and intervals for contestation

I have mainly spoken here above of a hegemonic discourse as if it were a unitary and coherent structure. However, as I discussed in Chapter 4, discourses – like processes of subjection and power itself – are never fully accomplished, fixed or stable: in their contradictions and discontinuities, intervals are available that leave productive space for contestation and individual agency (e.g. Gibson-Graham 2006a, 24). Neglecting these intervals and spaces would mean to fall in the trap of “strong theory” and to essentialise contingent processes while obfuscating individual agency and the plurality of local practices and subjectivities (see Gibson-Graham 2014). The empirical material presented in Part III offers some glimpses into the contradictions and discontinuities of the hegemonic discourse and into the alternative aspirations, subjectivities and practices that emerge in its intervals.

We have seen that the “project” of the promotion of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan is far from being coherent and linear but consists instead of a series of situated, fragmented and sometimes contradictory negotiations, reinterpretations and performances. Governmental actors, because of their scarce budget, cannot implement all the measures they promise; development actors act within the constraints of limited project timeframes and depend on donor funding for their implementation; activities of CUK are often limited to “doing *remont*” because of its limited financial and human resources. As a consequence, the concrete measures for the promotion of cooperatives are often fragmentary and uncoordinated and produce themselves that same confusion that some of these actors lament referring to villagers’ understanding of cooperatives.

In this fragmented context, individual development workers and governmental actors sometimes express – explicitly or implicitly – doubts about the definition of “true” cooperatives and about the kind of cooperation that should be promoted; they also reinterpret the goals of their agencies’ programmes according to their own aspirations and ideals of modernity (see also Féaux de la Croix 2013). Governmental actors are also able to navigate different narratives and assume what seem contradictory positions as a way to attract precious foreign resources while maintaining their own ideals of development and modernity. I have shown, however, that this strategy can be also damaging for governmental actors since, by outsourcing the implementation of concrete measures for development promotion, they further reduce their own visibility, credibility and legitimacy among citizens.

Many villagers are more aware of the representations of cooperatives underpinning development projects than development workers (and villagers themselves) suggest. We have seen that Kumbat and some “members” of Ak-Bulut, as well as Aisha and Batma, are able to perform a “true” cooperative when they

meet me, and that their performance can last several days: a timeframe that is often long enough (and was already enough in past situations) to convince a development agency or a private investor to start a project with them. We have also seen that villagers reinterpret and reassemble the formal framework of cooperatives according to their practices, representations and needs: in this way, the group of farmers that coagulated around Kumbat was able to access credit, seeds and other important resources. This kind of processes of reinterpretation and renegotiation are well known by anthropologists and geographers in Kyrgyzstan (e.g. Dörre 2015; Kim et al. 2018) as well as worldwide (e.g. Mosse 2005; Olivier de Sardan 2005; Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008, see §3.3)

Villagers express and reproduce the sense of inadequacy and lack discussed above; however, they also contest that they are themselves responsible for this lack. Whereas, on the one hand, villagers perceive themselves in a position of lack, they also attempt to justify this position by externalising the responsibility for their inadequacy onto structural conditions for which they cannot be held responsible. This is the case when they blame the “Kyrgyz mentality” as an essentialised external structure that determines their own behaviour; or when they blame a generalised lack of understanding (by others or even by themselves) that prevents them from working together with others. This strategy, however, is problematic because, first, it does not question the assumptions and categorisations that underpin the definition of this lack in the first place and, second, it produces an additional sense of powerlessness since it evacuates not only responsibility but also agency from individuals.

Memory as an instrument of rule and memory as contestation

I argue that the processes discussed above (the reproduction of the hegemonic discourse and the individual agency that emerges in the intervals of this discourse) are particularly well visible in the ways in which actors mobilise different temporalities in their narratives: references to the past, or memories, but also projections into the future. Scholars agree that memory is always a situated and contingent process of reinterpreting the past in the present (see Legg 2007). First, memory can be an “instrument of rule” through which powerful “individuals and groups recall the past not for its own sake, but as a tool to bolster different aims and agendas” (Hoelscher and Alderman 2004, 349). We have seen that this is the case in the narrative of failed cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan and in the hegemonic discourse in which this narrative is inserted. Scholars and development actors define their ideal of “true” cooperative in opposition to Soviet farms, which they frame as “fictive” cooperatives; they blame the persistence of this “wrong” model for farmers’ “lack of understanding” of “true” cooperatives; and they argue that farmers’ negative experience with Soviet “fictive” cooperatives generates a “psychological resistance to cooperation”. Villagers blame the “Kyrgyz mentality” for the failure of cooperatives: although they intend this mentality as originating in a far and undefined past, they argue that the Soviet experience – where, according to their memories, the government “provided everything” to its citizens and this provision did not depend on the actual work effort one performed – exacerbated the laziness and passivity that were already part of the “Kyrgyz mentality”. Kumbat summarises this idea when he sometimes notes that “the Soviet Union taught us laziness and corruption”.

These framing and evaluation of the Soviet past indeed reinforce the dichotomous categories of the hegemonic discourse and therefore the process of othering discussed above. They also reinforce the idea of a path dependency determining the trajectories of entire populations and regions (see §2.2.1), which in turn strengthens villagers' fatalism and powerlessness by further evacuating agency from individuals, who are seen as trapped in this dependency and in structures that are resistant to change. I have noted above that villagers, by mobilising the idea of a "Kyrgyz mentality", shift the responsibility for their inadequacy or lack away from themselves and onto an external structure they cannot control. Their reference to the Soviet experience as exacerbating this "mentality" further evacuates responsibility from individuals and shifts it onto an essentialised past. Similarly, Féaux de la Croix (2017, 154–67) has noted that her Kyrgyz informants, when referring to historical events or to their own biography, tend to project onto individual figures (of heroes or anti-heroes) the agency to shape history, while silencing their own individual agency to shape their own lives. Although this strategy is counterproductive because it reinforces villagers' actual and/or felt powerlessness, it is also a way to cope with the disheartening effects of the hegemonic discourse on villagers' sense of self.

Second, memory can also be a tool for contestation and resistance, in a regressive, conservative or progressive sense (Hoelscher and Alderman 2004; Legg 2007; Karner and Weicht 2016; Meeus, Devos, and De Blust 2016). Villagers' strategy to evacuate onto the Soviet past the responsibility for their inadequacy or lack is also a way to counter the dominant narrative that blames them for this inadequacy. Villagers also contest this narrative in another way. They suggest that, even more than the "Kyrgyz mentality" exacerbated by the Soviet experience, what made them inadequate for cooperatives and cooperation today are more recent experiences: the establishment of markets after independence made villagers individualist and "cold"; their unsuccessful experience with farmer groups during decollectivisation in the 1990s made them sceptical towards cooperative experiments; their abandonment by the state made them even more passive. Also, with the narrative of lost solidarity and cooperation, villagers implicitly contest the definitions of cooperation and community solidarity that development actors and many scholars present as universal definitions. By stating that in the past they were, indeed, cooperating and supporting each other in the community, villagers refuse the idea (promoted by development actors and many scholars) that their communities have always lacked an understanding of cooperation and have always been inadequate for cooperatives: villagers suggest implicitly that these lack and inadequacy concerns *a specific kind* of cooperation and solidarity and thus reveal that the definitions proclaimed universal are in fact only partial.

The narrative of loss is one example of how villagers' memories of the Soviet past are often positive and nostalgic: in this sense, villagers produce alternative memories to the dominant ones (see Brockmeier 2002). By lamenting the loss of state support and recognition, job security and social security on the one hand and, on the other, of solidarity and cooperation in their community, villagers produce the memory of a (Soviet) past where these elements were provided. In this way, villagers also contest the teleological vision of development of the hegemonic discourse: they suggest that their trajectory is not a linear progression towards a higher stage of development but it is rather an involution back to a lower stage that

implies the loss of past achievements. Simultaneously, the narrative of loss is also a way for villagers to contest the present: they point to what they miss in the present and to what they wish for the future. Karner and Weicht (2016, 21) note that such forms of nostalgia entail “feelings of loss and decline in the face of societal change [and] rest on a longing for a better situation and a perceived ideal which, discursively, is tied to the past”.

Conclusion: traversing fantasies

Karner and Weicht (*id.* 22) further note that, “while nostalgia is a longing for another time and space that evade modernity’s pressures and challenges, it also includes an element of recognition of the impossibility of this endeavour”. Indeed, villagers in Pjak contest a present they feel they cannot shape through a retrenchment in nostalgic accounts of the past. They build their wishes for the future either on nostalgic memories of the Soviet past or to the far-away present of Europe, North America but also Russia and Kazakhstan (from where they see images of modern agro-industrial businesses exploiting the infinite expanses of the steppe). What these referents have in common, however, is that they are *distant*, either in time or in space.

I have already argued at the end of Chapter 6 that development workers in Kyrgyzstan, as well as agricultural economists who study agrarian transformation in the region, are caught in the mechanisms of Lacanian fantasy (as intended by Byrne and Healy 2006, §4.3.1); here, I argue that also villagers are caught in the same mechanisms. On the one hand, we have the objects of desire. Besides those just mentioned, we see that, for what concerns cooperatives specifically: Kumbat dreams of joining production with other farmers and establishing a big farm enterprise; Aisha dreams of a cooperative that can empower women by improving their economic autonomy; Stanislav, like others, yearns for modern machines and large fields. On the other hand, we have the symptoms – the scapegoat-obstacles that prevent the realisation of the desire but that are produced by the fantasy itself: a broad series of “lacks” and “losses” or the “Kyrgyz mentality”. I thus argue that, like Byrne’s and Healy’s (*id.*) fantasmatic subjects, the villagers, development workers and governmental actors we have encountered in Part III tend to project the responsibility for their condition onto others (actors, structures, pasts), and are thus often unable to assume on themselves the conscious responsibility that would allow them to pass to the act and act ethically (in the sense discussed in §4.3.1).

Scholars, certainly, are not immune to the mechanisms of fantasy (see Healy 2010). I have already argued that classical or institutionalist economists, as well as several political scientists of postsocialism, reproduce unrealisable objects of desire (e.g. an ideal cooperative but also a perfect and disembodied market economy) and their obstacles as symptoms (see §2.1.3.). I am certainly not immune myself: when I started studying cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan, my (partially conscious and partially unconscious) aspiration was to find clear forms of resistance to the “penetration” of neoliberal markets in villages. I realised only later, and gradually, that this aspiration was based on an essentialist understanding of economy as a separate and autonomous sphere and of transformation after socialism as the conquest, by

neoliberalism, of realms that were previously outside the influence of the market or even outside the economic sphere. My personal journey through the “failed” cooperatives of the Issyk-Kul – but also in a *banja* in Pjak (see Introduction) – allowed me first of all to become aware of this essentialist understanding and, then, to start developing a different, more fluid and open, understanding of cooperatives, cooperation, development and economy.

Developing and applying this alternative understanding in the analysis of past and present agricultural practices in Pjak is the aim of Part IV. In particular, we will be able to better understand the renegotiations, representations, practices and relations that existed before the registration of Ak-Bulut and how they have shaped, and have been shaped by, the formalisation of the cooperative. We will also be able to understand more clearly villagers’ representations and practices of cooperation and how their representations and practices relate to those of other actors. Finally, we will be able to better understand how individual actors contest the hegemonic discourse and how alternative subjectivities and practices emerge in its intervals.

Part IV – Re-reading cooperative experiences in Pjak

When I started my fieldwork in Pjak in 2015, my aim was to investigate the practices of the cooperative Ak-Bulut. I thus focused my interactions with villagers on Ak-Bulut and on other cooperative experiences, approaching “the cooperative” as a defined and bounded object that could be observed and grasped. I quickly had to admit, however, that my attempts to grasp Ak-Bulut were unsuccessful and, in a first moment, I identified the cause of this failure in the failure of Ak-Bulut itself. Later, thanks to my encounter with Gibson-Graham’s work, I realised that my initial failure was probably mainly due to the inadequacy of the conceptual understandings underpinning my attempts to make sense of Ak-Bulut’s experience – understandings about formal cooperatives but also about cooperation and economy more generally. In Part III, I deconstructed these understandings and showed that the categorisations they assume are often not relevant for villagers or other actors I encountered during my fieldwork, and therefore are useless for making sense of these actors’ practices.

Now, we are thus ready to re-read cooperative experiences in Pjak: we can overcome the fixation with cooperatives intended as bounded objects and instead look at how existing local representations, practices and social relations reconfigure the meanings and practices of external initiatives for the promotion of cooperatives as well as how, simultaneously, these initiatives reconfigure local lifeworlds. With this aim, the next two chapters engage with the analysis of agricultural practices in Pjak in the last decades (Chapter 8) and today (Chapter 9) through the lenses of diverse economies following in particular Marianna Pavlovskaya’s (2004) and Smith and Stenning’s (2006) application of Gibson-Graham’s framework in postsocialism.

8 DIVERSE ECONOMIES OF AGRICULTURE IN PJAK: HISTORICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

This chapter presents and discusses the transformation of agricultural practices in Pjak in the last century and focuses especially on the last six decades. The first section provides a general overview of the geographical situation and history of the village, based on existing literature and on the narration of villagers.¹ Section 8.2 presents the conceptual framework for the analysis of diverse economies. The following sections dig into the diverse economies of agriculture in Pjak in the late Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic (§8.3) and in the decade following the independence of the country (§8.4); Section 8.5 focuses on the role of international development projects in this last period.

8.1 General situation and history of Pjak

8.1.1 Arriving in Pjak

From Karakol, the easiest way to reach Pjak is to go to the town bazaar. Buses to Pjak leave from there, but their schedule is irregular and you can end up waiting several hours. A quicker option is to find a shared taxi at the corner in front of the bus station, where drivers from Pjak gather. You will find a couple of them there, depending on the time of the day. Smoking a cigarette, chatting, or drinking *jarma* if it is hot, they wait their turn to pick up clients and fill their cars before leaving for the village. Your fellow travellers in the taxi will be mostly villagers from Pjak. If you purchased heavy or cumbersome goods at the bazaar, you can negotiate with the driver to bring you in front of your house; you can also ask him² to stop at the seed shop to pick up your purchases there. If you are a foreigner, you will quickly make some friends during the ride. Most of the Western foreigners who visit Karakol and its region are tourists attracted by trekking routes on the Tian Shan. Tourists never stop in Pjak, where there are no guesthouses, no restaurants, no bazaars, no touristic attractions. When your fellow travellers understand that you are really going to stop in Pjak, they will finally also understand that you are not a trekking tourist and will ask you if you are a *volontior* – intended as the development workers (paid or unpaid) of international organisations that sometimes visit the region.

The road from Karakol to Pjak runs along the foothill of the mountains. On one side, non-irrigated fields of hay and clover cover the mild slopes of the mountains; on the other side, the irrigated fields sloping down until the bed of the river are cultivated with potatoes, wheat, barley, clover, hay and in some rare cases with vegetables (Fig. 8). Pjak, as most of the settlements in the region, consists of few regular

¹ These narrations stem mainly from the oral histories collected among villagers in Pjak. As I will hint to in several occasions, the selection of narrators (mainly elderly villagers and other villagers in their sixties and seventies) as well as the particular setting of our oral history sessions surely shaped the content of the narrations collected. A deeper discussion of these biases would be, however, too complex to fit in this manuscript and would require additional empirical research, in particular among younger villagers.

² I have never met a female taxi driver in Karakol.

blocks of houses built around the main road. The centre of the village is marked by the victory park, the building of the local administration, the recent mosque. The building that once housed the offices of the Soviet farm also faced the main road, but it was demolished in 2016 to make space for two private houses. A few small shops on the main road sell goods of daily use such as food, clothes and kitchenware, but make most of their revenues from vodka and cigarettes.

8.1.2 Early settlements in the region

The alluvial lowland around Karakol and stretching eastwards from it presents favourable conditions for agriculture due to its fertile soil and good water availability; it was also one of the first areas of the Issyk-Kul region to be occupied by Russian settlers in the second half of the nineteenth century (see Chapter 7). Vast parts of the area, however, remained unsuitable for cultivation until Soviet infrastructural interventions to guarantee their irrigation. Before these interventions, a large part of the territory of today's Pjak consisted mostly of swamps, and, contrarily to other nearby villages, no Slavic people established settlements in Pjak. Its population has remained pretty homogeneously ethnic Kyrgyz until today, with the exception of some specialists that, since the 1930s, were sent from other parts of the Soviet Union to work on the local farms.

Before the arrival of the Slavic settlers, the local population in northern and central Kyrgyzstan lived mostly from animal husbandry in a transhumant system organised according to family lineage: several families constituted separate groups according to patrilineal descent (Judith Beyer 2016, 21–24). These groups were organised in *aiyls* (in this case “encampments”) that moved from semi-permanent settlements in lower altitudes in winter to the summer pastures in higher altitudes, through the spring and autumn pastures. These movements were not without conflicts: competition for the best pastures provoked grievances and fights between different clans (Benfield 1998, 61; see also Jacquesson 2010). Beyer (2016, 21) notes that “Kyrgyz society was highly stratified before the Russians arrived”: not only there were important differences in the wealth and power of different groups, but also within the same group authority was distributed in a strongly hierarchical way. Each group referred to one or more internal leaders (*aksakals*, *biis* or *manaps*) and leaders similarly headed larger clan formations; under the rule of different hordes and khanates in the region, local clans responded to an overarching leader (*ibid.*).

In the mid-nineteenth century, the groups based in the Issyk-Kul fought against subjugation by the Khanate of Kokand. They were the first on the current territory of Kyrgyzstan to initiate negotiations with Russian delegations in order to gain protection against the Khanate (*id.* 24). These negotiations resulted in the establishment of the Governorate-General of Turkestan (covering part of the current territories of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) under Tsarist control in 1864 and the consequent establishment of Slavic settlers in the region (*id.*). This political change mostly did not modify the economic practices of local groups, which maintained their transhumant system of animal husbandry with increasing competition – and consequent conflicts, also violent – for grazing land around winter settlements on lowlands (Benfield 1998, 64). Tsarist law and administration was superposed to existing local structures

of governance, which were mostly maintained in their hierarchical organisation and partially reinforced with their incorporation into the tsarist administrative structure (Judith Beyer 2016, 28).

8.1.3 The advent of Soviet rule and collectivisation

After the October Revolution in 1917, the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was established in 1918. It covered a territory larger than the former Governorate-General of Turkestan, including also parts of today's territories of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan (Abazov 2008, 35). In the 1920s the territory of Soviet Turkestan was subdivided in autonomous regions that were supposed, in principle, to follow ethnic/national lines.³ The Kyrgyz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) was established in 1926 on the territory of today's Kyrgyzstan; it acquired the status of Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in 1936 (*id.* 38). The first collective farms were established in the Issyk-Kul region in 1918, but their number remained limited initially (Benfield 1998, 99). In the meantime, Kyrgyz groups were forced to settle down in their winter encampments and to abandon transhumance, often to work on the Slavic peasant farms (*id.* 98, Judith Beyer 2016, 29). It is only after Lenin's death in 1924 and Stalin's ascension to power that a vaster, more radical and more violent process of collectivisation began – a process that in the Kyrgyz ASSR started officially in 1930 but protracted throughout the decade (Benfield 1998, 100). Keres (born in 1951) explains to me: “Collectivisation started from the West, touching first the two shores of the Issyk-Kul. Therefore here in Pjak it came a bit later” (Keres, 11.05.2016). In Keres' representation, collectivisation was a force spreading from the capital and investing gradually the whole territory of the Kyrgyz ASSR.

The collectivisation process meant first of all the creation of collective farms (*kolkhozes*) based in the existing Slavic settlements and the semi-permanent winter encampments of Kyrgyz transhumant groups; the groups that were still transhumant were forced to join the new farms (Benfield 1998, 100). Beyer (2016, 48–51) notes that in Talas province, the sedentarisation process consisted initially in the establishment of *artels* (teams), i.e. working units composed of a few households of the same descent line (*uruu*), which managed common land but maintained private animals. Between 1936 and 1938, *artels* were grouped into larger *birikmes* (associations), in which families pooled their private animals. It is only a few years later that *birikmes* were joined into *kolkhozes*. Each of these groups (from *artels* to *kolkhozes*) had a hierarchical governance with similar forms of leadership that reproduced the role of *manaps* and *büis* in pre-collectivisation times (*id.* 51). Although I was not able to collect detailed information about working unit formations in the early stages of collectivisation in Pjak, villagers' narrations about that period confirm that, in general, sedentarisation followed existing groupings of families that previously moved together in their transhumant practices.

Collectivisation also meant the confiscation of the possessions of the richest local leaders, who were labelled as *kulaki* and repressed as remnants of the old nomadic feudalism the Bolshevik revolution aimed

³ The process of nation-building in Soviet Central Asia was highly complex and shaped, among others, by local nationalist movements and economic and political interests of Moscow's central power (see e.g. Haugen 2003; Bustanov 2015).

to erase (*id.* 29). While several of these leaders were killed or forced to exile and some managed to flee to China, others – especially *aksakals* (who had a more limited power than *manaps* and *biis*) in the initial phases of collectivisation – were integrated in the new governance structure of *kolkhozes* and their working units (Benfield 1998, 101). Keres' grandfather Omar was a powerful leader in the Issyk-Kul region. Keres narrates that, when the first Slavic groups settled in the region, he dissuaded the local population to fight the newcomers and convinced it to collaborate with them. Omar died few years after the advent of Soviet rule, before the beginning of systematic collectivisation. Keres explains that he supported the Bolsheviks and helped forge consent for them in the local community. She insists that “Omar *ata* turned his sons into communists. He was saying to them: ‘you should sing the song of the age in which you are living, not stay stuck in the past’” (Keres 11.05.2016). Some of Omar's own sons became leaders in the new Soviet governance structure and supported the process of early collectivisation and sedentarisation. Two of his sons, on the contrary, opposed this process and flew to China. Keres' father was one of the former, but, when the process of collectivisation became increasingly violent and intolerant towards powerful rich local leaders, he had to flee to China too.

The few villagers who can still remember that time – and the ones who narrate secondary memories about it – usually avoid mentioning the violent dispossession of *kulaki* or the forced sedentarisation of previously mobile groups. Even Keres, after having told in minute detail her grandfather's story and her father's exile, dwells on the improvements the Soviet regime brought in the life of the local population and refers in particular to the large alphabetisation campaign, the improvement of medical services and the expansion of solid houses built with Russian techniques. She also emphasises the regime's ideals of equality and solidarity, insisting that these ideals corresponded to Omar's values.

8.1.4 The time of “hardship”

At the end of the collectivisation process in the 1930s, the territory of today's *aiyl* Kok-Bulak was subdivided in several *kolkhozes*. Production focused on animal breeding and the cultivation of forage crops and wheat. The outbreak of the Second World War imposed a dramatic pressure on local production, which was mainly directed at providing resources (in particular grains and wool) to the war front. Numerous young men left the village to join the Red Army. The oldest villagers, who experienced in first person the war and post-war periods, vividly recall the hardship of those times. In particular, they narrate that little flour was left in the village after most of the production was sent to the front, or that women knitted clothes for the soldiers. This hardship continued also in the aftermath of the war, when the village population was still missing its young males and agricultural production was carried out mainly manually.

The village experienced an important change in agricultural production in 1952, when opium cultivation was introduced in the region and the local *kolkhozes* specialised in its production. After the death of Stalin in 1953, Khrushchev launched a campaign to expand cultivation into formerly uncultivated land; at the same time, an effort to increase productivity led to the establishment of larger farms through the merging of

kolkhozes (Benfield 1998, 103). On today's territory of Kok-Bulak there were five newer *kolkhozes*, corresponding approximately to the current division of villages constituting the *ayil* today. Drainage works and new irrigation infrastructures expanded the arable land available to the *kolkhozes*, and new buildings (e.g. warehouses, animal stalls) appeared in the village. Despite the general increase of agricultural production in the region (*id.* 104, Abazov 2008, 39), villagers remember the 1950s as still a period of hardship. Although the availability of food had improved, villagers recall their hard work in the opium fields, which required much manual work (performed at that time mainly by women).

8.1.5 The time of “abundance”

Although the general growth of production slowed or even stagnated since the 1960s in the region as in the rest of the Soviet Union (Benfield 1998, 104–5; Abazov 2008, 39), villagers remember the Soviet decades since the 1960s as a time of abundance. In particular, agricultural production was increasingly mechanised, which reduced at least in part the hardship of work in the fields. Consumption opportunities were increasing, also thanks to the expanding black market for opium. To curb this expansion, opium cultivation was officially abolished in 1972. An important turning point in the region was the earthquake of June 1970, whose epicentre was not far from Pjak, which destroyed or damaged most *kolkhoz* buildings and private houses. This natural event coincided with a period of galloping mechanisation and efforts to increase productivity through the further merging of former *kolkhozes* into larger state farms (*sovkhozes*). A new *sovkhoz* was established on the ruins left by the earthquake and included the whole territory of today's Kok-Bulak. New, bigger buildings, including large garages for the new agricultural machines, were constructed especially in Pjak, which had become the centre of the *sovkhoz*.

Having abandoned opium production, the *sovkhoz* focused on the traditional agricultural specialisation of the region: animal breeding for the production of milk, meat and wool and the cultivation of fodder crops (including perennial grasses, barley, maize and sugar beets), wheat and potatoes (Benfield 1998, 122–23). This change also meant a shift in the type of labour required by the *sovkhoz*. In particular, a higher number of families were spending a part of the year on pastures. This change concerned especially women: whereas they previously worked in women brigades in the fields close to the village, they now followed their husbands to the summer pastures, fulfilling household tasks there and cooking for the herders.

Villagers remember the years of the *sovkhoz* (until 1991) as a period of prosperity and abundance; this corresponds to the governmental rhetoric of the time and to the image of technological and cultural progress propagated through large and prestigious projects throughout the territory of the Soviet Union at that time (Abazov 2008, 39). In particular, villagers recall the modern tractors and combines that drove in the fields, the abundance of animals, the “scientificity” of agriculture led by the specialists of the *sovkhoz*, the increasing consumption possibilities, but also the general sense of progress intended as *progression* forward, towards an even brighter future.

8.1.6 The “time of chaos”

Despite the signs of economic decline and the political unrests especially in the Western part of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s (*ibid.*), the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the independence of the Kyrgyz Republic came to villagers as a (tragic) surprise. Villagers refer to the period that followed as “the time of chaos” (*vremja bardaka*) to underline the volatile and uncertain nature of that period, when they lost the certainties provided by the Soviet system and were catapulted in an extremely insecure present with an unpredictable future. In Pjak, as in the rest of the country, agricultural production dropped dramatically in the early 1990s and recovered only at the turn of the millennium (see §3.1). Many agricultural activities were privatised, which resulted in small family farms cultivating in average between two and six hectares of land each. Agricultural production today focuses, as before, on animal breeding, fodder crops (barley and perennial grasses), wheat and potatoes. Besides live animals and meat, farmers mainly sell potatoes. They cultivate wheat to sustain household consumption and as fodder crop to feed their animals. Vegetable and fruit production is mostly relegated to household plots; the produce serves mainly for household consumption but also represents a useful, even if limited, additional source of cash. As in the rest of the country, migration is an increasingly important livelihood strategy:⁴ almost every family in the village has at least one member who works in Bishkek and/or abroad, especially in Russia and Kazakhstan.

Today, the village reflects its history. The buildings of the *ex-sovkhoz* are abandoned and partially dismantled; they confer materiality to the sense of abandonment expressed by villagers (see Chapter 7). At the same time, each time I go back to the village after some months, I observe several new foundations for private houses; the houses that were in construction the previous year have some new walls or even expanded up to the roof.⁵ During my stay in the village in 2016, after a particularly good year for potato prices, I observe the proliferation of *remont* (renovation work) on or expansion of existing houses, which made the village appear shiny and new, at least for few months.

8.2 Diverse economies: analytical framework

Gibson-Graham has denounced the capitalocentrism of dominant representations of the economy (§4.1.1). With her “diverse economies iceberg” (Fig. 9), she denounces the bias of these representations, which defines as “the economy” mainly formalised and monetised activities (the upper part of the iceberg) while neglecting other activities, especially informal, nonmonetised ones (the lower part of the iceberg). Gibson-Graham insists that economies are *diverse*. Pavlovskaya (2004) has applied Gibson-Graham’s

⁴ During Soviet times, some specialists and *kolkhoz* workers were sent to the village from other parts of the country or of the Soviet Union. Once the Union collapsed, these “outsiders” usually went back to their original villages or towns. Since no early Slavic settlement was established in Pjak, the village, contrary to several villages in the region, did not experience the massive outmigration of Slavic descendants after 1991.

⁵ House building in the village is a lengthy process. Usually families are able to collect enough money only for one phase of construction: the foundations, the first floor, the second floor (if planned), the roof, the internal works. Thus, it is not uncommon to see half-built houses that wait for the next tranche of capital (often raised abroad by seasonal migrants).

diverse economies framework to socialist and ex-socialist economies and has noted the same bias in their common representations: what is most studied and discussed about socialist economies is the formal state economy and its application in socialist enterprises. Pavlovskaya (*id.* 337) draws a parallel between economic theories of capitalism and socialism and argues that “the market economy and the centrally planned economy are constructed as respective formal economies of these social formations. As such, they are seen as the essential, dominant, and legitimate economic practices within each system, encompassing all employment and production of goods and services”.

Whereas it is unquestionable that Soviet enterprises were important institutions regulating and structuring economic activities and everyday life during Soviet times, many scholars agree in noting that their formal activities represented only a part of the economic activities unfolding in the everyday life of Soviet citizens. It is well known, for instance, that food produced privately on household plots made up a good part of household consumption (Humphrey 1998, 289–99; Lindner 2008, 84–96; for the Issyk-Kul region Benfield 1998, 123); that production within Soviet farms depended on favours within personal networks often at the edge of legality (Kornai 1980; Verdery 1991; Ledeneva 1998); or that the private use or appropriation by villagers of the resources of the Soviet farm often exceeded the legal limits and importantly contributed to household’s livelihoods (Humphrey 1998, 136; Verdery 2003, 65–69).

Despite this evidence, little research has overcome the (often implicit) dichotomy between the two parts of the iceberg or the essentialisation of centrally planned economy as the main determinant of economic (and social) life in socialism. Pavlovskaya (2004, 337) has noted that, as a consequence, when socialist regimes in CEE and the FSU ended, public discourse and policy design were able to develop only a specific vision of transition: “following this simplified vision of socialism and capitalism, transition theory presents the economic transformation as a binary shift from the Soviet formal economy [...] to the capitalist formal economy”. She has further noted that this bias manifested in the focus of reform policies, which have almost exclusively targeted the reduction of the formal role of the state in economic production and welfare provision and the expansion of formal private economy (*id.*).

For her analysis of “diverse transitions” in Moscow, Pavlovskaya (2004) applies a matrix with four dimensions, each composed of two opposed poles: formal/informal, state/private, monetised/nonmonetised, taking place in the public/private sphere (Fig. 10). Following Gibson-Graham, Pavlovskaya argues that dominant accounts view these categories as hierarchical dichotomies, privileging one of the two poles of each dimension while delegitimising other. First, formal economic practices (i.e. those activities included in official accounts) are usually best documented and quantified and, therefore, scholars can investigate these activities (in the past and in the present) more easily. Despite the vast scholarly tradition on informal economies (e.g. De Soto 1989; Portes, Castells, and Benton 1989; Sassen 1993; Polese et al. 2017; in postsocialism Morris and Polese 2013; 2015), the latter are usually defined in opposition to the formal economy. Often, informal economic practices are represented or theorised as remnants of primitive societies – remnants that are supposed to disappear in more “advanced” and “developed” societies.

Second, theories and applications of socialism clearly privilege economic practices that are performed by the state: socialist revolution is conceived basically as the shift from (formal) private economy to (formal) state economy. On the other hand, as discussed, reforms in ex-socialist countries were mainly conceived as the opposite shift: from (formal) state economy to (formal) private economy. Third, monetised activities are usually privileged in research and in definitions of economy, also because such activities are easier to quantify and to document. Especially feminist economists have combated this vision at least since the 1980s (e.g. Barret 1980; Mackenzie and Rose 1983; see also Gibson-Graham 2006b, 33–35; Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003) and have pointed to the colossal amount of unpaid work performed especially by women to sustain household livelihoods. Although the topic of unpaid care work has acquired prominence in both scholarly research (see the review in Rummery and Fine 2012) and public discourse, it remains marginal in mainstream economic accounts, as its exclusion from GDP calculations demonstrates. Finally, common accounts of economy usually focus on formal and monetised economic activities that take place in the public sphere, intended as the sphere of production opposed to the private sphere of reproduction in the household (see e.g. McDowell 1983; Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003). Most activities within the private sphere in fact pertain to the unprivileged poles of the previous dualities: they are mainly nonmonetised and informal and therefore also difficult to document and quantify.

Pavlovskaya uses these dimensions as analytical tools to identify the multiple economic practices that made up the everyday life of inhabitants of Moscow during the Soviet regime. These dimensions are in no way to be intended as ontological categories. Pavlovskaya (2004, 336) insists that the point of her analysis is to show exactly the opposite: that these dualistic categorisations hide the complex relations between different types of economic activities but also that, more importantly, these categories have no ontological essence, they “are not antithetical but continuous, and properties of multiple economies are interconnected and overlapping”.

In the next two sections, I apply Pavlovskaya’s matrix as support to identify and analyse diverse economic practices of agriculture in Pjak, first in the late Soviet decades (§8.3) and then in the decade following independence (§8.4). As for Pavloskaya and Gibson-Graham, my aim is not to produce a taxonomy of such practices, but rather to show how multiple economic activities enmesh and overlap beyond every attempt of categorisation. In fact, it is not always easy to ascribe a practice to a specific category, and often the practices I describe below could pertain to several categories simultaneously. The reader should understand the below divisions in sections (and categories) not as rigid ontological differentiations but rather as a pragmatic way to structure the presentation of my empirical material.

8.3 Diverse economies of Soviet agriculture

This section provides an analysis of the diverse economies of Soviet agriculture in Pjak. For this analysis I draw in particular on the oral histories collected in the village in 2016, complemented by numerous anecdotes and spontaneous recalling shared by villagers over teas between 2015 and 2017. I focus specifically on the last three decades of the Kyrgyz SSR, starting from the 1960s and covering thus in

particular the period of “abundance” discussed above; this represents the period most accessible through villagers’ primary memories at the time of fieldwork. I also include some rarer primary and secondary memories of earlier decades. Certainly, my account of Pjak’s Soviet diverse economies does not have the ambition to be exhaustive: I focus on the main economic practices that have emerged from villagers’ narrations and include, in addition, some practices that are well recognised in scholarly literature on Soviet farms. As noted above, this account is forcibly partial, since it includes mainly the voices of elderly villagers as well as of villagers in their sixties and seventies, while it does not dig into the secondary memories of younger villagers.

8.3.1 Formal state economies: the Soviet farm

Since the 1930s the Soviet farm was indeed the main formal institution organising and regulating agricultural activities as well as social life, in Pjak as in the rest of the Soviet rural space (see e.g. Humphrey 1998; Lindner 2008; for Central Asia see Khan and Ghai 1980). As explained, initially there were several *kolkhozes* on the current territory of Kok-Bulak *aiyl*; these were later merged in five separated *kolkhozes*, which, after the earthquake in 1970, were in turn merged into a unique *sovkhov*. At their origins, the two forms of farming enterprise presented distinct characteristics (see Humphrey 1998, 3–4, 13–14). *Sovkhozes* were direct continuations of national administration and Party’s institutions and were direct subsidiaries of the Ministry of Agriculture; the farms and their assets were thus direct property of the Soviet state. Collective farms (*kolkhozes*), on the contrary, owned the farm’s assets and had their own administration which was, at least on paper, autonomous; in practice, however, it was dependent on the decisions of the Ministry and the Party. Humphrey (*id.* 13–14) notes that the distinction between *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes* was more relevant in the early decades of the Soviet Union. When *kolkhozes* started to be merged into *sovkhozes* in the Kyrgyz SSR in the 1960s – and even more when the *sovkhov* in Pjak was established in 1970 – the distinction was thus mostly irrelevant in practice: also the privileges conceded to *sovkhozes* in terms of state support and financialisation were mostly equalised for *kolkhozes* at that time (*ibid.*).⁶

It is not surprising, then, that villagers in Pjak use the two terms (*kolkhoz* and *sovkhov*) as synonyms. When directly asked about the difference between the two, they mostly do not understand the question, in a similar way as Nurlan or Nadyrbek do not understand my questions about the different types of cooperatives (§6.4.1). The few villagers who acknowledge a difference between the two terms insist that this difference was not translated in practice. Bolot (born in 1941, ex-specialist in the *sovkhov*) explains:

There were no differences between the *kolkhoz* and the *sovkhov*. They were managed in the same way. There was the Party and the Party was controlling and giving the plan and the tasks to do and saying how much harvest the *kolkhoz* or the *sovkhov* had to collect and give to the government. If the plan was not fulfilled, there was a first alarm given to the heads of

⁶ This does not mean, however, that some differences did not persist between the two forms of farm organisation, in particular concerning their financialisation and state support. For instance, Bichsel (personal communication) notes that in her field site in the Ferghana Valley, damaged infrastructures or assets were “moved” from *kolkhozes* to *sovkhozes* as a way to shift their costs from the collective to the state (see Bichsel 2009).

the *sovkhos* or of the *kolkhoz*. If the plan wasn't fulfilled a second time, the heads risked losing their position. (Bolot, 03.07.2016).

Bolot's quotation, besides confirming the equation of *kolkhozes* and *sovkhoses* in practice, also summarises the functioning of Soviet farms⁷ (see in general Humphrey 1998). Soviet farms were integrated in the international socialist economic system and were strongly supported by the state, to which they had to deliver a fixed part of their produce as defined by the five-year plan Bolot refers to. The farms had access to subsidised inputs and sold their produce to the state for a fixed price. The governance and administration of the farm were organised in a rigid hierarchy (see Steimann 2011, 106; also Humphrey 1998, 228–66): the farm's director or chairman responded to a management board and a Party commission. Directly under him (or, more rarely, her), the chief specialists (agronomist, animal breeding specialist, engineer, economist, accountant) controlled each a sector of production or administration and the related working units (brigades). Each brigade had a head (a brigadier) controlling and responding for the work of brigade members. Orders and tasks were transmitted through the several levels of the hierarchy from the top to the bottom. Villagers who were simple workers or brigadiers insist that they were just fulfilling (or transmitting, in the case of brigadiers) the tasks they received from above. As mentioned by Kumbat in Section 7.3.2, agricultural tasks were thus highly fragmented: the individual worker was alienated from the production process as a unity and was responsible – and aware – of only a little cog in the wheel of agricultural production.

All employees of the farm received each month a salary proportional to the hours they worked that month and, in case production exceeded the plan, an additional bonus at the end of the year. Since the 1970s, the salary was usually paid at least partially in cash, whereas previously cash payments were rarer. Also, after the 1970s, salaries and especially bonuses usually included in-kind payments of farm products (especially flour, but also fodder for private animals, see below). Villagers had also access to subsidised food and basic goods through the shop managed by the farm. In addition to these forms of labour remuneration, villagers had also access to a range of monetised or nonmonetised transfers from the state, among others: state allowances for children, veterans or ill people; pensions; health services; education; housing and leisure activities. Of the latter, villagers like to tell about the holidays organised by the *sovkhos* as a prize for workers in resorts around the Issyk-Kul lake or in other Soviet Republics. Kumbat can spend hours recalling anecdotes and showing pictures of his trips abroad to Moscow, Saint Petersburg and other Soviet cities: as a specialist of the *sovkhos*, he was regularly invited to participate to these travels in winter, during the quiet agricultural period. In addition to material benefits, workers also received from the farm or the Soviet state what could be seen as a “symbolic remuneration”: awards, prizes or medals that certificated the effort of good workers.

As a way to balance the accounts and keep up with the production goals set by the state, it was common for farms throughout the Soviet Union to employ “voluntary” work (Humphrey 1998, 302–5). This

⁷ Because of the missing distinction between *sovkhoses* and *kolkhozes* by villagers, I generally prefer to use the general term “Soviet farm”, which includes both. I make exceptions when the term is used explicitly by villagers or when I refer to the specific Soviet farm in Pjak before 1970 (*kolkhoz*) or after 1970 (*sovkhos*).

concerned for instance “youth brigades” of schoolchildren that were mobilised for so-called *subbotniki*, i.e. forms of community work conducted mainly on Saturdays (*subbota*). Whereas in principle *subbotniki* focused on cleaning public spaces or helping *sovkhoz* workers in peak moments, Humphrey notes that they were used also to fulfil other everyday tasks within the farm (*id.* 303). Villagers recall especially the moment of harvest in autumn, where not only youth brigades, but also teachers and office workers of the *sovkhoz*, were sent to the fields or to the warehouses to help out with the harvesting process.⁸

8.3.2 Informal state economies

Shortage economics and exchange networks

Kornai’s (1980) theorisation of an “economics of shortage” has been widely used to understand the mechanisms of planned economies (see Verdery 1991). Kornai coined the expression “economics of shortage” to describe the Hungarian planned economy in the 1980s. He advanced the idea that socialist enterprises are regulated by “soft budget constraints”: since they can be bailed out by the state in the case they have losses, it is not their first goal to make the highest gains. Neither is this, according to Kornai, the objective of the state: the state’s main aim is not to have efficient and effective enterprises, but to sustain specific social values through them, in particular symbolic and ideological values. Socialist enterprises (including farms) thus have an incentive to hoard material and labour resources through bargaining over production plans, whereby they tend to ask for more inputs than necessary while negotiating less output than required. They even have an incentive to hide excess resources (inputs or outputs) in order to avoid having to give them back or receiving less the next year. The result is an even greater shortage of resources, since many are frozen in enterprises that do not use them.

Because of these constraints, Verdery (1991; 2003) emphasises that it was very difficult, if not impossible, for socialist enterprises to reach the production goals only with official formal procedures for the access to the necessary production inputs. She notes:

Collective farm chairmen and their technicians had to cultivate immense and far-flung networks in order for their farms to function. They needed to induce the AMSs [Agricultural Machinery Stations] to work for them at the optimum time, to obtain inputs when these were hard to find, to anticipate and adapt to changes in the county political environment, to influence the people at the state warehouse not to apply rigorous standards to the quality of the crops they delivered, and so forth. (Verdery 2003, 62)

Verdery, drawing on Kornai’s shortage economics theory, argues thus that informal exchange “out of the books” (sometimes monetised but mostly nonmonetised) was an indispensable practice for managers of Soviet enterprises – a practice that constituted informal horizontal trading networks. She further notes that “filling each such need incurred social debts that had to be honored” and concludes that “this far-flung

⁸ This practice was common during the Soviet Union and has persisted until today in some contexts, in particular in Uzbekistan’s cotton sector (e.g. McGuire and Laaser 2018).

system of exchange involving gifts and favors justifies seeing socialism as a complex form of gift economy, one in which the aim was to collect followers, supporters, and allies – in other words, to *accumulate people* on whom one could rely in moments of needs” (*ibid.*).

Probably because of the unofficial, and often illegal, nature of these practices, they rarely emerge from villagers’ accounts of Soviet agriculture in Pjak. However, we will see below that Kumbat drew on his personal “far-flung” networks, which he built during his activities as chief agronomist in the *sovkhos*, for his private needs. After independency, he used these networks to bring resources in the village. Based on these accounts by Kumbat and on the widespread evidence of the importance in the Soviet space of the practices just described (e.g. Hare 1989; Humphrey 1991; Johnson et al. 1997), I assume that such unofficial exchanges between farm managers constituted a crucial practice within the *sovkhos* in Pjak.

Benefits and privileges for specialists

Several scholars have added to the “second economy” in socialist countries (i.e. the unofficial and often illegal economic practices paralleling the “first economy” of socialist enterprises; see Sampson 1987; Shelley 1990) practices of bribing, intended as “the use of public office for private gains” (S. Lovell, Ledeneva, and Rogachevski 2000). Villagers often highlight the existence of widespread corruption both during the Soviet time and, even more, in the present. Although they do not necessarily condemn these practices as immoral, they complain about having to face high “bribing” costs if they want to access a specific (usually public) service. Such costs were mostly paid in-kind in the past but are increasingly monetised today.

Beyond the specific meaning of “corruption” (whose discussion is too complex to include here), it emerges clearly from villagers’ accounts that people in elite positions had access to a number of privileges in Soviet time. Kumbat explains the privileges he had through his position as specialist in the *sovkhos*:

Life was good for the specialists. We could have access to many things. The government really cared for the specialists and provided a lot of things for free. For instance, from time to time they [the government] were bringing coal or other things to your house with a big lorry. You didn’t have to ask for it and also if you didn’t need it the lorry was coming and brought you the stuff. They were also distributing meat and many other goods to the specialists. [...] For the specialists there was always money. Well, we had to work hard during the agricultural season, but we were actually enjoying life. For instance we had the car of the *sovkhos* which was consuming a lot of petrol. If there was rain and we couldn’t work we took the car and we drove around for our business, visiting friends and relatives, driving around... and of course we weren’t paying for the oil! We were enjoying life like this. (Kumbat, 03.06.2016).

Some of the privileges of specialists were officially part of their remuneration and work benefits, like the trips abroad, better housing conditions, or the free provision of goods mentioned in Kumbat’s quotation. At the same time, other privileges were unofficial: sometimes these were openly accepted (as in the case

of the private use of the farm's car), other times they were at the edge of legality or were plainly illegal and had thus to be carefully hidden (see below).

8.3.3 Private formal economies

In a socialist economy, formal private economic activities are generally limited. Nonetheless, every rural household was endowed with a small plot of land annexed to the house in Soviet times (in Pjak each of about 0.25 hectares). Despite its formal marginality within the socialist system, private food production (including animal breeding) on household plots constituted a crucial part of household consumption throughout the Soviet Union, with productivity rates per hectare even exceeding those of Soviet farms (Humphrey 1998, 289–99; Lindner 2008, 84–96; for the Issyk-Kul region Benfield 1998, 123, see above). Villagers produced especially fruits, vegetables and wheat for flour, but also hay and fodder for their private animals, whose number was legally limited, and meat.

The production on household plots was in part supported by in-kind transfers from the Soviet farm. As seen above, a part of salaries and bonuses consisted in a share of the produce of the Soviet farm (such as seeds or forage), which could be used on household plots. Villagers often insist that, although the formal payments (in cash or in kind) to farm workers were small, they were enough to cover their basic needs. This was possible not only because of subsidised goods, state allowances and free services (e.g. education, housing or healthcare), but also because households were able to cover an important part of their food needs through private production on the household plots. In this sense, the two forms of production – within the Soviet farm and on household plots – were in a symbiotic relationship, where neither could have lasted long without the existence of the other (e.g. Verdery 2003, 266–69).

8.3.4 Private informal economies

Private production on the household plot

Production on household plots was formally allowed but had legal limitations. Surplus production from the household plot was also sold or exchanged among neighbours or on local markets – a practice that, although not formally allowed, was widespread and tolerated. Furthermore, some families continued to use land plots at the edge of the village as grazing land or for the production of hay for their private animals. These plots somehow escaped the official mapping of arable land – a complex process of mapping that took several decades after the establishment of the first collective farms.

“Taking” from the Soviet farm

The symbiotic relationship between the Soviet farm and household production was strengthened even more through practices of appropriating farm resources to be used on the household plot or for direct consumption. During her fieldwork in postsocialist Romania, Verdery found numerous narrations of how

farm workers were used to taking resources from the farm (Verdery 2003, 65–69). Villagers in her field site recalled these practices as funny anecdotes, often coloured with pride. Villagers in Pjak, on the contrary, rarely share similar stories where they are protagonists, but they recognise that it was common that other villagers took things from the farm. In particular, they insist that this was the case especially for people in good positions within the farm hierarchy: some complain about this practice as a form of corruption. The few villagers who share stories about *themselves* taking things from the farm are the ones with whom I could develop closer contact. I therefore suspect that, like in Verdery’s village, these practices were also widespread in Pjak but, since they were illegal, villagers are reticent to tell about them to an outsider. Like in Verdery’s case, the few who share with me stories of illegally taking resources from the farm tell these stories as funny anecdotes over a cup of tea.

I do not have evidence of the extent of practices of “taking” from the farm by simple workers in Pjak. From the few accounts I could collect, it is probable, however, that this practice was also common for simple workers, who could take collective resources by paying a small bribe (often in the form of a bottle of vodka) to the one in charge of controlling them. It is clear, however, that farm employees in higher position had more possibilities to appropriate these resources, as Kumbat explains:

It was very easy for people in good positions in the *sovkhov* to take the things they needed. For instance we had a method to take out some of the content of the sacks at the warehouse with a little pipe. Of course we weren’t taking out too much, so that nobody could see it. The sacks were never weighed, so it was not a problem. My son was working there and I was responsible for the inventory, so we could take the content of the sacks because he was working there. (Kumbat, 03.06.2016).

For people in good positions (like Kumbat), it was easy to access resources of the *sovkhov* for private use not only because they had a *direct* access to them, but also because they entertained reciprocity relations with other people in good positions, in the village as well as in other Soviet farms of the region. Here is one example given by Kumbat:

There were many ways of taking what you needed from the *sovkhov*, or of changing the accounts. For instance, Zamir [a good friend of Kumbat’s] was an accountant. If we needed money... actually not only we, but also the other people in good positions in the *sovkhov*, we could go to him and ask for some money. There was a lot of money in the *sovkhov*, so it was easy to take it. So we were in debt with Zamir. When the debt was getting too big, Zamir asked for the money back, but we didn’t have it. So we were just asking to modify the accounts so that it resulted that the money wasn’t lost. This was very common. (Kumbat, 03.06.2016)

During this narration, which emerged spontaneously while having tea with Kumbat and Dinara, the couple gives several other examples of how they could take meat, money, flour, or other resources from the farm through their personal relations. They further explain how this appropriation worked through exchanges:

With the chiefs we could exchange many things. For instance the chief of the warehouse had access to the flour, the chief accountant to the money, the chief of the shepherds to the

animals... you could take some stuff from your sector and exchange with the others. We were helping each other. In these terms, life was good. (Kumbat, 03.06.2016)

This account resonates with Verdery's observations of unofficial exchanges among farm leaders and the "gift economies" that emerged through these exchanges. In these quotations, Kumbat refers to exchanges of resources for private use, but it is probable that, like in the case of Verdery and of the other researchers quoted above, this system of exchanges was used also for resources that served for official production within the farm itself.

Kumbat and Dinara describe a system in which local elites were connected with each other through informal exchanges and favours. This system of exchange could last because each person was "helping" the others, reciprocating the favours received through new favours and covering the illegal practices of the others. Kumbat and Dinara underline that the system was based on a specific ethic of sufficiency. The individual actors of this system were careful not to appropriate too much. Certainly, taking too much could increase the risk of being caught by the controlling authorities and the consequent sanctions. In addition to this, Kumbat also notes:

Sometimes there were also specialists who didn't want to share with the others. They were hiding the resources just for themselves. They had so many things they didn't share that the things were getting spoiled in their houses, because they had too many. (Kumbat, 03.06.2016)

Kumbat here suggests that such behaviour – taking too much and not sharing – was considered by the other specialists as unfavourable. It would likely lead to a partial exclusion from further favours. It is important to note that what was usually taken was food for private consumption, some luxury goods for special occasions (especially meat), or agricultural inputs for the household plot and fodder for the private animals. In this sense, the aim of such practices for most specialists was not to accumulate resources and savings for the future, but rather to acquire some privileges that would allow them to enjoy life at best in the moment. As Dinara specifies, "at that time there was no concept of saving money or resources. Everything was given in abundance, so we didn't have an idea of saving the things, we were just using them" (Dinara, 03.06.2016).

Reproduction within the household

Part of the Soviet project of building a new type of person, the *homo sovieticus*, was also the emancipation of women through their inclusion in the formal economy. Indeed, the women we have encountered throughout this manuscript until now all had a formal employment on the Soviet farm or in local schools. The economic activities in the production sphere were paralleled by reproduction activities within the household. Since the latter were mainly performed by women, several scholars have spoken of a "double burden" falling on Soviet women, who had to take over formal employment in the public sphere while maintaining their responsibility for reproduction tasks in the private sphere (see e.g. Northrop 2003; Edgar 2006; Kamp 2007). Children, especially girls, supported women in both spheres:

on the one hand, girls helped out with household tasks; on the other, it was common for women to take their children to the fields to help them fulfil more quickly the tasks assigned by the brigadier. This kind of support was not restricted to children, but could involve several members of the family.

8.3.5 Discussion: mapping diverse economies of Soviet agriculture

It has become clear in this section that, indeed, the categories proposed by Pavlovskaya and used in my analysis of the diverse economies of Soviet agriculture in Pjak are far from rigid dichotomies, as is too often assumed in economic and social analyses. Instead, we have seen that villagers' economic practices crossed different categories, whose boundaries are thus blurred and fluid, constituting a continuum rather than a dichotomy. For instance, formal monetised labour in the Soviet farm was supported by the informal nonmonetised mobilisation of children in the fields. Production on household plots was officially regulated and supported through formal, nonmonetised transfers from the State farm; at the same time, however, this production often exceeded the formal limits and was dependent on the resources villagers were able to take illegally from the Soviet farm. Informal systems of reciprocal exchanges and favours within networks of specialists and local elites, in the village and beyond it, were crucial for formal production within the Soviet farm. My analysis shows thus that, as suggested by Pavlovskaya (2004) for the case of urban economies of Soviet Moscow (but see also, for rural contexts, e.g. Creed 1998; Humphrey 1998; Verdery 2003), agriculture in Soviet times was performed within a complex system of interdependent diverse economic practices. Certainly, because of the specific structural policies of the socialist regime, these practices were constituted mainly by formal and informal state activities and informal private activities, whereas formal private activities remained limited (see Fig. 11).

Many of the described activities were in a symbiotic relationship: they could not exist without the others and depended heavily on their relations with the others. This does not mean, however, that all activities linearly and coherently tended towards one direction. In fact, one activity could be necessary for the survival of another one but at the same time weaken the basis of the other activity, a point developed in detail by Verdery (2003). For instance, although the informal exchanges between specialists were crucial for the maintenance of the formal farm economy, these exchanges also took away important resources from the farm and diverted them for the private use and consumption by specialists, thus aggravating the shortage of resources within the farm. At the same time, formal employment in the Soviet farm with limited remuneration could be maintained also because it was compensated for by other activities outside the farm: not only the official household production but also the illegal appropriation of farm resources. Regarding this point, Verdery (*id.* 65–9) suggests that what was considered “theft” by socialist law (i.e. the illegal private appropriation of socialist collective property) was not considered as such by villagers, who considered instead that resources in collective property were also their own resources and felt thus entitled to take some of them also as way to compensate for the small remuneration received for their formal work on the farm.

The public spaces of the Soviet farm and the private spaces of the household and household plot were thus simultaneously in a relationship of co-dependency and competition. At the same time, the two spaces were also fragmented internally. The production process within the Soviet farm was performed in separate work domains and work units. Former simple workers recall that “we were just given tasks. We were just doing what was said by the brigadier” (Nazgul, 30.04.2016). Ex-brigadiers insist that “I was giving the orders to the members of the brigade, telling them the tasks they had to do. I received these orders from the *kolkhoz*’ leaders: every evening we had a meeting to discuss what to do next day” (Mirislam, 03.05.2016). Even chief specialists explain that “I didn’t have to decide, I just followed the plan that was given to us. The plan was made by the government” (Jumabek, 05.06.2016). The responsibility over the production process was thus fragmented: single workers felt responsible for one little task in the wheel but did not have the overview of the whole production process. In these accounts, we recognise again the sense of fatalism I discussed in Part III; by projecting agency onto others, onto “big men”, villagers evade both their own responsibility and agency (see especially the Discussion of Part III, also Féaux de la Croix 2017, 154–67).

The fragmentation within spaces of production and reproduction also concerned the inclusion or exclusion of some social groups in specific activities. For instance, reproduction tasks in the household were performed primarily by women with the support of children. Also, brigades were usually separated by gender and within the Soviet farm, some activities were mainly covered by brigades of women (for instance milking or opium harvesting). Villagers still maintain strong relationships with former colleagues of the Soviet farm, especially with the ones of the same brigade or section, who often correspond with relatives and/or neighbours in the village (see below). Thus, on the one hand, the formal employment on the farm created or reinforced linkages between workers at all levels. Several villagers insist that these linkages consisted also of relations of solidarity and mutual help: for instance, workers supported each other to finish daily tasks in due time or covered each other when taking resources from the farm. On the other hand, these groups and linkages were also exclusive in some regards and were shaped by the farm hierarchy. We have seen in particular the case of the networks of specialists and the privileges they generated: the inclusion in such networks was limited to persons that were filling a specific position within the farm hierarchy. A certain permeability concerning the resources circulating within these groups was allowed by the relationships between the specialists and their relatives outside the networks: specialists in fact also channelled some of the resources to villagers on lower levels of the farm hierarchy. Relatives of the specialists could turn to them when in need, for example for an illness, a specific celebration or a trouble with the law.

The Soviet regime aimed, at least in principle, to disrupt former social hierarchies and inequalities: the repression of *kulaki* throughout the Soviet Union was officially motivated by this goal. However, the analysis in this section has revealed that the way Soviet agriculture was organised also created new, or

strengthened old,⁹ social stratifications within the local community. Aziza explains how she got her position within the *sovkhos*:

I was a simple accountant, not the chief accountant. When people graduated, they were given positions according to their degree. [...] I didn't study further to continue my career because I had children. [...] If you studied, you could work in higher positions and earn more money. I had an education as accountant and I was working as an accountant, because I didn't have education for other things or for higher positions. You worked according to your education. (Aziza, 28.06.2016)

Aziza underlines that one's positions depended on his/her educational background. From her account it is clear, however, that not everybody had access to the same educational possibilities – especially women. The accounts of villagers who had good positions in the Soviet farm suggest that their achievements were a mix of hard work, capacity, education, but also of their and their fathers' good connections. Furthermore, it must be noted that the privileged position of specialists was certainly not to be taken for granted: specialists constantly run the risk of losing their position and being hardly sanctioned if they did not comply with the production plan or if they were caught in the illegal or semi-legal activities described.¹⁰

8.4 Diverse economies after independence

As discussed above, reforms after the end of the Soviet Union and of other socialist regimes in CEE aimed at a shift from formal state economy to formal private economy. Pavlovskaya's (2004) analysis of "diverse transitions" in Moscow shows, however, that, whereas reforms consistently reduced formal state activities, they mostly led to the proliferation of informal economic activities and not to the strengthening of the private formal sector. Stenning et al. (2010) came to the same conclusion after studying transformation after socialism in Krakow and Bratislava.

In this section I discuss how post-independence reforms transformed the diverse economies of agriculture in Pjak. During my stay in the village, especially in 2016, I conducted numerous sessions of oral history, interviews and informal chats on this topic: every new conversation, however, led to new unsolved questions and additional confusion. The reconstruction of this transformation on the basis of villagers' narratives is a difficult task: the categories and terminology villagers use to refer to institutional arrangements of that period are multiple and often used in contradictory ways, even by the same person. I suggest that the confusion in villagers' accounts is revealing of the confusion, uncertainty and volatility of the institutional context at the time of reforms (the "time of chaos", see above), which resulted from the institutional void left by the collapse of the previous system. Trying to define the complex period of

⁹ An analysis of the continuities and discontinuities of pre-Soviet and Soviet hierarchies would need a much broader and deeper historical research.

¹⁰ Kumbat, for instance, spent more than six years in prison in the 1980s, during which his family suffered a shortage of food and consumption goods. This information is certainly in contradiction with Kumbat's and Dinara's statement that "life was good" in Soviet time. I will come back to this later.

reforms through institutional and formal frameworks counters the perceptions and categorisations of villagers. Because of this confusion and institutional uncertainty, it is even more arduous today – as it was probably at that time – to determine whether an activity pertained to the formal or informal sector. For this reason, I subdivide this section only according to Pavlovskaya’s second dualism (state and private), abandoning the subdivision in formal and informal practices. Nevertheless, the discussion of the other dualities proposed by Pavlovskaya (formal and informal, monetised and nonmonetised, public and private sphere) will be part of the analysis.

8.4.1 State economies: dismantling the Soviet farm

Post-independence reforms consistently reduced the weight of state formal economies in Kyrgyzstan (see Chapter 3). Reforms cut state employment opportunities drastically but also the monetised and nonmonetised transfers to citizens discussed in the previous section. The availability of state services and assistance became so rare that the access to such services became increasingly regulated through bribing and personal favours – shifting thus part of the state formal activities to the expanding informal (and illegal) sector. These cuts impacted heavily on the livelihoods of families in Pjak: a whole range of state services and benefits that were previously given for granted were suddenly not available anymore, or were accessible only through the payment of bribes for which villagers rarely had the resources.

First phase of land reforms: first steps towards the dismantlement of the Soviet farm

The most dramatic change after independence for villagers was agricultural decollectivisation (for the Issyk-Kul region see Benfield 1998, 133–54). With the first phase of land reforms, started in 1991, shares of land and other assets of the Soviet farm were distributed to villagers on paper. Most agricultural activities remained, however, within the structure of the ex-State farm, now transformed into a joint-stock company whose management remained unchanged. Villagers remained employed at the ex-Soviet farm, but their working conditions deteriorated in parallel to the deteriorating finances of the farm, which suffered from the reduced state support and the collapse of the international socialist trade system. As in the rest of the country, the farm in Pjak started selling out its assets (especially the animals) to curb its exploding debts; this further reduced the resources available to the farm to continue production and worsened its financial situation.

The Law on Peasant Farms opened the space for first forms of private farming outside the Soviet farm (see Benfield 1998, 135–39; Sabates-Wheeler and Childress 2004). Few specialists of the ex-Soviet farm in Pjak, while maintaining their employment on the farm, requested and received land plots between 25 and 100 hectares and started cultivating them individually or within groups of three to four families. Villagers today mainly refer to these first attempts of individual farming with the Russian term *kristjanskije khozjastva* (peasant farms).¹¹ On the one hand, these early peasant farms received the worst

¹¹ I will refer to these farms as the “early peasant farms”.

land of the ex-Soviet farm, since the farm kept the best land to continue its activities. On the other hand, however, the early peasant farms had access to a range of privileges, thanks to their symbiotic relationship with the ex-Soviet farm. In particular, they had “access to farm inputs from state sources, subsidised loans and tax exemption” as well as to collective machines (Sabates-Wheeler and Childress 2004, 4). The availability of such resources was, however, also diminishing for the ex-Soviet farm, so that production conditions and productivity deteriorated for both the ex-Soviet farm and the early peasant farms. Nevertheless, the involvement in these early peasant farms allowed their leaders to acquire (for free or against payment) some of the resources of the ex-Soviet farm – resources that were thus not included in the wider distribution process later. Moreover, peasant farm leaders could also acquire first experience with individual farming on a medium scale, which would give them an advantage later.

Second phase of land reforms: distribution of the ex-Soviet farm assets

Villagers recall that in the early 1990s, there was a lot of uncertainty about what would happen next. There were rumours that land might be distributed to all villagers, but nobody, not even the specialists of the ex-Soviet farm and the ones with a high position in its hierarchy, could foresee whether, when and how this distribution would happen concretely. Also, the few who were already active in the early peasant farms could not know whether one day they would have to give back the land they were cultivating. The second phase of land reforms, started officially in 1994, confirmed the decision to distribute land and other assets of ex-Soviet farms to the rural population. Like collectivisation 70 years before, decollectivisation also “arrived from the West”: in the Issyk-Kul province it started with some delay in comparison with the Chuy region (see Benfield 1998, 139). In Pjak, actual distribution did not start before 1996. Between 1994 and 1996, speculations multiplied about the details of the implementation of the new reforms, contributing to increase the general uncertainty and confusion. In the meantime, the activities of the ex-Soviet farm continued to decline, and the food and production crisis in the village – as in the rest of the country – increased. Those who had the means tried to increasingly accumulate assets from the ex-Soviet farm, legally and illegally, before they were put in the pool for distribution.

The central government ordered the institution of land commissions in each village for the implementation of land distribution. I spend a long time trying to clarify the distribution process in Pjak with villagers and especially with Mamat (born in 1952), who is passionate about history and spends his free time doing historical research on the region.¹² Despite his precious help, the actual implementation process remains difficult to reconstruct. Mamat explains that the central government’s order to distribute the assets of ex-Soviet farms was not accompanied by clear guidelines about the actual composition and formation of land commissions or about how precisely land should be distributed. As a consequence, each

¹² My former interpreter conducted a further interview with Mamat in Bishkek in October 2019 to clarify the questions that had emerged during the analysis of the material we collected in the village the previous years. My questions, transmitted to Mamat by the interpreter, tackled very specific issues. Even after this last, very focused interview, several questions remain open about the concrete implementation of land distribution in Pjak. Further research, especially in local archives, might in the future help answer some of these questions – not necessarily though, given the volatile institutional context (and thus probably also the incomplete archiving) of that time.

local commission was formed and composed in a different way. Often, the commission members were the local *aksakals*, i.e. the clan representatives: in this case, the relations within the commission mirrored the relations between local clans (this seems to be the case for instance in Beyer's field site in Talas province, see Judith Beyer 2016, 52–56). Mamat, however, notes that, in other cases, the commission included also some younger men who were particularly “active” in the village (Mamat calls them *aktivists*) and who entered the commission on their own initiative. In these cases, the younger members did not necessarily represent their clan in the commissions, and their loyalties were not primarily based on kinship but also on the networks emerged through their former employment at the Soviet farm. I could not collect clear evidence of the composition of the land commission in Pjak (and Mamat remains vague on this issue); my data, however, suggest that members included both *aksakals* and *aktivists*, in particular those specialists, like Kumbat, who had gained a certain reputation in the village.

In principle, land distribution was organised as follows. First, the territory of the ex-Soviet farm was divided into the five villages corresponding to the pre-Soviet *aiyls* or settlements. The total arable¹³ land was calculated for each village and divided in two categories: the irrigated and non-irrigated land. 25% of the total arable land was kept out of the distribution process and flowed into the Land Redistribution Fund (LRF).¹⁴ The remaining land in the two categories was divided by the total number of villagers. This resulted, in Pjak, in a share of 0.61 hectares per person, 70% of which on irrigated plots and 30% on non-irrigated plots. The total surface of irrigated and non-irrigated arable land was divided into zones and families participated in a kind of raffle system to determine the exact location of their land plot: they picked a number from a box containing the codes of the different land zones in the village. Villagers who already cultivated land on the early peasant farms had to give the difference between the surface of land of their farm and the total land to which they were entitled back for distribution: they could decide whether to keep the land plot they were already cultivating or to go through the raffle procedure and receive a plot in another location.

Certainly, this system for land distribution entailed several ambiguities that left margins for negotiations and that gave rise to conflicts, some of which are still ongoing. First, the five villages had different sizes of arable land on their territories and different population sizes: the total land share per person varied between villages. The demarcation of the borders between villages was controversial, since it was based on the Soviet maps produced between 1935 and 1965 and on older divisions in *aiyls*. Second, also the calculation of the total surface of arable land within each village was based on these old maps, which, as mentioned above, had left some areas unmapped that continued to be used privately during the Soviet period. This land did not enter the process of distribution and continued to be used by the same families afterwards, producing an unevenness in land endowment even before the distribution started.

Third, land plots within the two zones (irrigated and non-irrigated) presented differences concerning especially the closeness to the village, the accessibility through roads and paths, the connection to the

¹³ Remember that pasture land was not distributed and has remained state property until today, see §3.1.

¹⁴ This fund is used until today to comply with later claims of land shares by villagers who could not claim them at the moment of land distribution; see §3.1.

irrigation infrastructure and soil quality. Through the raffle system, some families received better or worse land plots. Most of the villagers, however, because of the fragmentation of the production process in the Soviet farm discussed above, were not even aware of these differences. The ones who were aware were the ex-specialists of the Soviet farm, who were able to negotiate with the land commission to receive plots in the best locations.

Fourth, the total number of villagers by which the total distributable land was to be divided was a vague notion. Each household had to provide the official identity documents of each of its members to include them in the distribution process. The villagers who, through their position in the ex-Soviet farm administration or through their networks, were aware in advance of this procedure had the time to collect the necessary documents of all household members, including the ones who were not living in the village at that moment. In this way, these families could receive more land shares. On the other hand, the ones who were less informed about the procedure often were not able to collect all documents and received thus a smaller amount of land than they were entitled to. Some villagers did not register at all because, at that moment, they could not imagine how to use a plot of land, since they did not have access to any means of production, including knowledge about the cultivation process.

Lastly, land plots were not registered individually for each villager. It was the head of the household (usually an older man) who registered for all the members of his household. This created problems later for the recognition of land rights of other family members, especially of women.¹⁵ The advantage was, however, that in this way household members received bordering land plots in the same location. Beyer (2016, 52–56) notes that in her field site in Talas province, land plots were distributed following descendent lines: clans of the same lineage received large land plots that were then subdivided internally among the single families. I have no evidence that this was the rule also in Pjak; it was, however, common there that groups of households, either of the same clan or linked through relations of neighbourhood (which often overlapped with kinship) or friendship, registered at the same time and picked up a code in the raffle procedure together in order to receive bordering land plots.

The shares of other assets of the ex-Soviet farm (like agricultural machines, buildings or animals) were distributed later. However, because of the crisis of production that started in 1991 and the deteriorating finances of the ex-Soviet farm, by the time of distribution, several of these assets had “disappeared”. They had been used to pay out the farm debt or were sold for a cheap price to the few who had the resources to buy them. As seen above, many of these assets had also been appropriated, legally or illegally, by the early peasant farms or by other local elites. Moreover, the conditions of buildings and machines were deteriorating because of scarce maintenance and looting (especially of scrap metal). Non-

¹⁵ Land access for women is a complex problem in Kyrgyzstan today. When they marry, women are considered to leave their family of origin to join the family (and kin) of their husband. It is thus common that, when “leaving” their family, women also renounce to their land shares. This becomes a problem especially in case of divorce, when access to land is negated to women both by their ex-husband’s family and by their family of origin. See e.g. Kuehnast (1998), Giovarelli et al. (2001), Giovarelli (2004), Younas (2017), see also Beyer (2007).

divisible assets like buildings and machines were distributed to groups of households;¹⁶ these groups, however, were often not able to manage the use and maintenance of these assets, which led to their further degradation and looting.

8.4.2 Private economies: establishing private farming

Finding resources for individual agriculture through informal networks

When villagers received land plots with the second phase of land reforms, their access to other means of agricultural production was very limited. By that time in the village, few seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, fuel, functioning agricultural machines or functional buildings remained. The few that were still available or were brought to the village by emerging traders were difficult to access for most villagers, also because their financial capital was almost inexistent: many had bartered their last private animals. For the ex-specialists of the Soviet farm, like Kumbat, it was easier (although not easy) to access such resources: they could mobilise the networks discussed in the previous section to get some of the last assets of ex-Soviet farms in the village and in the region. Also, they had usually more assets which they could barter.

Kumbat and Dinara, however, underline that Kumbat, like the other specialists, did not keep these resources for himself. Dinara explains:

At that moment people started understanding that there was nothing left from the *sovkhoz* and started running around to find the fuel, the seeds. [...] Villagers were sending Kumbat to Bishkek to find oil, seeds, et cetera. They sent Kumbat because he had connections in Bishkek to purchase the things or to have them as a credit. (Dinara, 10.08.2016)

Dinara here suggests that Kumbat was entrusted by his fellow villagers with the task to bring the needed resources in the village. Dinara further explains how this worked with the example of Mamakaev, an influential doctor in Bishkek:

Kumbat was giving things to the important persons [in order to purchase the things villagers were asking him]. It was a kind of corruption of course. He was bringing stuff to Mamakaev, therefore they had good relations. Mamakaev in his turn was using his own connections to get the things and give them to Kumbat. [...] Mamakaev was famous, an authority. He could have access to many things and was distributing the things among his acquaintances. (Dinara, 10.08.2016)

Dinara likes to share similar stories over tea, depicting Kumbat as a kind of “hero” who helped villagers access the resources they needed to start individual farming. Both Kumbat and Dinara remain vague on how the distribution of these resources happened in the village, for instance on whether Kumbat distributed the resources for free or against some sort of present or future return, or whether, like Mamakaev, he also accepted bribes from villagers.

¹⁶ Also in this case, Beyer (2016, 52–56) notes that, in her field site, non-divisible assets were given to clan leaders and that the further distribution within the clans was organised internally. Again, I have no evidence that this was systematically the case in Pjak.

Furthermore, because of the fragmentation in the Soviet farm discussed above, few villagers had usable knowledge about the entire agricultural production process: when, what and how to sow, when and how to plough, irrigate and harvest, how to use or repair machines, etc. Dinara and Kumbat emphasise that their house was always visited by villagers who asked Kumbat for advice on and help with the cultivation process. Similarly, Ermek and Aibek, both ex-mechanics in the Soviet farm, recall that villagers came to their houses regularly to ask how to use the machines or how to repair them. Since spare parts were hardly available, Ermek and Aibek, like Kumbat, used their networks to find these parts and usually did the repairs themselves. Ermek observes that the few villagers who knew how to use the machines had to “run from one field to the other without rest, working day and night” (Ermek, 17.08.2016). Ermek further explains that, because of the chronic lack of fuel and cash, he was often working for free or for delayed payment (usually in kind) and used his own fuel if the landowner could not find some.

Groupings of farmers

The early peasant farms were usually managed by the family of a specialist of the ex-Soviet farm who joined with other households, mainly close relatives. These groups were registered at the local administration as peasant farms, with an own name and juridical status as enterprise. Later, when groups of households combined their land shares, they were also registered as peasant farms¹⁷ and had an own name and juridical status as an enterprise. Kumbat was the leader of one of such groups, which was officially registered with the name of Ak-Bulut.

Kumbat summarises the trajectories of these peasant farms: “People [...] just decided to work together because they were not used to working separately. Then after some time they separated. The conflicts started. That was the reason to go alone” (Kumbat, 22.07.2016). Villagers explain that, at that time, they thought it would be easier to join with other families to cultivate their newly acquired land plot, hoping in this way to have better possibilities to access the required resources and the knowledge to start cultivation. These groups, however, did not last long: households left the groups and started cultivating their own land shares individually, usually after one or two years of group experience. The recurring explanation for the dissolution of such groups, as anticipated in Chapter 7, is that conflicts emerged about labour contribution and sharing the harvest. Kumbat explains this in detail:

With my brother’s family and two other families we united forces to handle the land. We were doing the activities together. [...] My brother was sending only his young child, who was five years old, to do the fieldwork in the common plot. I was providing seeds, fuel, machines, in addition to my work and the work of my wife and my children. Dinara also organised all the meals for the people who worked in the field. It was a lot of work. [...] At the time of harvest, we brought the wheat and barley to the warehouse to clean it and share it among the four families. Each got 3.5 tonnes of wheat and barley. [...] The division of the harvest was done in equal parts, but everybody was complaining because my brother only

¹⁷ Whereas sometimes villagers refer to the early peasant farms with the Russian term *kristjanskije khozjastva* (peasant farms), they sometimes refer to the peasant farms that emerged with the second phase of land reforms with the Kyrgyz term *dyikan charba*. Other times, they refer more generally to these groupings as farmer groups.

contributed the work of his small child, if you can call it work. [...] The same happened with the harvest of potatoes. The other families were really angry. [...] Therefore the next spring we started cultivating the individually. (Kumbat, 28.08.2017)

Conflicts about the division of harvest concerned the variable that should be used to calculate the share of harvest for each household: whether the harvest should be divided in equal parts among the households, or according to the size of the land plot of each household or according to the work contribution of each household. As seen in Chapter 7, when villagers tell today about these conflicts, they usually frame the behaviour of the households who did not contribute to fieldwork as “lazy”.

8.4.3 Discussion: mapping diverse transitions

The process of decollectivisation produced new forms of individual agricultural practices. In the volatile and uncertain institutional framework of the 1990s, these practices were only partially formalised – and, if they were, their formalisation was often unclear and ambiguous. In this section, I have only presented the main forms of private agriculture that emerged in that period. In fact, during the 1990s, different and complex forms of farmer grouping emerged, overlapped, stopped or continued. It is difficult to reconstruct today the organisational details of such groupings, the exact moment in which a type of grouping emerged or stopped, who initiated them and under which institutional conditions. In principle, the early and later peasant farms that emerged in those years did receive formalised rights in the form of land shares and shares of the other assets distributed, registered either as private property of the farm or of its individual members. These farms were usually registered as private associations or enterprises with an own name and stamp. These names and stamps have remained in the registers of the local administration, even if the composition of most of these farms and the distribution of concrete land plots within them changed in the following years. For instance, the peasant farm of Kumbat and his brother was registered under the name of Ak-Bulut: Kumbat continues today to use the stamp of this farm for some transactions. This of course increases my own but also villagers’ confusion about the differentiation between the cooperative Ak-Bulut and Kumbat’s own private agricultural activities.

My analysis of Pjak’s diverse transitions has shown, on the one hand, that post-independence reforms have achieved a shift away from formal state economies by dramatically reducing the role of the state in local and national economic activities. On the other hand, as Pavlovskaya (2004) has noted for her field site in Moscow, this shift did not necessarily follow the direction wished by reforms, namely a linear shift from formal state economy to formal private economy. Instead, this shift produced an expansion of informal activities, both in the private and state sector (Fig. 8.4), including in Pjak. In the state sector, the access to what had become rare state services and resources remained dependent on (and in some cases became increasingly depending on) personal connections and bribery. In the private sector, a range of new agricultural activities emerged, many of which can be hardly categorised as formal or informal. Villagers tried to make do with the resources that were available to them, without caring too much about the formalisation of their activities – a formalisation that, in any case, would have been volatile. Private agricultural activities were strongly dependent on informal networks for the access to the necessary

production means, including knowledge, which had become dramatically scarce. Local elites played an increasingly important role as intermediaries between villagers and elites at the regional and national levels. The ex-specialists of the Soviet farm acquired even more importance and authority in the village in their role as reference persons to which villagers had to turn to access scarcer agricultural production means.

In this regard, post-independence reforms, at least during the first years of production crisis, in part reinforced the relations of patronage between villagers and local elites. The confused and deteriorating economic and political situation after independence exacerbated villagers' dependency on local elites for their livelihoods and in particular for agricultural activities on the plots received through the process of land distribution. On the other hand, however, the position of local elites remained precarious: my empirical material suggests that local elites faced an increasing pressure – or even a burden – to fulfil villagers' demands for resources, advice and support. For instance, in order to bring increasingly scarce resources in the village, local elites had to invest more of their own resources to maintain their networks outside the village through “presents” and bribes. Also, their position as intermediaries between villagers and regional elites was linked with a certain risk. One example is again Kumbat's relation with Mamakaev, the doctor mentioned above by Dinara. In the mid-1990s, Kumbat could obtain through him a lorry full of wheat seeds to bring to Pjak. Villagers were supposed to sow these seeds and give back in autumn the same amount they had received. However, in spring villagers had so little to eat that they ate part of the seeds; in autumn, harvest was limited (also for the reasons seen above) and a big part of it served to pay other debts. Thus, few villagers could pay back the debt to Mamakaev. Kumbat got into troubles and even had to appear in a tribunal for this issue, since he was the villagers' warrant towards Mamakaev. Although Kumbat was able to escape the tribunal's verdict through a bureaucratic cavil, this episode cost him a lot. Not only did he have to face the expenses and the administrative and the emotional burden of the time-consuming tribunal, but he also lost his connection to Mamakaev – one of Kumbat's most precious resources at that time.

Certainly, not all villagers had access to the ex-specialists' networks to the same extent. Peasant farms in the first and second phase of reforms were created mainly with close relatives, but also with neighbours (who often overlapped with kin) and friends (whose friendship had often originated through the working experience in the Soviet farm). The farms whose members included an ex-specialist started of course with an advantage over the others. The members of the other farms, and villagers in general, were usually included in the networks of the ex-specialists according to similar linkages: in Kumbat's case, for instance, it is clear that he had – and still has – closer relations (and thus more frequent exchanges) with his close relatives, neighbours and friends.

The hierarchy of the ex-Soviet farm also shaped the material outcomes of decollectivisation and in particular of asset distribution. Some ex-specialists of the Soviet farm could start private agricultural production on early peasant farms, through which they could not only start accumulating assets (thereby removing these assets from what became later the pool for distribution) but also acquire experience in the management of medium-scale private farming. Later, ex-specialists had better access to information about

the details of the distribution procedure, for instance about the administrative steps but also about the quality of the land of the ex-Soviet farm. The vague directives from the central government for the concrete actuation of distribution left local elites large room for manoeuvre to shape this process in their favour. In this regard, post-independence reforms exacerbated already existing power relations and privileges in the village. I am not suggesting, however, that this exacerbation was systematic and always linear. On the one hand, some ex-specialists were able to determine the outcomes of reforms in their favour and, in the following years, to build on this advantage and expand their economic activities, wealth and authority. On the other hand, some early peasant farms went quickly bankrupt because they could not generate enough revenues from land plots with bad soil quality that they received from the ex-Soviet farm. Many ex-specialists were also victims of their own patronage relations and lost an important part of their assets in the attempt to cultivate and maintain their networks with regional and national elites. Sometimes, both processes concerned the same person, who could quickly accumulate assets one day and equally quickly lose them with an unlucky deal another day. For instance, Kumbat could profit from his position and knowledge to derive more benefits from the distribution process: Dinara likes to recall that in the 1990s their yard was one of the few full of chickens and that their house was one of the few where guests could always find a table full of food. However, Kumbat lost part of his power when he lost the connection to Mamakaev and, also because of other factors (a serious and prolonged illness in the family and some bad investments or business decisions), today his family is not among the wealthiest in the village and struggles to make ends meet like most families there.

The transformation of economic practices engendered by post-independence reforms profoundly changed the everyday lives of villagers. As in the case of the diverse economies of Soviet agriculture, also the diverse economies of the time of reforms consisted of a complex set of interdependent practices. As suggested by Pavlovskaya (2004), villagers could bear the drastic reduction in state services and transfers because the latter were substituted by informal activities and by patronage relations. Nevertheless, villagers' livelihoods dramatically suffered from this transformation and, as in the rest of the country and in many other ex-socialist countries of CEE and the FSU, the scarcity of basic goods and services for most villagers characterised the post-independence period.

In this section I have focused on the main activities related to agricultural production. Of course, the diverse economies of Pjak in the decade after independence included a range of other practices on which I do not have the space to expand here. These practices included widespread barter and exchange between relatives, neighbours and friends of agricultural means of production but also of food and other basic goods and services. Since the care services previously provided by the Soviet state were drastically reduced, the burden of reproduction and care activities within the household sphere increased and continued to be carried mainly by women and children. In this regard, it must be noted that the loss of formal employment in the Soviet farm also implied a reduction of socialisation spaces, especially for women, whose everyday was withdrawn from the public sphere and increasingly limited to the private sphere of the household.

8.5 New actors in the local arena

My accounts of the diverse economies in post-independence Pjak above have not included, until now, the role of an important group of actors that appeared in Kyrgyzstan in the first half of the 1990s: international organisations and development workers. In Pjak, the first development workers arrived in the mid-1990s, when decollectivisation was ongoing and the first forms of individual agriculture were emerging. In this section I discuss how these actors entered the local arena of Pjak and how their presence and activities transformed economic practices and social relations in the village.

8.5.1 Mobilising local elites

Development projects started appearing in Pjak when villagers' access to every kind of resources, especially agricultural production means but also food and other basic goods, was rapidly deteriorating. The projects offered access to some of these resources; it became thus crucial for villagers to relate to development actors. Dinara explains the establishment of one of the first projects in the village. It is worth quoting a long excerpt of her story not only because Dinara is a wonderful narrator but also because from it emerge several themes that are central for the analysis in this section:

The story began around 1993 or 1994. The local council of the village had the idea of organising a union of farmers who would work together. One guy of the local council gathered with some foreigners, some people from GTZ and Peter Schmidt. On a snowy day they did the transect¹⁸ of the village, to identify the need for seeds in spring and the current yields. They visited the five villages of our *aiyl okmotuu*. There were people from Helvetas, Peter Schmidt, a lady from Helvetas and someone from the local council. They discussed about the results of the transect, the volume of the seeds, the field activities. They said that in the answers of people in the five villages, there was always the name of Kumbat *baike*.¹⁹ Therefore, they wanted to discuss the idea of the project with him. They asked us if we were ready to start the project with Helvetas. Peter Schmidt asked Kumbat to support the project by actively gathering farmers to work in a group. In all five villages, people referred to Kumbat to know when to start irrigating, planting or doing fieldwork. They didn't know about the time, the volume, the seeds, the irrigation, et cetera. They were following Kumbat because he is an agronomist. People were not experts, but Kumbat was an expert agronomist of the five villages and therefore they [the development workers] proposed a collaboration for the project. (Dinara, 30.08.2015)

First of all, it is important to note that, as it is often the case in villagers' accounts, Dinara mixes up dates, persons and institutions. As I have explained in Chapter 7, Peter Schmidt was a real person, but Dinara and Kumbat often use his name to refer to other German-speaking development workers whose names they do not remember. Dinara also confuses the German GTZ and the Swiss NGO Helvetas: it is not clear to which project she refers. She also probably anticipates the timing of her story of a couple of years,

¹⁸ I am not sure that Dinara uses this technical term or whether Elzada, who has experience in interpretation for development projects, summarises with this term another expression in the original narration.

¹⁹ The Kyrgyz word *baike* in its narrow sense refers to one's own older brother. It is, however, used in a larger sense as a respectful form to address men that are older than the speaker. If the man is elderly, *ata* (lit. father) is used. The equivalent feminine forms are *eje* (older sister) and *apa* (mother).

since in 1993–4, villagers were not conducting individual agriculture yet (with the exception of production on their household plot and of early peasant farms); certainly Helvetas did not start projects in rural Kyrgyzstan before 1995 (see Schmidt 2012).

The exact time, persons and institutions are, however, secondary in Dinara's story.²⁰ What is more interesting is Dinara's description of how Kumbat was selected to be an active part of a project. Remember that Dinara likes to depict her husband as a hero and to emphasise his importance as an agronomist with vast experience and knowledge.²¹ Also in this story, she highlights Kumbat's position as an expert in the village, a referent person to whom other villagers asked advice and support and whose name everyone mentioned and praised. Although Dinara probably exaggerates Kumbat's heroic virtues, it is very plausible that Kumbat – an experienced ex-specialist of the Soviet farm with a good knowledge of agronomic techniques and a wide network in the village and beyond it – represented a perfect profile as a partner in a new project. As Dinara explains, “Peter Schmidt” asked Kumbat to help the project by gathering villagers, by mobilising them for the project's activities. This is a typical procedure of development projects, which try to build on local leaders and existing networks to mobilise and motivate villagers for their activities (§3.2.2). In the following years Kumbat became thus a reference person not only for villagers but also for development workers. Project activities consisted mainly of providing farmers with agricultural inputs and training sessions on cultivation techniques, entrepreneurship and management. Often, the projects created the link between input suppliers (especially of seeds, fuel, fertilizers) and villagers. Kumbat explains that the projects usually bought these inputs from outside the village and stored them in his house, from where they were distributed to villagers.

8.5.2 Privileges and burdens for local elites

On the one hand, Kumbat's privileged position in relation to development projects provided him several advantages. His role, discussed in the previous sections, as the reference person for the provision of important resources to villagers through his personal networks outside the village was confirmed and strengthened through the access to project resources. Kumbat could also directly profit from the resources made available by projects: for instance, when they organised training sessions in his garden, Kumbat could keep the material used during the training sessions. He also received from a project the material to build a glasshouse on his household plot and to conduct a trial with potato seeds: the glasshouse still stands in his garden and allows Kumbat's family to produce far more vegetables than average in the village. As I have argued in Part III, villagers today usually identify Western actors as the ones “who know”, who own the right knowledge. In addition to the mentioned privileges, the recognition of Kumbat's authority and expertise by Western actors and his collaboration with them certainly further legitimised his authority and reinforced his reputation in the local community.

²⁰ As I have suggested already in other villagers' accounts, I interpret her confusion not only as a sign of fading memories but also as revealing of the confusion dominating the moment in which the events took place.

²¹ This does not mean, however, that Dinara only praises her husband: her praises are usually paralleled by teasing comments as well as complaints – in a mix that is probably typical of a couple who has spent 50 years together.

On the other hand, however, this new engagement also implied a further burden for Kumbat, especially in terms of responsibility. Once Kumbat agreed to participate in the project, “Peter Schmidt” explained him that his organisation planned to bring new seeds to be distributed for free to villagers. Kumbat transmitted the information to his fellow villagers; however, Dinara comments:

People were refusing the seeds because they thought that Peter Schmidt was cheating and that in autumn he would ask them to pay back the seeds. We said that our family would count as the warrant of Peter Schmidt, the warrant that the seeds were really for free. [...] We said that we would be the persons to blame, the persons guilty if Helvetas wanted the payment back. We tried to convince the others [villagers] that it wasn't a threat but that they [the project] were trying to work together [with villagers]. (Dinara, 30.08.2015)

Kumbat and his family thus assumed the villagers' responsibility to the development agency. This responsibility was linked to a certain risk, in the case the deal with the agency would not evolve as planned. Remember that Kumbat had to assume a similar risk when mobilising his networks to bring resources in the village, and that he also faced legal troubles when the villagers were not able to pay back Mamakaev's wheat.

When I ask Dinara why, contrarily to the other villagers, she and Kumbat trusted the development workers, she replies:

We could trust them not only based on their own words, we also had the representatives of the local administration and of the local council who ensured us that the foreigners were not the kind of people who would cheat you. [...] Also, we compared them with the local administration, who was promising a lot of things but didn't give us anything concrete. They promised to provide fuel, seeds, whatever, but these just remained promises that never became true. By that time the group of foreigners came here with real proposals. These people didn't just promise, they said 'Let's do it!' and they came with concrete things. Why not believe them? (Dinara, 03.09.2015).

Also in her first quotation in this section, Dinara mentions the role of representatives of the local council as intermediaries between development workers and villagers, in particular Kumbat. In this last quotation, she confirms their role in providing a first bridge between Kumbat and the development workers, but also in convincing Kumbat to trust the latter and to collaborate with them. The resources available to governmental actors at all levels to implement concrete measures and fulfil the expectations of villagers dramatically decreased after independence (see Chapter 6). We see here, nevertheless, that governmental actors still played a role in the realisation of development projects in the village – this role remained, however, mostly invisible and therefore widely unacknowledged by villagers, who could see in the realised projects only the engagement of foreigners and individual villagers like Kumbat. This, once more, reduced the legitimacy of governmental actors, as Dinara expresses clearly. She decided to trust development workers because they came with “full hands”. On the contrary, her trust for governmental actors had already deteriorated since, because of the drastic cuts in state budget and tasks, these actors could not fulfil their promises nor the expectations of villagers. We see here clearly how development agencies and local leaders gradually substituted the state, not only in the implementation of development programmes but also in villagers' representations.

Aziza, Kumbat's friend whose husband was head accountant in the Soviet farm, explains how the distribution of agricultural inputs through Kumbat worked at that time:

Aziza: Whenever we met Kumbat, he was informing us about new sorts of seeds. If we were interested in these new sorts, we then told him. We got potato seeds for free for our family. Also the fertilisers. Whenever we met Kumbat, he was informing us. He gave us the fertilisers. And if we needed fertilisers we went to him and paid him.

Ottavia: So you got the seeds for free from Kumbat, right?

Aziza: At the beginning there was a project supporting with the seeds. Kumbat was responsible for these seeds towards the project. He had to report to them. But when he then grew the seeds of the new sorts on his own land, then he gave them to us for free, as a traditional friendship support as we have here in Kyrgyzstan. My husband used to work with Kumbat [in the *sovkhos*], so they are friends. And therefore Kumbat gave us the seeds out from his own yard. The first year he was supported by the cooperative [intended here as the project]. Everybody was asking him for the seeds, but he explained very well that the seeds were not his own property, they were a support for the cooperative. In that moment he could not give the seeds because they were not his property. But he promised that later, when he would have his own production, he would support us [by giving the seeds for free]. (Aziza, 15.08.2015)

Aziza's narration confirms Kumbat's ambiguous position as intermediary between the villagers and development agencies. Kumbat had also obligations towards his networks of friends and relatives, a continuation from the practices of exchange of Soviet time. However, as a representative of the project, Kumbat had to pay attention to what he shared with other villagers and promised them to share his own seeds later. Kumbat was thus caught in his intermediary position, which included both the responsibility towards development agencies but also his obligations towards his networks. In this sense, he did not only profit from the privileges generated by his close connection with the projects, but he also faced an increased burden to fulfil his obligations towards villagers. Failing to fulfil these obligations can have consequences on one's reputation and status in the local community. For instance, a few villagers lament in our conversations what they see as the greediness of Kumbat's family, which used to share seeds and other resources with other villagers but now does not share anything anymore. Since it was difficult for villagers to differentiate exactly between the specific roles and resources of the projects and Kumbat's own role, it was easy for them to identify Kumbat's family as greedy once the projects stopped channelling resources in the village and Kumbat stopped distributing these resources to villagers,

Another important point emerges from the quotations in this section. It was difficult for villagers to understand when resources were given them for free and when they had to pay them back later. Villagers who were part of Kumbat's exchange networks (in Soviet times and later) used to receive resources "for free" – or, rather, in return for some favours later. It was thus difficult for them to understand why, suddenly, sometimes they had to pay and sometimes not. This point does not concern solely the exchanges with Kumbat, but is an ambiguous issue within development projects until today. Sometimes projects distribute resources to villagers for free. Other times projects serve as intermediary between traders and villagers: they buy products in bulk from traders and resell them to villagers for a profit. This

ambiguity concerns also financial resources flowing in the village through development projects: it is often unclear whether these are loans that should be paid back, or grants or subsidies that are offered without expecting a return payment. This was the case for instance for the money the cooperative Ak-Bulut received for the renovation of its warehouse from a development agency through CUK. Kumbat maintains that this was a grant that should not be paid back. However, until today, CUK is asking him to pay back the money, which its director considers was a credit. To the Swiss reader – like for myself – this ambiguity might seem odd: how is it possible that villagers accept big amounts of money without knowing whether they will have to pay them back and thus without being able to draft a financial plan for the repayment of the debt? We will see later with the case of Aisha that this ambiguity is normal in the village and still widespread today.

8.5.3 A new generation of projects

The presence of development projects in Pjak reached its peak in the 2000s. Towards the end of the decade, several of these projects stopped, also because their aim had been to support farmers in the transition to market economy. Kumbat's access to project resources – and villagers' access to them through Kumbat – decreased thus in parallel with the retreat of development agencies from the village. Nevertheless, development intervention in rural Issyk-Kul did not completely stop, although today it usually does not directly provide agricultural inputs to farmers for free or for cheaper prices and focuses instead on the provision of training sessions and opportunities to diversify production with the processing of raw products. The new generation of farmers, who only marginally experienced Soviet agriculture, developed some new strategies to secure its livelihoods through agriculture and other activities (see Chapter 9).

I have already introduced to the reader Batma, the chairwoman of the cooperative Kara-Jer, and Aisha, its only member from Pjak (see Chapter 7). Batma's personal trajectory is an example of the possibilities a career in the development sector can offer to Kyrgyzstani women today (see §3.2.2, also Féaux de la Croix 2013). As a development worker, Batma has travelled in the region and in the country giving training sessions and mobilising communities on different topics. Through such activities, Batma has built a broad network of contacts in the region. She has also collaborated with Sezim, the CUK director, with whom she has become a close friend. It is thanks to this connection that Batma and Sezim decided to establish a new cooperative based on Batma's network in the Issyk-Kul region: the cooperative Kara-Jer.

Through her contact with Batma and her involvement in the activities of development projects and of Kara-Jer, Aisha has acquired several skills and resources that are useful for her beyond Kara-Jer's specific activities. In early 2016, in one of the gatherings held for the establishment of Kara-Jer, Aisha hears about the Issyk-Kul Development Fund. The fund was established by the Canadian mining company Kumtor, which exploits a big gold mine in the Issyk-Kul province. The fund, nourished with 1% of the company's yearly revenues, supports “social and economic development” in the province and is managed by a board composed also of regional governmental actors from the province and the

districts.²² Aisha always bursts with business ideas and, when she hears of the fund, she starts dreaming of establishing a processing factory for fruit and wool in Pjak.

From that moment, an odyssey begins: every time I visit Aisha between 2016 and 2017, she tells me the further developments, and several complications, of her project. Initially, Aisha struggles to obtain support for her project from the village administration. She complains that its representatives (all men) do not take her seriously and even laugh at her when she explains her project. Aisha tries to put pressure on the local administration from below and from above. From below, she collects the signatures of villagers who support her project because they see the advantages of having a processing factory in the village. From above, she achieves an audience from the *akim* (head of the district) and the *gubernator* (head of the province) thanks to some friends of her husband. Sezim contacts a national deputy friend of her and convinces him to make pressure on the *akim* and the *gubernator* to support Aisha's project. Finally, in June 2016, Aisha receives the confirmation from the *akim* that the fund has granted her 450,000 soms (6,500 USD) for the purchase of the processing machines. When I ask her whether this is a grant or a loan, Aisha vaguely replies that she does not know or that it is not clear from the *akim*'s letter. We see here the same ambiguity discussed above about the repayment of such funds.

In the meantime, Aisha and her husband already started constructing a small building in their yard, where they plan to install the machines. The local administration, however, informs Aisha at this point that she cannot install the machines on her private land: since the machines are paid by the fund, they have to remain on public land. A new chapter of the odyssey starts: Aisha spends the following months trying to find an agreement with the local administration about the public building that should host her new factory. When I come back to Pjak in August 2017, Aisha explains that finally the local administration agreed to install the machines in the old *klub*, an abandoned building in the centre of the village that has been falling into ruin for several years. The building needs substantial renovation, and a special electrical installation is required for the machines. Aisha, with the help of Batma, Sezim and her husband, put together a dossier detailing the current conditions of the building and the necessary renovation works; the dossier includes a budget plan. The renovation will cost 1 million soms (14,600 USD), more than the double of the money she received from the fund for the machines. When I leave the village in September 2017, Aisha is still struggling to negotiate that the local administration and/or the fund pay for the renovation of the old *klub*.

Between my visits in 2016 and 2017, Aisha and her husband conduct research on the internet to find the machines to buy with the money of the fund. The purchase of the machines is managed by the accountant of the fund, in order to avoid irregularities with the bills. When I visit them in August 2017, only the fruit dryer has been delivered to their house. Apparently, the accountant did a mistake and ordered a smaller juice maker than planned. The small juice maker is now in Bishkek and Aisha is reflecting whether to complain and send back the machine (with the risk of having to wait a long time for the new one) or to accept the smaller one. The wool cleaner has been ordered but has not arrived yet.

²² See http://www.transparency.kg/ti_k-i-fond-razvitija-issyk_kulskojj-oblasti.html (accessed 30.08.2016)

8.5.4 Discussion: new actors, new relations

If we come back to Pavlovskaya's matrix, we can conclude that the arrival of foreign development actors in Pjak contributed to reducing the visibility and legitimacy of state formal economic activities, which were already declining as a consequence of post-independence reforms. In the moment when local governments found themselves without resources to support villagers in the deteriorating food and production crisis of the 1990s, development agencies entered the local arena with "full hands", providing concrete material resources, as Dinara underlines. Since their room for manoeuvre and budget were dramatically limited, local governmental actors turned to development agencies and supported (or at least did not thwart) their establishment in rural villages. At the same time, however, as already noted in Chapter 6, this move often produced a further deterioration of villagers' trust and appreciation of the local government – and an even more reduced legitimacy of the state in the eyes of villagers.

On the other hand, the activities of development agencies contributed to reinforce and expand private economic activities in Pjak, in line with the aims of post-independence reforms and privatisation policies; this concerned informal practices at least as much as formal ones. The presence of development projects as a source of resources reshaped exchange networks and the relations of patronage that already existed around the Soviet farm. Similarly to post-independence reforms, development projects provided both privileges and burdens for local elites, the burdens being particularly the risk they had to take on as intermediaries and the warrants between external agencies and villagers. At the same time, projects themselves relied on existing groups and networks to realise their activities. I am not criticising this strategy: on the contrary, in Chapter 6 I suggested that the promotion of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan has tended to neglect existing informal cooperation practices while proposing an abstract model that is not always easily adaptable to local realities. In this regard, the fact that projects consider and include in their activities existing social relations is positive. However, I am highlighting here once again that, also in the case of development projects, formal economic activities are dependent on informal ones and that both constitute a complex system of interdependent diverse economies. This interdependence is often neglected by both scholars and practitioners who, as noted also by Pavlovskaya (2004), present postsocialist policies or development intervention as promoting the shift from formal state economy to formal private economy, neglecting thus the role of informal economic practices.

Certainly, development projects did not just overlap with existing relations and practices, but also contributed to their transformation. In particular, whereas the villagers relied on existing patronage relations with local elites during the first decade of the presence of development agencies, new actors have more recently emerged and transformed these relations. In Aisha's case, her involvement in development initiatives allows her to overcome, albeit sometimes with a lot of struggle, existing hierarchies and privileges. Through this involvement, she is not only learning cultivation techniques and entrepreneurial skills such as drafting a budget plan, but she is also developing an important network of contacts that allow her to further her business ideas.

Aisha's case seems to confirm that the intervention of development agencies is creating the conditions for people like Aisha to overcome the rigid local networks and structures and to further their private business activities – in short, the conditions for the emergence of a new class of entrepreneurs. Indeed, Aisha embodies the ideal entrepreneur to whose emergence development agencies aspire (see my discussion in §3.3). Aisha and her husband do not come from a particularly privileged family: through the right connections with the right people and the right investments at the right moment, both Aisha and her husband were able, in the 1990s, to start some successful businesses almost from nothing. At least according to Aisha, her husband was one of the first persons to start selling *jarma* at the corners of Bishkek's streets in the 1990s, before this business became widespread and was later taken over by the large companies Shoro and Enesay, which now control almost all stands in Bishkek and in the country. Today, Aisha and her husband engage in several small businesses beyond agricultural production, for instance: they process manually some products they then resell in Karakol; they keep beehives in their garden and sell the honey in the village; and they grow medical plants they can sell through Batma's networks. Aisha is also a woman, and thus a favourite target of gender-sensitive development projects. It is indeed astonishing how she is able to fight for her project and defend it in front of the men of the local administration and other men in higher positions (the *akim* and the *gubernator*). It is also rare in Kyrgyzstan to see a woman standing for her business ideas in front of her husband and especially her mother-in-law, who were reticent to join Kara-Jer.

It is important to note that the conditions for the emergence of entrepreneurs like Aisha also include reliance on informal networks and the lobbying, through these networks, of persons highly placed in the state hierarchy. Indeed, as we will see more in detail in Chapter 9, the emergence of this new kind of entrepreneur does not go without its own ambiguities and contradictions.

8.6 Conclusion: transformations of economic practices and social relations in Pjak

Transformations of diverse economies of agriculture

The analysis of the transformations of agricultural practices in Pjak through the lenses of diverse economies has confirmed what scholars in Gibson-Graham's tradition have observed in other contexts. Neither the Soviet economy of the Kyrgyz SSR nor the neoliberal market economy promoted by post-independence reforms are unitary and coherent economic systems. Rather, both are constituted through diverse economic practices that are strongly interdependent and symbiotic but that can also be contradictory and mutually detrimental. Neither of the two systems mirrors its common representation as centred on, dominated and determined by, respectively, formal state economy and formal private economy. Instead, Section 8.3 revealed that the formal economic activities controlled by the Soviet state were supported by informal – and often illegal – exchanges between Soviet enterprises but also by private economic activities that extended largely beyond what was formally and legally allowed. These informal

activities, however, simultaneously eroded the sustainability of the formal state economy. Section 8.4 revealed that, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, villagers could bear (albeit with extreme sacrifices) the consequences of the dramatic reduction of state tasks and budget commanded by post-independence reforms only through the expansion of private activities, especially in the informal sector. The high volatility and confusion of institutional arrangements at that time, in turn, often prevented the establishment of a solid private formal sector. Section 8.5 revealed that the intervention of development agencies in the village contributed to reinforce these processes.

In general, it has become clear that post-independence reforms drastically reduce the role of the state and the extent of formal state economies and that the activities of development agencies reinforced this reduction by substituting the state in some of its former tasks. However, the analysis in this chapter has confirmed that it would be simplistic to read post-independence transformation as the “penetration” of the neoliberal market or capitalism in a society and in sectors previously organised according to different economic and social principles. It is true, on the one hand, that some economic domains that were previously outside the influence of market relations have been newly re-organised according to market principles. However, on the other hand, several activities have remained (or have newly become) organised according to other principles – in particular according to reciprocity or patronage relations within networks of relatives, colleagues and friends.

Reconfiguration of social relations and hierarchies

Throughout the chapter I have often emphasised the importance of reciprocity and patronage relations within local networks for villagers’ livelihoods but also their role in the stratification of the local community. Such networks were important in Soviet times and continued to be so after independence: it is indeed through these networks that villagers could access important resources for private agricultural activities on their household plot during Soviet times and later also on their newly acquired fields. Personal networks were indispensable for the establishment of private agriculture during decollectivisation. The general uncertain and volatile context of the 1990s offered new possibilities to local elites to accumulate crucial assets and wealth, but also authority and power. In particular, the outcomes of the confused process of land distribution favoured the villagers who had already a privileged position in the hierarchy of the ex-Soviet farm. The increasing scarcity of agricultural inputs (and of other resources in general) engendered by post-independence reforms confirmed villagers’ dependence on patronage relations and thus also on local elites.

Personal networks were crucial also for the implementation of development projects. Aid agencies relied on local elites for the realisation of their projects and thus provided these elites with material and symbolic privileges (in particular the direct access to project resources but also the legitimation of their authority as “specialists”). The presence of development projects in the village thus reproduced the role of local elites as intermediaries between external actors and villagers and thereby confirmed the authority of these elites as well as villagers’ dependence on them. On the other hand, however, I have underlined that

the collaboration with development projects did not only provided benefits for local elites: their obligations towards villagers but also towards development agencies placed them in a delicate position that implied a series of risks and additional burdens.

Both post-independence reforms and development projects thus reshaped the position of local elites as well as the relations of patronage and reciprocity within local social networks. One could be tempted to read my account as suggesting that rigid Soviet hierarchies determined the outcomes of reforms in favour of the old well-known local elites and that these elites were systematically strengthened by the activities of development agencies. It is important to underline once more that this is not the case. Processes I have discussed are all but linear and determined: the position within Soviet hierarchies was already precarious, as were the privileges that elites were able to acquire from the decollectivisation process. Starting individual agriculture in the second phase of land reforms was also difficult and risky for local elites (although less so than for other villagers). An unlucky investment, an illness in the family or the rupture of an important relationship with a particularly influential person could suddenly reverse the fortune of a privileged family. On the other hand, a particularly lucky investment or a new beneficial connection could mean the unexpected opportunity to rapidly improve the position of another family. Burawoy et al. (2000) have noted a similar uncertainty in social position and mobility in northern Russia in the 1990s.

The generation of local Soviet elites to whom I refer is gradually getting old or dying. Certainly, the sons (and to a lesser extent the daughters) of those elites start from a privileged position in terms of the assets and networks that are already available to them. At the same time, we have seen that, more recently, a new generation of villagers is able to gain wealth and authority in the local community. This is the case for instance of Aisha, who is able today to strengthen and expand her economic activities and, sometimes, to bypass local hierarchies. This is possible also thanks to the resources (including personal connections) provided through the presence of development projects in the village and in the region. Nevertheless, these possibilities are again not accessible to everybody in Pjak: Aisha represents in this sense a specific subject – the peasant entrepreneur – that development projects particularly support and look for.

Reconfiguration of economic spaces

The transformations of economic practices after independence reconfigured the spatial dimension of economic activities in Pjak. During Soviet times, villagers' livelihoods were centred in, but not limited to, the relation to the Soviet farm. Both the public space of the Soviet farm and the private space of the household were fragmented. Villagers' relation to cultivation processes was highly fragmented within the Soviet farm: workers were responsible for, and often aware of, only a small cog of the big wheel of agricultural production and marketing. At the same time, this wheel stretched well beyond the farm and the village: the activities of the Soviet farm were tightly linked to other farms and enterprises in the Kyrgyz SSR and were inserted in the larger international socialist economic system. The networks of specialists also stretched beyond the village and the country and linked local specialists with other specialists in the international socialist space. Villagers experienced their linkages to this broader space

both indirectly through consumption goods imported from other socialist countries but also directly through the travels awarded to farm workers.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, villagers' space suddenly shrank as the linkages to the larger international socialist space vanished at least in part (see Smith and Stenning 2006; Reeves 2014). Some elites were able to maintain their connections and networks outside the village, but with increasing difficulties. Later, villagers' space gradually expanded again through the presence of international aid agencies in the village but also through villagers' connections with emerging regional and international traders as well as with increasing labour migration of household members. On the other hand, the decollectivisation of agriculture reconfigured villagers' relation to the process of cultivation as well as to land, soil and natural resources more generally. Over the course of a few seasons, ex-Soviet farm workers became responsible for the whole production process, which also constituted a new awareness about specific agro-ecological needs and limitations. Therefore, whereas agriculture in the village became fragmented (in the sense that agricultural production was not anymore centralised in the Soviet farm but was decentralised in single households), the process of agricultural production gained simultaneously a new form of unity within the single household.

These spatial changes affected male and female villagers differently. Women performed reproduction and care activities within the private sphere of the household both during Soviet times and after independence (and continue to perform them today, see Chapter 9). However, in Soviet times most women were also active in the public sphere outside the household through their formal employment in the Soviet farm or the local school: this employment provided them with occasions for socialisation and exchange outside the family and the household. With the dismantlement of the Soviet farm, women's everyday experience retreated increasingly in the private sphere and in the household (and household plot) space. Their opportunities for socialisation and exchange became increasingly limited to household members and the guests visiting their house.

Understanding Ak-Bulut in its historical context

The analysis in this chapter has also offered new elements to better understand the meanings villagers ascribe to the cooperative Ak-Bulut – and their confusion. We learned that the peasant farm Kumbat established with his brother and two other families during decollectivisation was registered with the name Ak-Bulut in the local register. A formalised group of farmers surrounding Kumbat thus already existed and carried the name Ak-Bulut long before the cooperative was registered in 2005. Beyond this small formalised peasant farm, patronage and reciprocity relations informally linked many other villagers to Kumbat already during Soviet times and later during post-independence reforms: these villagers used to receive agricultural inputs and advice from Kumbat. Kumbat was the reference person as development projects appeared in Pjak, and he was a representative of these projects for villagers. In collaboration with development agencies, Kumbat kept distributing (for free or against payment) agricultural inputs and advice to villagers: it was not always easy for villagers to distinguish between when Kumbat was

distributing something for free on his own, when he was reselling what he had bought outside the village, or when he was distributing something in the name of some development project.

At this point, we can make better sense of the confusion I experienced at the beginning of my fieldwork while trying to define Ak-Bulut as a formalised object with clear boundaries (the reader might have experienced a similar confusion while reading Chapter 7). For villagers, Ak-Bulut is not only (or not necessarily) the cooperative that was officially formalised in 2005 in the framework of a specific development project. Ak-Bulut is rather a group of villagers who have been linked in some way to Kumbat since land distribution occurred, and even before. Furthermore, given the volatile institutional context that has persisted until today, it is understandable that whether a group is formalised and how (as a cooperative or whatever else) is secondary for villagers' perceptions of that group. It is difficult, or irrelevant, for villagers to distinguish which of Kumbat's activities were related to the formal cooperative, which were linked to development projects and which were simply informal exchanges and collaborations Kumbat had within his network. This difficulty persists today. Indeed, several of the villagers Kumbat indicates as members of the cooperative Ak-Bulut are his close relatives, neighbours and friends with whom he has had regular exchanges since Soviet times. In the next chapter I will dig deeper into these relations and show, among other things, how Kumbat's and other villagers' economic activities rely on close cooperation with other villagers today, regardless of the formalisation of such cooperation.

9 DIVERSE ECONOMIES OF AGRICULTURE IN PJAK TODAY

After the analysis of the historical transformations of diverse economies of agriculture in Pjak, we are now ready to engage in the analysis of diverse economies of agriculture in contemporary Pjak. Following the same strategy applied in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, I first present villagers' representations of their agricultural practices (§9.1). In a second step, I present (§9.2, §9.3) and then discuss (§9.4) the agricultural practices I could observe during my fieldwork. In the concluding section (§9.5) I come back to the representations presented in the first section and discuss them in the light of the analysis provided in the central sections of the chapter.

Like in Chapter 8, I do not have here the ambition to provide a comprehensive and exhaustive list of all economic and social practices related to agriculture in the village. My aim is rather to present some examples of different forms of economic practices in the agricultural sector from which we can extract a repertoire of social relations and affects, but also of problems and conflicts, that can emerge from such practices. Because of the seasonality of my own fieldwork (I have never been in Pjak in wintertime, see Table 5.2), my account especially considers agricultural activities that take place in spring, summer and early autumn, while it does not include winter activities like the cultivation of winter vegetables on household plots or the (rarer) cultivation of winter crops in fields. My account focuses on practices related to the cultivation of arable land, while practices related to animal husbandry and the use of pasture land enter my analysis only marginally; the reader should, however, keep in mind that the latter practices are symbiotically intertwined with the cultivation of arable land.

9.1 “We do all by ourselves now”: individualisation of agriculture and of social relations

When I ask villagers in general about their agricultural activities, they usually state that “we do all by ourselves now”,¹ that they work individually. Indeed, we have seen in the previous chapter that the peasant farms composed of several families that had emerged with land distribution lasted usually for one or maximum two agricultural seasons. After these collective experiments, these groups of farmers divided the land they had pooled in a collective plot. Alone, single households started managing the plots corresponding to the land shares they had received through the process of land distribution. The results of the quantitative survey my interpreter conducted in the village in 2017 confirm the narrative of an individualised agriculture in contemporary Pjak.

¹ The sentences in quotation marks in this section are very common statements that recur repeatedly and regularly in my conversations with villagers – old ones but also younger ones who have a shorter direct experience (or no direct experience at all) of the Soviet time.

9.1.1 The establishment of agricultural markets

When Aziza explains how her family used to receive agricultural inputs from Kumbat (see §8.5.2), I notice that she speaks in the past tense. I therefore ask her whether the practices she describes have stopped today:

Aziza: Yes. Recently we had new sorts of barley from Kumbat, but we paid for them. Concerning the seeds of potatoes, we already have them, so we don't need more. Now we have a good basis and we work individually. If we hear that there are new sorts, we can go to Kumbat and ask him. If there are new sorts and we need them, we get in touch with Kumbat. But for the moment our sorts are ok.

Ottavia: And what about the fertilisers today?

Aziza: Kumbat doesn't have fertilisers anymore. Otherwise he would certainly tell us and share them. To buy the fertilisers now we go to Karakol: we buy other products and also the fertilisers. (Aziza, 15.08.2015)

Aziza testifies to the emergence of monetised markets for agricultural inputs and the parallel reduction of informal exchanges between her family and Kumbat. Although Kumbat remains a reference point for information about the market for these inputs, he is not the one who systematically brings resources to the village and distributes them among his personal networks anymore. Kumbat himself comments that he is retired now. He defines himself as a *pensionier*, intending that he no longer takes care of bringing and distributing resources in the village to the same extent as he did before and that he does not engage in development projects anymore. All² survey respondents state that when they do not use as seeds their own crops from the former years, they buy seeds individually from private retailers. They state the same for agrochemical products (fertilisers and pesticides). This suggests that markets for agricultural inputs have emerged and stabilised in the region: several private companies in Karakol sell seeds, fertilisers and pesticides, and villagers can now access these goods through the market without having to rely on intermediaries like Kumbat.

Kumbat's role as a reference person to whom villagers could (or had to) turn for their questions about cultivation has also reduced. Also thanks to Kumbat's advices and the training sessions offered by development projects, villagers have learned the basic cultivation techniques and can manage the whole process of agricultural production without needing to ask advice to Kumbat or others. Retailer companies of agricultural inputs often provide simple advice or more complex extension services to their customers: villagers can turn to them for their questions about how to handle the seeds or how to use the agrochemicals products they have bought from the company.³

It seems that each household individually manages also the rest of agricultural production and marketing: market relations regulate exchanges along the agricultural value chain. Most survey respondents cultivate

² Throughout the chapter, when I refer to "all respondents", I intend all the respondents who gave an answer to the specific question discussed. This does not always correspond to all the people who responded to the survey, since some of them left some of the questions unanswered.

³ A large Swiss-funded programme between 1995 and 2010 attempted to establish a system of Rural Advisory Services (RAS) in the country. Whereas today some regional or local RAS offices still exists, often their activities are very limited. One of the main problems faced by these offices is farmers' scarce willingness to pay for extension advice. See Schmidt (2012) and Vögli (2008).

their private land plots; one fourth rents some additional land from other villagers or from the public fund (LRF) and only few rent out land to other villagers. According to the answers to the survey, all land rents are paid in cash.

The fleet of agricultural machines in the village and its surroundings has increased and, although still limited, can roughly cover the local demand. Attempts to own and manage agricultural machines collectively, like in the case of Ak-Bulut's tractor, have mostly failed. Instead, individual villagers have been able to acquire private machines, usually from the second-hand market and therefore likely to require frequent repair (Fig. 13). Owners of agricultural machines in the village sell the services of their machines to other farmers, driving the tractor on others' plots themselves or hiring a driver whom they pay an hourly wage. When asked whether they coordinate the use of machines with other villagers (especially with plot neighbours) all survey respondents answer negatively. According to the survey, labour in the fields is performed by members of the household without direct compensation in 70% of the households. 30% of the households rely on hired workforce, which they pay in cash. Only one respondent states that he relies on the help of friends without direct compensation.

Villagers store their produce in their yards or gardens – underground, in underground rooms or in small storage buildings (Fig. 14). Few villagers use Ak-Bulut's warehouse to store their potatoes. The only two survey respondents who use the warehouse state that they pay for the storage in cash. According to the survey, the large majority (72%) of respondents sells its products to middlemen in the village: these are usually traders from the region who buy products in the village and resell them in Karakol, in Bishkek or abroad. The rest of respondents, especially the ones who own a suitable means of transport, sell their products directly at the market in Karakol. None of the respondents organises in some ways with other farmers to sell their produce together. When asked why, respondents mainly advance one of the following reasons:⁴ we don't sell our produce / we only sell a small amount (27.4%); I don't want problems/headaches (19%); everyone sells individually, when s/he wants and at different times (19%); the problems of others are not my business (18.4%); what for? (7.5%).

9.1.2 “We have all become specialists”: sense of pride for the establishment of private farming

When speaking about the establishment of private farming in Pjak, villagers mostly express a sense of pride. They emphasise the hardship of the 1990s and the difficulties they faced when they lost their formal employment in the ex-Soviet farm and received instead a piece of land for whose cultivation they had neither the necessary material means nor adequate knowledge. Villagers commonly narrate that, despite these difficulties, they were able to overcome the crisis and improve their livelihoods thanks to their hard work, resistance to hardship and persistence. They often comment that “hunger has told us how

⁴ The question was open; answers were not pre-given. I grouped myself respondents' answers in the categories presented here.

to handle the land”: because of the hardship, the material needs, they heroically pulled out all their forces and resources to overcome the crisis.

We saw in Chapter 8 how decollectivisation forcibly created a new kind of relationship between villagers and the agricultural production process in general, but also between land, soil, seeds, plants, pests, water, canals, tractors and many other non-human entities. Villagers are particularly proud to underline that “the land taught us” how to cultivate it. They refer to the process of trial and error they went through when starting cultivation outside the Soviet farm: they learned to observe the land, its reactions to their practices, the kind of harvest they could obtain depending on how they took care of their fields. Villagers also often refer to this new relation to the agricultural process, commenting that “we have all become specialists”: whereas in the Soviet farm only few specialists knew the technicalities of the cultivation process, now many in the village have learned them. Today, villagers proudly show me the results of these efforts: the crops growing in their fields, their harvest or the food women prepare with the products from their fields and household plots.

In this narrative, villagers usually omit their dependence, at the time of land distribution, on the knowledge and information provided to them by specialists like Kumbat, Ermek or Aibek (§8.4.2) and by development projects through their numerous training programmes (§8.5.2). Certainly, one can suspect that Kumbat and Dinara, in their accounts reported in Chapter 8, exaggerate Kumbat’s role as a “mentor” for villagers or the importance of training sessions provided by development agencies. It is probable that both representations are exaggerated: villagers learned the process of agricultural production in part alone (or, as recurrently expressed by villagers, “from the land” or “from hunger”) through trial and error experiences, and they relied in part on the advice of specialists and on the information provided by training sessions.

9.1.3 “Now you have to pay for everything”: monetisation of exchanges

In parallel to this sense of pride, villagers’ narratives about the individualisation of agriculture express also a sense of loss for the stronger cooperation – intended as a habit of solidarity, mutual help and collaboration – that, at least according to their memories, characterised their lives in the past (see also §7.3.4). Villagers compare what they perceive as an individualised present with a past when they were used to work together, either as employees of the Soviet farm but also during the crisis of the 1990s when they were supporting each other by sharing the few resources they had. Many nostalgically recall that, during the hardship of the 1990s, “we were sharing our bread even if we did not have enough for ourselves”, a recurrent expression in my discussions with villagers. In opposition to this, villagers complain that “now you have to pay for everything” and “now nobody gives you anything for free”, or that “now there is the rule of money” and “money has become the new God” – other recurrent expressions in my interactions in Pjak. The perceived individualisation thus often refers to the monetisation of activities that were previously performed without recurring to money. However, even if an activity is not monetised, it is not necessarily free or a pure gift, as it can also be inscribed in

reciprocity relations based on other forms of compensation other than money – as was the case within the networks of specialists during Soviet times (§8.3.4). Also, sociological theory on gift economies recognises that gifts are usually expected to be reciprocated: what distinguishes gifts from market or barter relations is, however, that the amount and moment of reciprocation is not pre-agreed nor fixed (Mauss 1966; see also G. Botoeva 2015; Verdery 2003, 62–63). Whereas the exchange of food, other goods and labour in Pjak is still common now as it was in Soviet times or shortly after independence, my observations in Section 9.1.1 seem to suggest that such exchanges are increasingly regulated through money rather than implying an expected in-kind reciprocation in the future.

One example of the increasing monetisation of social life in Kyrgyzstani villages is what some have called the “*toi* economy” (Rubinov 2010; A. Botoeva and Spector 2013; see also Rubinov 2012; Reeves 2012; G. Botoeva 2015). The Kyrgyz word *toi* refers in general to different forms of social celebrations, which can include, among others, marriages, funerals, death commemorations, anniversaries, birthdays. Although the Soviet state legally limited the number and scope of such celebrations – especially ones with a strong religious component – these celebrations continued to be integral part of village life in Central Asia throughout the Soviet time (Kuehnast and Dudwick 2004; G. Botoeva 2015). With the weakened control over such celebrations after independence, their number and scope has constantly increased in the region (Fig. 15), leading some national governments to set new legal limits to the costs produced by increasingly lavish celebrations.⁵

As several scholars have noted, beyond their symbolic, religious and festive⁶ components, these gatherings are crucial occasions to share important information about personal lives, events happening in the village and agricultural activities (e.g. Kuehnast and Dudwick 2004; Turdalieva and Provis 2017). This information can include the evolution of agricultural prices, where to find the best inputs for the best price, which trader pays the best prices for agricultural products or how to deal with common pests and plant sicknesses. Furthermore, these ritualised gatherings also serve to maintain and strengthen personal networks with close and distant relatives, neighbours and friends in the village and beyond it. These networks, as we have seen in Chapter 8 and as we will see throughout this chapter, have been crucial for villagers’ access to resources (and credit) and information from at least Soviet times and until today (see also e.g. Kuehnast and Dudwick 2004; Sabates-Wheeler 2007; Rubinov 2012; G. Botoeva 2015).

In her ethnographic research in a village not far from Pjak, Botoeva (2015) has traced the evolution of such celebrations in terms of the resources invested by the families who organise the celebration and by invited guests. She points to the increasing monetisation of such celebrations in the last decade. On the one hand, families tend to increase the lavishness of such celebrations in a race to show prestige and status. The hosts thus face an increasing burden in order to maintain their status in front of others: often

⁵ This is the case in Uzbekistan (<https://eurasianet.org/uzbekistan-wants-to-fine-people-for-partying-too-hard>) and Tajikistan (<https://www.rferl.org/a/1076782.html>; both accessed 28.10.2019).

⁶ The festive component is probably the most neglected in analyses, which usually look for the material and economic functions of a practice that often absorbs an important part of household budgets and time. Most analyses thus tend to undervalue the pleasure – beyond economic or political calculations – that emerges through spending time with relatives and friends, eating abundant food, drinking, chatting, singing and dancing (see Féaux de la Croix 2017, 251–89).

families have to rely on very expensive credit to finance their celebrations, since renouncing a celebration or keeping its costs low is considered a shame. On the other hand, guests' contributions cover part of the costs of celebrations. Botoeva notes that, whereas this contribution traditionally consisted in animals, food or labour, a contribution in cash is increasingly expected, which varies according to the kind of celebration and to the guest's relation to the host family.

I have no quantitative evidence proving a similar evolution in Pjak, but villagers' narratives coincide with Botoeva's observations. When they lament that now they have to pay for everything, they often refer also to social celebrations. It is not uncommon that in our chats over tea villagers start listing all the *tois* to which they have to participate in the upcoming weeks and meticulously calculating the expenses they have to face. These expenses can include not only transfers in cash and in kind to the host family, but sometimes also the purchase of new clothes (or even new teeth⁷). Villagers complain that it is difficult for them to find the money to pay all expected contributions to *tois*. When organising such celebrations, it is tradition that the host family's close relatives contribute also by sending women (especially young women) to help with the preparation of food.⁸ Villagers complain that, whereas this help in the past was provided free of charge (although, indeed, a reciprocation in the same form was probably always expected), today often there is the expectation that this help be remunerated with a small amount of money. Villagers lament a similar process of monetisation of labour support by friends and relatives also beyond *tois*: they mention in particular the common practice of helping each other with *remont* in the house but also with work in the fields, especially when making hay. Villagers interpret this monetisation as a sign, and a consequence, of a broader process of individualisation in which people become increasingly attentive to their own interests and are less ready to support others out of generosity and solidarity.

Botoeva (2015) importantly underlines that the monetisation of social celebrations creates new exclusions in the community of her field site. In particular, she notes that the poorest families, who cannot afford the expected monetary contribution to the *tois* to which they are invited, prefer to avoid attending the gatherings altogether. The other families, noting the recurrent non-attendance of the poor families, or their too small contribution to the gatherings they attend, in turn start avoiding inviting them to their celebrations. In this way, the poorest families are cut out of social networks that are vital for their livelihoods. This has important repercussions on the agricultural activities of these families, who have fewer chances to receive useful information, credit, or material support in case of need.

⁷ In 2016, Dinara's schoolmates organised a weekend of lavish celebrations in her native village for the fiftieth anniversary of their school leaving certificate. For the occasion, Dinara bought new clothes and dentures. I financed the latter as a contribution to the family's budget and a compensation for their hospitality (see below).

⁸ See Beyer (2016, 39–46, 56) for the way in which lineage and descent define the roles and expectations in these occasions.

9.2 A weekend in the potato field

It is sowing time in Pjak. Kumbat's family has been discussing sowing potatoes in their fields for several days. On a Friday morning in early May, a car comes to the house. Meder has come from Bishkek with Sabyr, the son of Kumbat's oldest son Arstan, and three young men. Meder, a big, strong man in his forties whose family comes from a village not far from Pjak, is a good friend of Arstan: they have been working together in a distillery in the capital for ten years. Meder considers Kumbat's family a second family. He has rented land in Pjak for a couple of years, where he cultivates potatoes. His dream, however, is to buy some land in the outskirts of Bishkek and cultivate vegetables in greenhouses there. Sabyr, born in 1992, is Kumbat's oldest grandchild and, among those who do not live in Pjak, he is the one who has the strongest bond to the village. During the agricultural season, he comes to his grandparents' house on a regular basis to help out in the fields and in the house. He arrives with the night bus from Bishkek early on Saturday morning and leaves on Sunday evening. In the agricultural season peaks, when a lot of work is needed in the village, he comes every weekend. In Bishkek, he works with his father and Meder at the distillery, like the three men who arrive today at Kumbat's house. One of them, however, after a car accident that forced him to stop working at the distillery, went back to his family in the same village where Meder's family is from.

The five men have come to Pjak to sow potatoes on one of Kumbat's fields, half of which Meder rents. When they arrive, however, Kumbat gives them bad news: the only potato planter available in the village (a tractor tool that ploughs, sows potatoes, spreads the fertilisers and closes up the soil at the same time) is broken. Dinara and her granddaughter Leila prepare the table and we have tea together, exchanging news from Bishkek and from the village. Dinara, however, does not sit with us: she starts preparing the house and baking bread for the guests, who are planning to stay the whole weekend. Moreover, on Sunday Kumbat's relatives are organising a big gathering, and Dinara was assigned to cook *borsoki* and prepare salads to help with the preparation.

At one moment, the five men quickly leave the kitchen and go to Ak-Bulut's warehouse to take the potato seeds Meder and Kumbat stored there. A tractor comes to our house and, since I had asked Meder if I could join them in the field, Kumbat invites me to take a seat on it. The man on the tractor drives slowly to Kumbat's field: he does a large detour because the field is not accessible from the main street and he has to ride on small paths through other fields. I had been to the same field two weeks before with Osmon, Kumbat's son who lives in the village, when another tractor already ploughed the field. However, Osmon explains, too much time has passed and in the meantime the soil has dried; it is better to plough the soil once more before sowing the potatoes. Meder and the other men sit at the edge of the field. They have brought several sacks of potato seeds and they are now chatting and smoking. I sit with them for one hour while the tractor ploughs the field, then Meder leaves with his car. It is not clear what is happening: apparently Kumbat and Meder are trying to reach all their contacts in Pjak and in the nearby villages who could help them find a planter.

After one more hour, Meder comes back: there is no planter available. Instead, he has brought some buckets and rubber gloves: we will have to sow the potatoes by hand. Each of us grabs a bucket, fills it with the seeds and walks along the ploughed lines, dropping a potato at regular intervals (Fig. 16). The man who had the car accident helps a bit but mostly sits at the edge of the field, smoking, watching and enjoying the pleasant May sun. After a couple of hours, Meder leaves with the car and comes back with Dinara, Kumbat, some of their grandchildren and the lunch. Dinara and Leila have prepared everything: they lay out a blanket on which they dispose macaroni, boiled eggs, bread and tea from the steaming-hot samovar. After lunch, Dinara and Leila tidy up everything, while Kumbat chats with me and the grandsons play in the field trying to help the men who have already gone back to work. I join them when the others go back home.

We leave the field at sunset, not before a rewarding shot of vodka from Meder's car and a stop at the village shop to buy some beer. It is Meder who chooses the beers and pays for them: one "good beer" in a glass bottle for the foreign guest and several big plastic bottles for him and the others. At home, we all sit in the yard with Kumbat and Dinara, enjoying the beer and chatting about the day. After having heated up some water in the *kazan* (cauldron), the men start washing off the dust of the day. I take back my role as a *kelin*⁹ in the house and help Dinara prepare the table for dinner. When the men are done washing, I am ready to serve them tea and dinner in the kitchen. While I wash the dishes with Leila, the men sit outside chatting, drinking beer and smoking.

The next day, Dinara has to go to her relatives' house to help prepare for the celebration on Sunday. She asks me to stay at home and take care of the men's lunch with Leila. While Meder and the others are in the field and Kumbat and Osmon rest at home, Leila and I work in the kitchen. After serving lunch at home and washing the dishes, I join the men in the field. After finishing sowing the thirty-second line, we stop with the seeds and spread little grains of fertiliser (nitrogen) in the lines. Meanwhile, Meder has left and comes back with a man, his horse, two boys and the tool that closes up the soil after sowing. We sit at the edge of the field, waiting for the boys to finish closing up the lines with the horse. When they finish, it is already dark. Meder apologises to me: we cannot go home right away; it is tradition to toast with vodka to celebrate the end of the work in the fields and to express wishes for an abundant harvest in autumn. We end up staying quite long: the toasts, and the shots, are numerous. Then we leave, repeating the evening routine of the previous day.

On Sunday, I go with Dinara and Kumbat to the family gathering. We spend several hours there, chatting with relatives, drinking tea and enjoying the lavish food served on the festive tables. After the ritual distribution of *beshbarmak*, while the guests are still sipping tea and chatting, I join Meder and the others in the field. Kumbat found a planter in the morning. It is the planter of the Oktjabr cooperative in Cheken and, since Kumbat knows Oktjabr's director, he could convince him to send the planter to Pjak to work

⁹ As already discussed, my position in Kumbat's and Dinara's family is multiple and ambiguous. Among others, sometimes I am considered (and referred to) as Kumbat's and Dinara's adopted Swiss daughter, other times as their daughter-in-law (*kelin*), since Dinara often suggests that I should marry her youngest son. When, here and below, I refer to my role as a *kelin* in their family, I intend it broadly as implying a series of duties and responsibilities especially concerning household tasks (duties and responsibilities that, at least in this case, would be similar for an adult daughter).

Kumbat's and other villagers' fields on the same day. The planter can quickly finish most of the lines that were left despite our hard work the two previous days, but Meder and the others are still sowing by hand the last lines with the seeds that were too big for the machine. For the last two lines, Meder has bought two new sorts of seeds. We sow them by hand and finish the work after sunset. The horse with the tool will come the next day to close up the last lines. This time we do not linger with vodka and toasts in the field, but drive directly home to quickly repeat the evening routine before the men leave for Bishkek, where they will have to be in the distillery on the morrow. My fieldnotes of the weekend end with the following observation: "I'm a bit sad that Meder and the others are leaving. Meder was very nice to me all weekend, and this evening, at the end of our work in the field, he thanked me, saying that without my hands they couldn't have finished the lines before sunset. I'm feeling proud!" (Fieldnotes, 07.05.2016).

I linger on the details of this weekend in early May not only because its narration revives memories of a particular pleasant and convivial moment of my life in Pjak, but also because it condenses several important characteristics of village life in general and of everyday agricultural practices in particular. This account seems to come from a different world than the one described in the first section of this chapter. The impression is not of agricultural practices that are completely individualised and regulated through market relations, but rather of practices that are based on, and embedded in, strong personal relations of kinship and friendship. It is puzzling, therefore, to compare the results of the quantitative survey and villagers' narrations about the individualisation of agriculture or about the individualism that dominates the village community today with my experience of accompanying Kumbat's family in the fields and with other observations of agricultural work in the village. In the rest of the chapter, I will discuss these experiences and observations and re-read agricultural practices in Pjak from a different perspective – a perspective that allows us to remain open to diversity and plurality.

9.3 Everyday practices of agriculture

Many of the activities occurring during the weekend described in the previous section are monetised. Meder pays a rent for Kumbat's field and a fee for storing his potatoes in Ak-Bulut's warehouse. For the sowing, he mostly uses seeds from his own harvest of the previous year, plus some that he bought from a private retailer in Bishkek. The services of the tractor that ploughs the field are paid the same evening, as are the services of the horse and the planter. It is possible also that the two men from Bishkek receive monetary compensation for the work provided during the weekend, although when I ask Sabyr whether the two men are paid a wage he replies: "No, we work as a collective. We are a group at the distillery and we help each other also outside the distillery" (Sabyr, 06.05.2016). It is probable also that the women helping with the preparation of the family gathering, including Dinara, receive monetary compensation for their help.

One could indeed interpret this monetisation as a sign of the commodification of agricultural activities, which, at least in part, is the case. However, the account of our weekend in the potato field reveals that these monetised relations are not simply regulated by the market as an external and overarching entity,

but are inserted in a complex system of social relations. I turn thus now to the detailed analysis of these relations with the help of some examples of specific activities related to agriculture.

9.3.1 Exchanges between and within multi-sited households

Until now, I have mainly taken the household as the unit of analysis. When speaking about Ak-Bulut's "members" for instance, or about the members of the peasant farms emerged during decollectivisation, I have usually intended not only one single person but also the other members of his or her family who live in the same house. I have already mentioned the division of labour within households when discussing the reproductive and care work performed by women. It is important, at this point, to reflect more in detail about the composition of households, the relations between their members and their spatial organisation.

In typical Kyrgyz families, married couples live together with their children until these get married. When the first son marries, his wife moves into his parents' house. When the next son marries, the first son moves out with his wife and children, and the new wife moves in her parents-in-law's house. When daughters get married, they move out of their parents' house to join their in-laws. It is thus the youngest son who is expected to remain with his wife and children in his parents' house until their death. This is the general norm in Kyrgyzstani villages; however, as one can expect, the actual practices often deviate from this norm. I discuss here the case of Kumbat's family (Fig. 17), which seems representative of what I could observe in other households in Pjak.

Kumbat and Dinara have four sons and one daughter. The oldest son, Arstan (born in 1969) lives with his wife and five children in Bishkek and works with his oldest son, Sabyr, at the distillery. Kumbat's youngest son, Samat (born in 1989) lives with Arstan in Bishkek, where he works as a sport teacher and football trainer. When he gets married in 2018, it is clear for everybody that he will move with his new wife into their own apartment in Bishkek, where he will continue his professional career. Bermet, Kumbat's daughter, also lives in Bishkek with her husband and three children. Osmon, Kumbat's second-oldest son, lives not far from his parents in Pjak in the house of Bermet's husband, left empty when he moved to Bishkek with Bermet. Osmon's wife regularly migrates to Russia for work to earn money for the house they are building in the village. When she is in Russia, Osmon and his three children mostly live in Kumbat's and Dinara's house and leave their house to Bermet's husband's young cousin Joldosh, whose father died and whose mother lives in Bishkek with her new partner. Tuman, Kumbat's second-youngest son who studied agronomy, used to live with his wife and three small children in Kumbat's house. The three children live in their grandparents' house, but Tuman and his wife migrated to Russia to earn money to pay back the debt he contracted for a failed investment (see §7.3).

The youngest of Bermet's and Arstan's children spend most or part of their school holidays with their grandparents in Pjak. In Kumbat's and Dinara's house, there are sometimes more than ten grandchildren. Many are still very young, so they cannot help their grandparents much with everyday tasks in the house and in the garden and require considerable care work from Dinara and the older grandchildren. Leila (born in 2002), Osmon's oldest daughter, is the one who most helps out with these tasks, taking over the

role of the missing daughter-in-law (*kelin*) in the house. In 2017 she starts secondary school in Karakol. During the week she lives in Karakol at her maternal aunt's house and comes back to Pjak for weekends and school holidays. As explained above, Sabyr comes regularly to the village to help out not only in the fields but also in the house. The oldest among the grandchildren who live in Bishkek come in summer for shorter periods of time, especially when help is needed for instance for the traditional summer *remont*.¹⁰ In winter, Kumbat and/or Dinara use to spend some time in Arstan's house in Bishkek. The house is still under construction and Arstan, his sons and Samat invest their free time working on it. Sometimes they organise a week or two for larger works in the house, for which they hire additional workers who often come from Pjak. On these occasions, Kumbat and/or Dinara stay in Arstan's house, helping out with the work organisation or, respectively, supporting Arstan's wife in preparing food for the workers.

When Kumbat's sons or daughter visit their parents from Bishkek, they often bring presents from the city, like clothes, toys and spirits from Arstan's distillery. They spend their time in the village hanging around with old friends but also helping in the fields and in the house. Every time their children go back to Bishkek, Kumbat and Dinara fill the car with food: fruits, jams, eggs, vegetables and sometimes full sacks of flour or potatoes. They pack the same products, but in smaller quantities, on the night bus every time Sabyr travels back to Bishkek. Similar exchanges of non-food products from the city and food products from the village also take place when members of the extended family (including me as Kumbat's and Dinara's "Swiss daughter", Fig. 19) come to visit, however, with less regularity and in general with smaller amounts of goods exchanged.

In the case of Kumbat's family, I consider each family unit composed of a son or daughter with his or her spouse and their children as a separate household and Kumbat and Dinara with Tuman and his wife and children as another household (Fig. 17). We see, however, that the division between households is blurred. Spatially, the division does not correspond to the norm presented above: sons and daughters move outside the village or outside the country following job opportunities or professional aspirations; the family units merge and separate spatially following the rhythm of agricultural seasons and school holidays. Economically, the households are intertwined in multiple and diverse exchanges of goods, labour and resources that make them interdependent. As we will see more in detail below, whereas some of these exchanges are regulated by specific expectations of reciprocation, most of them are inscribed within a broader system of family reciprocities where no account is kept of the single exchanges and the exchanges are not calculated monetarily. This does not mean, however, that there are no strong expectations of support from other households or household members – expectations that can often become a burden for the single members, especially for women. Dinara for instance often complains about the time and energy required by the care of her grandchildren when their mothers are not at home.

¹⁰ Once a year, the house is emptied of the furniture, deeply cleaned and repainted. Carpets, mattresses, blankets and curtains are cleaned or washed. Other additional *remont* tasks are performed in alternation every two or three years. See Fig. 18.

Leila, who usually performs household tasks without complaints, once cries¹¹ while doing laundry in the yard and confesses to me that this represents an enormous burden for her.

Moreover, it must be noted that I have only considered here the households composed of Kumbat and Dinara and their children. The spatial and economic intertwining, however, is not limited to these five households. First, each of them has further similar relationships with the in-law family. Second, each household is also linked to many other family units composed of close or distant relatives, friends, former schoolmates, neighbours or colleagues, like in the case of Arstan and Meder. The relationships to these other family units might be less cemented and regular than with parents, in-laws, sisters and brothers, but are equally crucial for the livelihoods of single households, as we will see more in detail in the next sections. Especially the relationships with the in-law families can provoke competing reciprocity expectations that produce resentments between the families and, less frequently, open conflicts. One example is the management of Osmon's wife's remittances when she is in Russia. Apparently, she used to send money to her own mother and sisters, which of course slows down the building of the house for Osmon's family. Dinara considers that Osmon's wife should think first of her children, her "true"¹² family and that she should not send so much money to her "other" family.

9.3.2 Land use

Several of the exchanges described above between members of Kumbat's family in the village and in the capital are also linked to the property and management of agricultural land. In principle, every household member who was already born in 1996 received 0.61 hectares of arable land in Pjak¹³ (§8.4.1). Today, some family members do not live in the village, but they still own land shares there. In the case of Kumbat's family, the four¹⁴ households pool their land together for collective cultivation by the family members who live in the village. In everyday conversations, I usually hear them referring generally to "our land", without distinguishing whether a particular plot formally belongs to one or the other person. The only time one of them expresses a separation in this sense is when, visiting some fields, Kumbat points at one plot and comments, teasing Osmon: "You see that barley? It doesn't look good. It's Osmon's barley!" (Kumbat, 07.06.2016). Dinara later explains that the family considers that 1.8 hectares are Osmon's land: these hectares, however, do not correspond to Osmon's official land property, but they are a share of the pooled family land that the family has decided to entrust to Osmon. This means in practice that Osmon decides himself what to plant and organises the field work on his own. For the rest of

¹¹ Whereas for children crying is normal, it is less accepted for teenagers and adults, except for some specific reasons and in some specific occasions. The burden of household tasks for women is surely not one of those reasons or occasions. I thank Paulina Simkin for a discussion on this subject.

¹² Dinara here refers to the tradition that, when a woman marries and moves out from her own parents' house, she also symbolically exit her father's lineage to join the lineage of her husband's father (see Judith Beyer 2016, 47–48, see also above).

¹³ Remember that this was not the case for every household. However, since Kumbat was part of the land commission and well informed about its procedures, the documents to be presented and the room of manoeuvre left to the commission for decisions, all his sons, his daughter and their respective children, living in the village or outside, could receive a land share.

¹⁴ See previous section: 1) Kumbat and Dinara with Tuman, his wife and children; 2) Arstan, his wife and children and, until his marriage in 2018, Samat; 3) Bermet, her husband and children; 4) Osmon, his wife and children. To which was added, since 2018, 5) Samat and his wife. See Fig. 17.

the land, the men of the four households usually take decisions by consulting with one another. Sabyr notes that, since Anabrek has 50 years of experience as an agronomist, he usually has the last word in these consultations. In the end, however, all the harvest is brought to Kumbat's yard and nobody calculates how much was from "Osmon's fields" and how much from the rest of the land.

I discuss with Sabyr how he considers his contribution to the work in the fields: is he coming to "help" or is he coming as a duty? Does he feel different when he is working on "Osmon's field", on what is registered as his own plot, or on other plots of the family? He explains:

I have never thought about this. The point is that we are siblings¹⁵ and I feel the same when I cultivate the different parts of the land. [...] I don't feel obliged to cultivate and work here in the village. Osmon is of my same blood: it is neither "helping" nor a duty, I just do it. I come here instead of lying at home in Bishkek while Kumbat *ata* is taking the shovel and going to the fields or loading the hay... It is a terrible picture that I cannot bear to imagine! (Sabyr, 05.09.2017).

For Sabyr, there is thus no separation between the formal ownership of land plots among the four households: this corresponds to how the other family members talk about their land. Sabyr enjoys being in the village, seeing his school friends, playing football with them and taking care of the land; he dreams of coming back to live in the village one day. Whereas he states that he does not feel that coming to the village and working in the field is a *duty*, from his quotation emerges what can be read as a *moral* duty, i.e. the expectation that children support their parents especially when they are old and expend great physical effort. A bit earlier, Sabyr commented: "The Kyrgyz mentality¹⁶ is that the land is not mine, I don't care which piece is really my land plot. The point is to not abandon the land and the family here" (05.09.2017). Again, he expresses a sense of moral duty towards the family in the village, which should not be "abandoned".

The exchanges of goods between the town and the village discussed in the previous section are thus in part related to the ownership of land and the redistribution of the value generated through its cultivation. Sabyr further explains: "There is no fix agreement among the members of the family for the cultivation of the land. This is the Kyrgyz mentality: we share things" (05.09.2017). The family units in Bishkek receive from the units in the village an amount of potatoes and flour that allows to cover their yearly consumption. This, however, is not necessarily considered as a direct compensation for the use, by others, of their land plots, but rather as part of the broader exchanges described in the previous section.

Sabyr observes that for his relatives in Bishkek, it is profitable *per se* if someone cultivates their land in the village. First, land owners have to pay a land tax to the local government regardless of whether they are cultivating the land. The norm in the village is that, in the case a plot is rented out or lent to others, it is not the owner but the person who cultivates the plot who is responsible for paying the tax. An unused plot represents thus a negative asset that generates costs and no profits. Second, the cultivation process, if

¹⁵ In a strict sense, Sabyr is not Kumbat's son. However, he explains, since he spent his early childhood with Kumbat and Dinara in Pjak while his own parents lived in Bishkek, he considers Kumbat's sons and daughter as his own siblings.

¹⁶ I will come back to the idea of "the Kyrgyz mentality" later.

conducted in a specific way, helps maintain soil quality and avoid its deterioration. Third, if a plot is abandoned, it can be “stolen” by the owners of neighbouring plots, who can move the demarcation signs so to increase the size of their plots.

A multi-sited organisation of household groups as described in the previous section seems to be the norm in Pjak – as in the rest of the country and region (e.g. Smith and Stenning 2006). These kinds of arrangements between households of the same family for the common use of the land shares of those who do not live in the village are therefore very widespread. Sabyr confirms what I have already noted in my observations in Pjak:

There are siblings who handle the land in common. There are also siblings who handle the land separately, but they still work in common. They cultivate separately but then when it is the high time of harvest they help each other. First they do together the harvest of one, then the others, in turn. This is very common. There are also of course siblings who do it all separated, in this case they send their children to work when it's harvest time. (Sabyr, 05.09.2019).

What emerges here is that, if “individually” means “within the same household”, many households in the village do not perform agricultural activities individually, but rather in collaboration with close relatives of other households. This does not mean that there are no examples of harsh conflicts between siblings about land management and use. It also does not mean that this system of collective management never creates injustices or inequalities between and within the households. I have mentioned already that it is especially difficult for divorced women to gain back actual access to their own plots. Also, in a social system like the Kyrgyz one where gender and age determine one person's authority and possibilities to voice his/her concerns, it is clear that family-based agreements tend to be dominated by the decisions of household leaders – in our case by Kumbat. The younger generations and women have thus fewer opportunities to shape the agricultural activities of the family according to their ideas and aspirations. The general consequence – with due exceptions – is a tendency to conservatism in agricultural practices and little room for innovations and alternative ideas.

As observed more generally for exchanges between households at the end of Section 9.3.1, also agreements for the cultivation of land in Pjak are not limited to the households of sons, daughters and siblings, but include the in-law families as well as other households linked through other kinship or friendship ties. For instance, of “Osmon's” 1.8 hectares, 1.2 hectares are owned by Bermet's husband, who entrusted them to his in-law family when his family moved to Bishkek. We have also seen that Meder rents 1 hectare of the land of Kumbat's family and collaborates with its members for cultivation. In this case, the rent is monetised and the separation of the physical plots, but also of the expenses and later of the harvest, is more rigorous. Nevertheless, fieldwork is organised collectively by Meder and Kumbat's family, especially Sabyr.

My observations in the village (and Sabyr's explanations above) suggest thus that the use of land by villagers and by their relatives outside the village is more fluid than what has emerged from the quantitative survey. Agreements similar to the ones described in the previous paragraphs seem to be

common in Pjak. Depending on the kind of relations between families, some are based on collaboration and are mostly nonmonetised, whereas others are more strictly regulated through market relations and monetised. It seems that only the latter are acknowledged in the responses to my survey.

9.3.3 Labour

Labour for agricultural activities

Several people participated in fieldwork while sowing potatoes in Kumbat's and Meder's fields. Members of Kumbat's family (including myself), Meder and the other men from the distillery contributed labour mostly without direct (monetised or nonmonetised) compensation. All these persons are linked by close kinship or by friendship. The weekend of potato sowing represented not only a necessary milestone in agricultural production, but also an occasion for strengthening these ties, spending some time in the company of relatives and friends and enjoying the spring sun and the fresh air of the village. In fact, Meder also included the injured men in the group, without expecting him to help with the fieldwork but rather offering him an occasion for socialisation and a distraction from his daily routine.

One could also wonder if I was myself an object of these functions during the weekend, i.e. if the weekend was organised in the way described also as way to provide Kumbat's and Dinara's Swiss guest with a specific experience of field work: the "genuineness" of manual work in the field, the conviviality of spending the weekend together, the enjoyment of fresh air and warm sun.¹⁷ Meder certainly cared to please and honour the foreign guest (for instance by buying a beer in a glass bottle only for me or by praising the lunch I prepared and my work in the field) during the weekend, but I presume that the manual sowing would have been organised similarly also if I would have not been there. Even when the planter machine sows the seeds, physical work is needed to bring the seeds and the fertiliser to the field and to load them on the planter. Also, some seeds were too big for the planter, and Meder had two new sorts of seeds in too small quantity for the planter. The risk that the planter would be available only when the men had gone back to Bishkek was thus too high: using the planter without the men from Bishkek would have meant the need to hire additional labour for the fieldwork and a car to bring the inputs to the field since Kumbat's family does not own a car in the village.

A specific division of tasks within the group also emerged from my account of the weekend. Kumbat, too old to perform physical work, has the role of the director, giving advice on the organisation of the work and looking for tractors or horses. Dinara and Leila, as women respectively too old and too young to work in the field, are nevertheless crucial to the field work since they take care of preparing food for the workers and assuring their comfort in the house. Were there an adult but not an old woman in the family, she would probably perform tasks similar to the ones I performed. This means, as I have shown above when describing my role during the first day, that I could take over a double role – and the consequent

¹⁷ I thank Bruno Meeus for this observation.

famous “double burden” (see §8.3.4) – both as a field worker during the day and as responsible for home tasks in the evening. Indeed, when we arrived at home from the field the first evening, I did not feel it legitimate to join the men in their washing ritual and later in their lingering in the yard with beers and cigarettes, so I automatically took back my role as an adult woman in the house by preparing the table, serving tea to the men and tidying up when the dinner was over.

The account of the weekend also shows that the obligations linked to *tois* can interfere and conflict with agricultural tasks. Although the peak of celebrations is in autumn after the harvest, they are also held during the rest of the year: families often have to juggle to find enough time to fulfil their obligations for the celebrations while keeping to their agricultural calendar. Once again, it is especially the labour of women that is mobilised for celebrations: Dinara is very anxious during the weekend because she has to help with the preparations in the house that will host the family gathering, while she is simultaneously responsible for the board and lodging of the men from Bishkek in her house. Certainly is she able to delegate part of the tasks to the other female members of her family (including myself), but she still has to maintain the overview and control to be sure that all tasks are performed correctly. Indeed, while Leila and I prepare lunch for the men the second day, Dinara repeatedly calls me to ask how everything is going.

As suggested by Sabyr above, it is common in the village to rely on the help of relatives but also of friends and neighbours in the moments when the labour is most needed in the fields – especially for harvesting and making hay. Often, as Sabyr explains, the help is reciprocated immediately for the same activities in the helpers’ fields. Joldosh (born in 1991), Bermet’s husband’s cousin who lives alone in Pjak, explains that he always performs fieldwork in his fields with the same group of four former schoolmates. Although each of them manages the expenses and the revenues of his land by his own, the group rotates to perform the most labour-intensive tasks in each other’s field. Although I could not directly observe this practice during my stays in Pjak, I know from villagers’ statements and from my survey that households sometimes also rely on hired labour for fieldwork. What I could observe, however, was the hiring of wage labourers in the domain of construction work – a domain that is therefore worth a short digression here.

Labour for construction work

Academic publications sometimes mention the practice of *ashar* as an example of traditional (or re-traditionalised) community work in Kyrgyzstani villages (§3.2.2). During my stays in Pjak in 2015 and 2016, however, the concept never emerges in my discussions with villagers. In 2017, I ask some of my interlocutors explicitly about *ashar*. Some of my youngest interlocutors do not understand exactly what I am talking about. Older villagers, on the contrary, explain that *ashar* is a traditional practice of helping each other in construction work, in particular when a young family is building a house in the village (Fig. 20). The expectation of mutual support in the form of labour by a male household member concerns the households of the same lineage. As in the case of women helping in the preparation of celebrations, this

help can be monetarily remunerated, but it is not considered as wage work. Similar to the rituals described above concerning agricultural fieldwork (e.g. the toast after the end of the day), the construction of a house also includes small or medium-size celebrations marking specific achievements. For instance, when the foundation of Osmon's house is finished, Dinara and Osmon's wife organise a lavish lunch in the garden for the workers; this also represents a convivial moment when relatives can enjoy time together.

It is very common, however, to also hire external workforce for the construction of a house. As far as I could observe, with the exception of the qualified specialists who are hired for specific technical tasks, usually the simple wage labourers are men who have visible alcoholism problems or whose households are considered poor – two things that can easily coincide. Often, these men are ethnic Russians from nearby villages or from the town. This observation resonates with the explanation of one of Féaux de la Croix's (2017, 239) interlocutors in another village in rural Kyrgyzstan, who states that “someone who is working for someone else in the village is by definition a poor person”. Féaux de la Croix (*ibid.*) suggests that “helping out acquaintances for money amounts to admitting publicly that you cannot manage without selling your self-determination to others”. The workforce hired for construction work in Pjak seems to confirm this argument. The ethnicisation of such activities is probably due to a weaker stigmatisation of wage labour among ethnic Russians in comparison with ethnic Kyrgyz (but also probably to the higher poverty rates among ethnic Russians in the region).

It is probable that similar practices of wage labour and its stigmatisations exist in the agricultural domain. This would also explain why in my survey, respondents never indicate that agricultural tasks are performed by friends and relatives against monetary remuneration, although sometimes it can be the case. Even when the labour provided by friends or relatives is remunerated monetarily, it is not considered as wage labour and the importance of the monetary remuneration is discursively downplayed. Indeed, providing support in the form of labour to a friend or relative against a monetary remuneration is symbolically different, and less stigmatised, than accepting to work as a wage labourer.

9.3.4 Agricultural inputs, information and knowledge

Markets for agricultural inputs (seeds, fertilisers, pesticides) have gradually emerged, with private retailers now covering the whole region. Problems in accessing these inputs are today mostly related to the scarce availability of financial resources for farmers. Villagers wish to increase land productivity through the use of new breeds of seeds and agrochemical products; however, these goods are expensive and farmers often rely on old seeds and limit the use of chemicals. This practice, in the absence of alternative techniques, provokes the degradation of seed material and soil quality year after year.

It is important to mention that this vision is based on a concept of modern agriculture that ties the increase in land productivity to the use of agrochemical products and the advancement of biotechnology. Of course, other models of agriculture exist that propose alternative agricultural techniques for maintaining soil quality and productivity without recurring to expensive (and often environmentally damaging or

risky) technologies and products. In this regard, the discourse on organic farming is growing in Kyrgyzstan. The few development projects that still focus primarily on agricultural production mostly promote organic agriculture and its certification process. Farmers in the Issyk-Kul region like to underline that their products are per definition natural, ecological and clean. They relate with pride the “cleanness” of their products to the beautiful nature of the region and to what they present as the traditional respect Kyrgyz people have for this nature. Moreover, farmers often underline, not without some irony, that their products are forcibly organic, since they cannot afford the use of agrochemical products. Nevertheless, when they speak about the agricultural production process, the productivity of their land plots or the profitability of their agricultural activities more generally, the vision that emerges from the narrations of many farmers remains a vision of, and an aspiration to, modern agriculture as defined above (see also Chapter 7).

Coming back to the practices of accessing agricultural inputs in Pjak: I could observe that spontaneous exchanges with other villagers are common. For instance, for farmers it is a problem when their harvest of wheat or barley results in grains that are not suited to being used as seeds the following year. In these cases, a farmer can seek a farmer with a better harvest of the same crop and barter some sacks of his/her grains for the same amount of the better grains. The second farmer can then use the grains from the first farmer for flour for private consumption or animal feed.

In small Pjak, farmers follow the evolution of the cultivation by other farmers with interest: what seeds they have sown, how their harvest is, at what price they could sell their potatoes, etc. Farmers observe the fields of their neighbours to compare the crops with their own (Fig. 21). The comparison and discussion of the agricultural process, inputs, results and prices are common conversation topics when villagers meet spontaneously in the streets but also when they visit each other’s houses and when they gather for celebrations. In this regard, the frequent *tois* discussed above do not only represent a financial and material burden for villagers but also an occasion to share crucial information and knowledge. It is also not uncommon, when seeing that someone has sown a new sort of seeds or crops, to ask about it and maybe, the following year, buy a sack of the new sort to try in one’s own field. In her quotation at the beginning of the chapter, Aziza underlines that Kumbat remains a reference for her family for what concerns information about the market of agricultural inputs as well as about cultivation techniques.

Another example of informal information exchanges among villagers is when Aisha and her husband decide to buy some beehives from a beekeeping farm in the region and place them in their garden planning to later sell the honey in the village. Since they have neither experience with nor knowledge on beekeeping, they ask a friend from the nearby village for advice. He comes to install the hives and for the most delicate moments of their maintenance; Aisha and her husband call him when they have a doubt or a question. The next year, some villagers, having seen the beehives in Aisha’s garden, become interested in beekeeping and ask her to sell them one or two beehives. Aisha and her husband are not simply selling the hives through a market relation, but will later share their knowledge and advice on beekeeping to these villagers.

9.3.5 Agricultural machines

It is part of the tasks of local governments to invite twice a year, in early spring and early autumn, all residents to a community meeting in each of the five villages of the *ayil*. One of the aims of these meetings is to fix the prices for using agricultural machines and for the services of herders who bring villagers' animals to the pastures. Attendants also discuss the calendar of agricultural activities, in particular in order to avoid that herders return to the village before farmers have finished harvesting their fields, which could lead animals to damage the harvest and thus cause conflicts between villagers. The negotiations usually start from the prices of the previous year with machine owners and herders claiming higher prices (by advancing the argument of the high costs of spare parts or the risk and hardship linked to spending over six months in the pastures) and other villagers insisting on keeping the prices low (by arguing that the margin of profit for their agricultural activities is constantly decreasing). Despite some small variations from year to year and from village to village, prices were mostly stable in the years of my fieldwork.

Not all villagers, however, attend these meetings. First, the information about upcoming meetings is spread in the village unevenly, often by word of mouth, and reaches thus most easily villagers who are closely related to members of the local administration. Second, the ones who are legitimised to attend are usually men, whereas the attendance of women is considered strange, if not inappropriate. Third, many villagers state that, even if they are aware of the upcoming meeting, they do not see why they should attend it. They motivate their scarce interest by explaining that, since the negotiations are led by few persons who have most authority in the village, they feel that their own opinion is not considered and that they cannot influence the final decisions. Some comment that, in general, Kyrgyz people do not like to fight openly, especially in Pjak, where most villagers are also close or distant relatives. Therefore, many avoid entering in heated discussions in the public meetings and prefer to negotiate later the prices in person with machine owners or herders. Furthermore, villagers underline that many of the decisions taken at the meetings are not enforced in practice. Since there are few agricultural machines in the village, the few who own them are in a position of power compared to farmers who need their services, so the former can therefore often obtain prices higher than those fixed in the meetings. Farmers who are charged a higher price rarely turn to the local administration with complaints: they do not believe a formal complaint would change the situation. Indeed, representatives of the local administration admit that the enforcement of the decisions taken in the meetings is difficult and that concrete sanctions are rarely applied.

Farmers usually call machine owners by phone when they need the service of their machine. They often comment that, today, waiting times for obtaining the requested service (1–2 days) are much shorter than some years before. Nevertheless, the waiting time often does not allow farmers to accomplish the planned fieldwork in the optimal moment, especially when concerning weather conditions. Furthermore, as we have seen during the weekend in Kumbat's fields, it is not uncommon that machines (which are usually old and overexploited) break, and that several days are necessary to find the fitting spare parts and repair them. This, again, can delay fieldwork, but also generate conflicts between owners and farmers and

among farmers on the waiting list, who fight to anticipate their turn in order not to lose precious time in the cultivation process. The difficult coordination of different fieldwork tasks requiring machines or labour can lead to the repetition of tasks (remember that Kumbat's and Meder' fields were ploughed twice) – and thus to a loss of money and time.

Since Pjak is a small village and the number of machine owners is limited, farmers know each owner personally. They know how the owner works, what kind of machine and tools he¹⁸ has and what prices he normally charges. In this sense, although farmers are dependent on the few machine owners for the realisation of field work, owners also have an interest in maintaining their reputation as reliable and fair. The negotiation of prices happens thus on a personal level between the farmer and the machine owner: the machine owner brings arguments to *convince* the farmer that the fixed price is too low, but avoids imposing the price in a unidirectional way. Also, machine owners know the spatial distribution of villagers' plots. Some of them admit that sometimes they change the order of farmers on the waiting list to reduce the distance their machines have to travel, which allows to save a considerable amount of time and fuel. However, this practice might cause conflicts with farmers complaining about the delayed service. Although in my survey none of the respondents stated that s/he coordinates with farmers cultivating neighbouring plots to call the machine owner at the same time, I could collect evidence of the existence of such practice, even if it is infrequent.

9.3.6 Irrigation

Irrigation management through the WUA

In Kok-Bulak there is a Water User Association (WUA), which is responsible for water and irrigation management on the territory of the five villages of the *aiyl*. The WUA's executive board, composed of three hydro-technicians, one manager and one accountant, in principle responds to the general assembly of members that takes place every year. In each single village, a *mirab* (water manager) is responsible for the concrete organisation and control of irrigation activities. WUAs are formally independent of the local government and are responsible for the collection of water taxes, the repair and maintenance of the irrigation infrastructure and the distribution of water for irrigation in the fields (see §3.1.1).

When I ask them about the irrigation of their fields, most residents of Pjak answer rapidly that it is easy: they call the *mirab*, he¹⁹ puts them on the waiting list and they can irrigate their fields when their turn comes. The same villagers state that there are no major conflicts around water and irrigation in the village. However, when asking the same questions to Aisha and Begimai – two women with whom I have built a close relation of trust – both point to the widespread problems and numerous shortcomings of the

¹⁸ As far as I could observe in Pjak, not only machine drivers, but also machine owners (or at least those who manage their use) are exclusively men.

¹⁹ *Mirabs* are usually men.

current water management system.²⁰ First of all, when discussing this topic with Aisha, it turns out that she did not know that there was a WUA in Pjak. Her husband, who joins the discussion later, knew something about a WUA but he thought that it was an organ of the local government. Aisha and her husband are very engaged villagers who take care to remain informed about the happenings in the village and to influence them according to their aspirations and ideas (see §8.5.3). If even two active villagers like Aisha and her husband do not know the principles and status of the WUA, I suspect that most villagers are not aware of them, either. In fact, when I speak with other villagers, they refer in general terms to some responsible persons for water (sometimes using the term *mirab*) but do not mention the WUA. Aisha confirms that for her, like probably for many other villagers, the persons who are responsible for water and irrigation are part of the local administration. She perceives the WUA thus as just another state organ that collects taxes from her. I have the same impression when speaking with villagers about the Pasture User Committee (PUCs, see §3.1.2).

Only Begimai, who is a deputy in the local council, seems to be aware of the legal status and formal functions of the WUA. She notes, however, that since its establishment in 2010, problems and conflicts around water have even increased: these problems, according to her, are not caused by drought or the lack of water, but rather by poor management. The WUA is not able to fulfil its expected tasks, i.e. to perform the necessary maintenance of the irrigation infrastructure and to guarantee the control over the distribution of water to single farmers according to the waiting list. For Begimai, this poor management is mainly due to the lack of qualified and motivated staff in the WUA. For instance, she underlines that nobody wants to be the *mirab* in Pjak: the job is poorly paid, and potential candidates know that the position as an intermediary between farmers and the WUA's executive board would bring them a lot of problems, conflicts and "headaches". Also, she continues, since the WUA collects a water fee for every time a farmer irrigates a plot, then if the season is particularly rainy, the WUA's income is dramatically cut, since farmers resort less often on artificial irrigation. Since the agricultural season in 2016 was particularly humid, in 2017 the WUA does not have the resources to execute the necessary maintenance of the irrigation infrastructure, leading to increased conflicts and complaints.

Aisha traces the cause of the poor performance of the WUA (or, as she perceives it, of the governmental organ for water management) to corruption practices. Aisha complains often about representatives of the local governments and civil servants who divert public resources into their own pockets or favour their relatives and friends. The WUA and its members are no exception: Aisha laments that the WUA collects taxes as forfeits in proportion to the number of hectares and the type of crop each farmer cultivates. Even if a farmer does not irrigate his/her fields during the whole season, s/he has to pay the full forfeit. This indication contradicts Begimai's statements above; I suspect that this contradiction reveals the unclear and confused institutional practices of the WUA, on the one hand, but might also suggest some "personal adaptations" of the official procedures by *mirabs* and/or WUA board members.

²⁰ Also in this case, villagers' reticence to speak about conflicts and problems might be due to a wish to give a positive image of their village to a foreigner (see §7.2.5). Since many of the people with whom I speak are close to Kumbat and part of his network, it might also be an indication of the favouritisms denounced by Aisha below.

When I discuss this topic with Aisha in late August 2017, she explains that, although she has already paid the whole forfeit of the water tax, she was not able to irrigate her fields during the whole season. As usual, the *mirab* put her on the waiting list; however, when her turn came, he told her that she had to wait a bit longer because there was no water available. After ten days, finally, the *mirab* called her saying that she could irrigate her fields, but when her husband went to the canal to divert water in their fields, the canal was dry. When I ask her whether there is anything they could do to receive their water, or at least to have their money reimbursed; she replies:

No. We were calling the *mirab* but I guess he recognised our phone number and he stopped answering. We cannot do anything! I wanted to do something but my husband didn't want to; he didn't want to fight with people for this. So in the end we lost 700 soms [10 USD] and we didn't water our fields. (Aisha, 31.08.2017)

Aisha is sure that the *mirab* privileged his own friends or relatives by allowing them to use more water than formally agreed – water that then was lacking for Aisha's field. From her quotation, we see that in these cases, although WUA regulations in principle guarantee formal procedures for complaints and sanctions, such procedures are rarely implemented. On the one hand, Aisha has limited confidence in, and limited expectations from, formal procedures in general, which she thinks are anyway co-opted by personal favours and corruption.²¹ On the other hand, she points also to her husband's reticence to enter in open conflict with other villagers. This mirrors what I observed above for the case of price negotiations in community meetings.

Whatever the cause of these problems, the consequence is that the access to water for irrigation is often precarious, at least for some villagers. This problem is exacerbated in Pjak, whose geographical location is less favourable than other villages of the *ayil*.²² Water for irrigation is brought to the five villages through two large canals. Pjak receives water from the two canals, both of which, however, pass through one or two other villages before reaching Pjak. Because of this particular location, if water is not strictly controlled in the other villages, the canals in Pjak remain dry. The *mirabs* of the other villages can afford to be looser about water control: since water is often largely available there, these *mirabs* have larger margins and are more likely to close one (or two) eye(s) when someone diverts water that was targeted for Pjak. It is also in this sense that Begimai states that nobody wants to be the *mirab* in Pjak.

Aisha, Begimai, but also some other villagers in Pjak explain that, as an informal solution to these problems, farmers often organise in groups to assure the control over the water flow that the *mirab* fails to provide. These groups are usually composed by the farmers whose turn for irrigation falls on the same day: while one farmer is watering his/her field, each of the other farmers controls one main water diversion point in turn over the course of the whole day. The same system of control is used during the night to water household plots and gardens. In fact, the WUA is responsible only for the distribution of

²¹ Remember her odyssey in §8.5.3 to obtain the support of the local administration for her project to establish a processing factory for fruit and wool in Pjak. During that odyssey, she bypassed the local administration, which she considers as irremediably corrupt, to obtain what she wanted.

²² This is probably the main reason for the absence of early Slavic settlers in Pjak, since these settlers usually selected the locations with the best water access.

water to irrigate the fields during the day. There is, however, also a water contingent that flows to the village in the night, but the use of this water is not regulated by the *mirab*. Aisha suggests that the self-managed watering at night works much better and with less conflicts than the watering of fields during the day managed by the WUA.

Community work for canal maintenance

Begimai explains that the WUA is directly responsible for the maintenance only of the big canals on the mountains and between the villages. For the smaller canals, the WUA delegates maintenance (mainly cleaning in spring) to villagers through forms of community work: one representative of each household is invited to form a group with his²³ neighbours to clean up the small canals on the whole village territory. Begimai further explains that these community works are organised at the same community meetings I have discussed above. Most villagers (likely because many do not attend such meetings) state that they receive the information about the community work by word of mouth from other villagers. Certainly, the fact that these works are organised by or through the local government probably contributes to villagers' confusion about the independent status of the WUA.

Some villagers refer to this community work on canals as *subbotniki*, but most villagers do not use any specific term. Only Begimai mentions the concept of *ashar* in this context, but rather to explain that the maintenance of the canals is a community practice of mutual support similar to *ashar*. When I ask in general about *subbotniki*, villagers usually do not think firstly of the maintenance of canals but rather of the Soviet-inherited tradition of community work performed by schoolchildren on weekends (see §8.3.1). This tradition is still practiced in the village: few times a year, in spring and autumn, children are convened to clean the school garden and other public spaces in the village. Usually on these same days, their parents and other adult villagers spontaneously organise with their neighbours to clean the street in front of their houses.

Villagers maintain that usually the participation in these community works is fairly good, although of course there are households who do not send any members. This practice does not provide for formal sanctions in case of non-participation; villagers, however, explain that they feel a moral obligation to contribute to the community work and fear shame rather than material sanctions. As Begimai puts it, "how would you look at your neighbour the day after, if you skipped the community work?" (20.08.2017). Begimai further explains that the tradition of *subbotniki* is rooted in the community since generations and that, therefore, villagers just reproduce the tradition without discussions. She also adds that "if you don't clean your street, people will consider your street as an open-air dump" (Begimai, 20.08.2017), which is of course not only shameful for the habitants of the street but will also result in increased littering in the area. Concerning the canals, Begimai's husband explains that everybody has an interest in maintaining them clean in order to have better access to water and that, therefore, usually

²³ Usually, men perform this work.

villagers contribute to the community work without complaints. It must be noted that all these forms of community work usually also represent an occasion of socialisation and a convivial moment with schoolmates or neighbours.

9.3.7 Marketing

Remember the disenchanted answers villagers gave in my survey to the question of whether they sometimes organise with other farmers for marketing their produce. Indeed, the selling of agricultural products from Pjak is very fragmented and individualised. Villagers' reticent attitude towards collective marketing is probably also in part the consequence of some negative experiences. Some tell about cases of businessmen who came to the village and promised to some groups of farmers to buy their products in autumn for a fixed price if the farmers were able to provide the requested quantity and quality; these businessmen then disappeared and never came back in autumn. Nevertheless, some villagers (for instance Tuman and Aisha) in some occasions were able to conclude agreements with traders who bought an agreed quantity of products at a fixed price for export. However, it happened that some of the farmers who participated in the agreement filled their sacks with bad quality potatoes or even with stones, and the agreement was cancelled the following year.

Finding good conditions for marketing their agricultural products is difficult for farmers, even if they join with others. Remember that even the new cooperative Kara-Jer, after only one year of existence, was already unable to find marketing opportunities for its members' products. In this sense, farmers are unable to exert control over marketing agreements and prices and are thus dependent on the fluctuations of highly volatile prices and market demand. Kyrgyzstan's inclusion in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015 did not improve the situation: on the contrary, the increased competition, especially of Belarusian and Kazakhstani potatoes, and the costly certification procedure required for trade within the EAEU are challenging for farmers in the Issyk-Kul region.

Concretely, farmers have personal contacts with traders in the region: they contact them when they want to sell some of their products; sometimes they call several traders to compare the prices they offer. The process can also happen the way around: traders contact farmers in the village when they have planned a delivery. It is also crucial for villagers to share information about the current prices different traders offer: this information, as seen above, is shared when meeting other farmers in the streets, visiting them in their houses or gathering at a *toi*. Some villagers sell their produce directly in the market in Karakol, but this requires the availability of a means of transportation and implies additional expenses for the fuel. Kumbat's family organises the selling of potatoes from Ak-Bulut's warehouse. Traders know that in the warehouse, they can usually find big quantities of potatoes, so they contact Osmon when they need some. Whenever Osmon receives a request from a trader, he calls the farmers who have stored potatoes in the warehouse to ask whether they agree to sell them at the price proposed by the trader and in which amount. Another option for marketing is selling to or bartering with other villagers.

9.3.8 Cash and financial services

Cash is a scarce resource in Pjak, especially in spring when it is most needed for financing the start of the agricultural season. Salaries from off-farm jobs, pensions and other (rare) state transfers, although often amounting to a pittance²⁴ that certainly does not provide a decent living, are a form of crucial, regular cash income for households. Cash transfers and remittances from household members working in Bishkek or abroad are also an important source of cash. In the case of Kumbat's family, an additional, yet temporary, source of cash was their Swiss guest: I lived and ate in their house without paying a regular rent, but our agreement was that they could ask me small amounts of money when they needed it for exceptional expenses (for instance for Dinara's dentures, see above). Animals represent another important means to access cash, so they are therefore considered to be a "bank account": they can be sold quickly whenever cash is needed, but of course prices fluctuate. The same, but within a shorter time span, is valid especially for potatoes but also for wheat and barley: the harvest is not sold all at the same moment, but a part of it is kept longer and sold during the year when cash is needed.

Forms of savings and credit groups are also present in Pjak, usually known under the Russian term *chornaya kassa* (lit. black cashbox). These groups function according to the typical principles of rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs, see Kandiyoti 1998) and are usually composed of households linked through kinship, friendship or neighbourhood ties. Members meet regularly (for instance every one or two months) and each time contribute a fixed amount of money to the *kassa*; in turn, at each meeting, one of the households receives all the money contributed by the other members. In Pjak, single households can be members of several of such groups, which usually share small amounts of money (200–500 soms or 3–7 USD) per household per meeting. These groups are usually attended by women, who gather in the house of the household that will receive the money and share a lavish lunch. These are also convivial occasions when women can gather without their husbands, socialise and share information. In these small *kassas*, the maximum sum of cash a household receives amounts to few thousands soms, depending on the number of participants (usually less than a dozen). This money is in part used to cover the expenses of organising the gathering and for other small exceptional purchases, especially of house furniture and kitchenware. Some households are part of a bigger *kassa*, where the contribution per household can amount to a few thousands soms (up to 5,000 to my knowledge, or 73 USD). These *kassa* groups usually meet in restaurants in Karakol and are attended by both women and men – reproducing on a small scale the *tois* discussed above. In these cases, the amount of money received by the household at its turn is more significant and can be used for construction work on the house but also for investments in economic activities. However, this cash is available only *una tantum* and its timing does not necessarily correspond to the time of the agricultural calendar when it is most needed.

Because of these limitations in accessing cash, it is not uncommon that the payment of the expenses for spring agricultural work is delayed until the time of harvest. This is especially likely when the payment is

²⁴ Average pensions are between 4,000 and 6,000 soms (58–88 USD) per month; the salary of a teacher in Pjak amounts to far less than 10,000 soms (145 USD) per month.

due to another villager but less frequent with private retailers in the town. These debts are rarely officialised through written documents but are agreed on by word of mouth, which villagers state they trust more than any written paper. Villagers in Pjak rarely rely on credit from credit institutions, which, with interest rates between 20 and 30% and the requirement of collateral, are too expensive for villagers. Only villagers who already own a certain amount of capital can access these risky forms of credit. We have seen the case of Tuman, who had to migrate to Russia to be able to pay back the debt he contracted with the bank. Such debts, which explode the longer the payment is delayed, can devastate the budget of a household for years and cause immense anxiety: Dinara once commented that when the date for the due payment of the debt interests is approaching, she cannot sleep and has a stomachache. As an alternative, villagers prefer to borrow money from relatives or friends in the village or through acquaintances on the black market in Karakol, which offers similar if not higher interest rates but requires no or less collateral. Certainly, also these forms of credit imply risks: the delayed payment of the interest from a credit from the black market can cause an even bigger explosion of the debt than from credits taken from banks. A delayed payment to relatives or friends can deteriorate personal relations that, as we have seen throughout this chapter, are crucial for households' livelihoods.

Lastly, there are no formal insurance options for farmers. Variations in farming revenues due to the fluctuations of prices and land productivity linked to weather conditions are usually absorbed by augmenting or reducing, the next year, the surface cultivated with a specific crop. For instance, when potato prices are low but meat prices are stable, farmers shift land use from potatoes to fodder crops. This common practice, however, also contributes to the exacerbation of price fluctuations. Farmers have also the possibility, each year, to increase or reduce the total amount of land they cultivate through the land rental market, especially thanks to the availability of public land from the LRF that can be rented on short-term contracts. Certainly, the networks of relatives and friends that have emerged throughout the chapter represent a crucial "safety net" that can be mobilised for accessing (also financial) resources in times of need (see Sabates-Wheeler 2007, §3.1.3).

9.4 Diverse economies of agriculture today: cooperation, networks and identities

In the previous section, I described in detail some of the everyday practices linked to agriculture that I could observe in Pjak. It is worth going back to Pavlovskaya's matrix (§8.2, Fig. 10) of diverse economies to reflect on what kind of social relations and spaces are constituted through the described practices, and how. In this section, I reflect on cooperation practices – intended as practices of collaboration, sharing, exchange and mutual support – within local social networks, on the inclusions and exclusions they generate and on how these networks constitute and are constituted by specific identities and senses of belonging.

9.4.1 Spaces and networks of cooperation

Farmers today have access to formal markets for purchasing agricultural inputs and for marketing their produce. Several agricultural activities in the village are thus regulated through market relations and are monetised. Also, in this regard, farmers are less dependent on patronage relations for the access to resources than they were in the 1990s (see §8.4). The description of everyday agricultural practices in Pjak in the previous section, however, has revealed that these practices, even if formalised and/or monetised, often rely on exchanges within personal networks in the village and beyond it. Markets and personal networks are strongly interdependent and are both crucial for private agriculture in the village, while the role of the state remains limited in this context.

Household economic practices (not only agricultural ones) are multi-sited and stretch well beyond the borders of the village: they reach the town, the capital and the cities (usually in Russia or Kazakhstan) where household members migrate following employment opportunities. The economic activities of an individual household are also deeply intertwined with those of other households linked to them through kinship or friendship relations. Whereas with decollectivisation the agricultural production process has acquired a new unity within the private household, which is now responsible for the entire process (§8.4.3), agricultural production remains fragmented in another sense. Indeed, today, agricultural production is conducted mainly on a small scale by groups of few households (for instance the four households of Kumbat, Dinara and their sons and daughter). As a consequence, farmers can barely shape the conditions under which they purchase agricultural inputs in their favour or, even more evidently, under which they sell their produce; farmers have thus almost no power in market bargains and are exposed to the volatility of prices and market demand for agricultural goods. These bargains take place instead between other actors that have more weight than farmers on agricultural markets, such as agro-industrial groups, trading companies, international organisations and national governments. Particularly concerning the latter, Kyrgyzstan's entrance into the EAEU in 2015 has put local farmers under the increasing pressure of the competition of agricultural goods from Belarus and Kazakhstan, while their access to EAEU's common market is limited by its requirements for quality standards and certification.

It has emerged clearly from my account in Sections 9.2 and 9.3 that, whereas cooperation within formal institutions (such as cooperatives but also WUAs or PUCs) is limited and almost irrelevant for farmers, informal cooperation is crucial for agriculture in Pjak. Informal cooperation is carried out mostly within networks of close relatives, especially between parents and their children, brothers and sisters and the respective in-law relatives. At this level, cooperation is intense in several domains, from the common management of land and the sharing of the harvest from private fields, household plots and gardens to the mutual support with labour in peak moments. Such forms of close cooperation can be carried out also among some distant relatives as well as among some neighbours and friends, although usually with less frequency and intensity. Looser forms of cooperation are carried out frequently in broader networks of other relatives, neighbours, friends and acquaintances. All these forms of cooperation are inscribed in relations of reciprocity that are sometimes monetised but rarely systematically calculated: in general, reciprocation is expected, but its exact amount and time is not calculated nor negotiated in advance. As

we have seen in the case of Sabyr, moral obligations often motivate such cooperation practices: reciprocation expectations are thus inscribed in broader social and affective relations between individuals.

9.4.2 Inclusion, exclusion and authority in networks

The networks presented above are not formal institutions with clear, systematic and universal rules for the inclusion or exclusion of members, for the resolution of grievances and conflicts or for decision-making procedures. Inclusion in a network or a system of reciprocities often depends on the type and strength of the bonds linking individuals or households: these bonds are usually based on (close or extended, own or in-law) kinship but also on friendship deriving from shared experience with people at school (former schoolmates), at work (colleagues),²⁵ at home (neighbours) or in local associations. The latter can include several forms of associations, like the ones we have come across throughout the manuscript: groups involved in development projects and training sessions, community-based organisations (from ADKs, see §7.2.3, to youth associations or sport associations concerned mainly with the maintenance of the football field in the village) or the group of practising Muslims that is growing around the recently built mosque in the centre of Pjak.

Certainly, not all villagers have the same access to all these networks – and this does not concern only kinship relations. For instance, the bonds that date back to the work experience in the Soviet farm depend on one's former position within the farm hierarchy; this is still in part the case in the local administration. Development projects, although they often attempt to focus on marginalised or discriminated social groups, are usually able to mobilise mainly a particular typology of villagers – the ones who, like Kumbat, have already a certain authority in the village or, more recently, the ones who, like Aisha, correspond to the researched profile of the active peasant entrepreneur. In this regard, some villagers are advantaged as far as they already belong to an elite kin group; as they can access elite networks through their position in the local administration; or as they correspond to specific profiles targeted by development projects.

Since these networks are so crucial for economic (and social) activities in the village, being excluded from certain networks can make life difficult for villagers and strongly affect their livelihoods. We have seen, for instance, that Aisha does not have access to the favours controlled by the network of villagers who are related to the elites of the local administration. Nevertheless, Aisha can rely on other networks outside Pjak (especially the networks of the cooperative Kara-Jer and of CUK) to bypass the local administration and further her projects. Such a possibility is precluded instead to other villagers who have access neither to the local elite networks nor to the networks of development workers outside the village.

Remaining in these networks and maintaining the reciprocity relations within them can also represent a burden and a difficult task for individuals and households. We have seen, for instance, how it became

²⁵ The Soviet farm provided several spaces and occasions for socialisation especially within groups of peers, for instance within brigades or among specialists (§8.3). Today, in the village, similar socialisation spaces at work are mostly limited to the school, the kindergarten and the local administration.

difficult for Kumbat to face the expectations of relatives and friends when development projects stopped delivering him resources to distribute to villagers (§8.5.2). Another example is the labour required from kin members for the organisation of *tois* – a requirement that can interfere with and take away resources from fieldwork activities at crucial moments of the agricultural calendar. More broadly, whereas attendance at the numerous celebrations taking place during the whole year is crucial for cementing and maintaining personal networks, it also creates a major expense for households, especially now that the cost (or investment) to maintain one's position within a network is increasing and increasingly monetised. These expenses do not concern only the organisation of and attendance to lavish celebrations, however, but also new imperatives to show one's status and reputation through consumption goods.

A story that is revealing of the competition between the necessity to increase consumption for performing a particular social status and other needs of household members is the story of Dinara's envisaged washing machine. Before I leave the village in 2016, Dinara's sons and daughter inform me that they plan to buy their mother a washing machine. This would considerably reduce the burden currently carried by Dinara (but also, and actually mostly, by Leila, and Sabyr when he is in the village) to do laundry, mostly manually. Dinara's sons and daughter ask me if I want to contribute to the present, which I am happy to do. When I come back to Dinara's house the next year, I thus expect that Leila's and Sabyr's unending laundry days in the yard have come to an end (or at least they have been reduced) thanks to the new washing machine. However, Dinara confesses to me, not without some shame for having diverted my money, that she decided to invest the money collected by her sons and daughters for the machine in a new yard gate. She explains that she was ashamed that visitors and guests were seeing the old rusty gate ("Who knows what they were thinking of us?", she asks) and comments that, anyways, "the girls can do the laundry", referring to Leila and her other two granddaughters (aged 9 and 5) who live in the house (Dinara, 14.07.2017).

Coming back to the maintenance of networks: failing to reciprocate within a network can lead to the exclusion from it. One example is Kumbat's loss of his connection with Mamakaev in Bishkek after he failed to pay back his debts (§8.4.2). In closer networks of relatives and friends, exclusion does not happen that quickly: there is a certain elasticity that allows individual members to postpone reciprocation while maintaining close relations to other members. However, major conflicts (for a missed reciprocation or other) in closer networks can be more difficult to solve and have even more severe consequences. For instance, when they fell into a very difficult financial situation, Dinara and Kumbat asked to borrow some money from some relatives whom, as Dinara underlines, she and Kumbat had often helped in the past. The relatives lent them some money, but with a very high interest rate and only on a very short term. Dinara and Kumbat were not able to pay back the money on time, provoking a conflict between the two households that extended to other families of the kin and provoked awkwardness and resentments during family celebrations. By reducing Dinara's and Kumbat's trustworthiness as debtors among their relatives, this event also made it more difficult for Dinara and Kumbat to receive further credit or financial support from these relatives later.

Since personal networks are so crucial for villagers' livelihoods, there is a tendency to avoid open conflicts in order not to damage relations within these networks. As we have seen, even if some individuals or households are not satisfied with the conditions of an exchange or a transaction, they usually prefer to negotiate these conditions privately than bringing the issue to a more public scrutiny; villagers therefore mostly avoid formal procedures for complaint even when these are available in principle. This means that the outcomes of these negotiations mostly depend on the two conflicting parts' authority and personal status and that little room of manoeuvre to shape the negotiations in their favour is left to those who have less power. Even Aisha, who, as we saw in Section 8.5.3, is often ready to challenge existing power structures to further her interests, finally gives up the idea to start a formal complaint procedure for her missed turn for irrigation, thereby placating her husband's fear of worsening their relationships with local authorities and with the persons responsible for irrigation and water management.

The centrality of these networks in village life also means that decision-making is mostly dominated by the households and individuals that have most authority and power within the networks and the households. Within a household are usually the older (yet not the oldest) male members who can most shape decisions regarding the responsibility to perform specific tasks or the redistribution of resources for consumption or agricultural needs. We have seen, for instance, how Sabyr underlines that in his family, it is Kumbat who has the last word concerning the cultivation of land and the organisation of agricultural activities. Also, Dinara's decision to buy a gate instead of a washing machine affects the amount and kind of labour that her granddaughters have to perform in the house, without the latter having a voice in the decision. In this regard, social relations within the village community are tendentially conservative: existing structures are difficult to question since questioning them would mean to risk losing the crucial support of one's networks of relatives, friends or acquaintances. This conservative organisation of the village society has repercussions in particular on the younger generations, who have little space for advancing new visions, aspirations and lifestyles, and on women, who have difficulty in escaping from their prescribed role as daughters, wives, daughters-in-law and mothers.

Concerning this latter point, the example of divorced women is particularly significant. We have seen that, when they marry, women symbolically and materially leave their family to join the family of their husbands (usually leaving behind also their land shares). Since divorce, despite increasing rates (see Karadag 2006), is still widely stigmatised in Kyrgyzstan, women who leave their in-law family often have difficulties in integrating back into their own family and are thus cut off from the networks of both families.

9.4.3 Networks, identities and structures

I ended my fieldnotes after the weekend in the potato field by noting the pride I felt when Meder praised my work and my sadness about his departure, with the group of young men, to Bishkek. These feelings emerged from my aspiration to feel included in the family and its networks – an aspiration to *belong*.

Indeed, during the weekend, while sharing the physical work in the field, the toasts after its completion and the beers in Kumbat's yard, I felt an affective closeness to the group of men: I felt part of the group. Once, however, the men started their washing ritual and I remained with Dinara and Leila, who were preparing dinner, I automatically took back my role as a *kelin* by helping them, later serving the food and the tea to the men, tidying up the table and washing the dishes. In my fieldnotes of the weekend, I also noted how, similarly, while performing these household tasks in the evening but also, the second day, while preparing and serving the lunch to the workers, I felt proud of the skills I had meanwhile acquired – skills that allowed me in this occasion to perform what I came to consider my duties as a *kelin* in front of the guests. During the weekend, thus, my identification shifted from feeling like a worker integrated in a group of men performing physical work in the field to feeling like a *kelin* performing household tasks “correctly”, showing respect and honouring guests, but also to feeling the honoured foreign guest to whom Meder offered a special treatment in the form of a beer in a glass bottle – a foreign guest who is allowed to shift between these identities how I did during the weekend.²⁶

When I first moved into her house, Dinara did not allow me to touch anything in the kitchen: I was considered the honoured guest who should sit at the *tör* (the most honoured place, opposite to the door) and be served tea and food. After a week or two, gradually, Dinara allowed me to take over some of the household tasks, especially in the kitchen: I started helping out preparing food, serving tea, washing dishes or collecting fruits and vegetables from the garden. I also started taking care of serving tea to guests visiting our house, while Dinara entertained them and checked that I did everything correctly. When Dinara hosted more guests or some particularly important visitor, she would ask me to help her with the hospitality rituals and catering. Looking later at some pictures of myself serving tea, I realised that I had not only integrated in terms of learning the rituals and procedures for serving tea, but also embodied the gestures that express respect to guests²⁷ (Fig. 23). In several passages of my field diaries, I noted how being able to perform household tasks and especially to “correctly” honour guests was engendering a sense of pride emerging from my aspiration to be accepted as a member of the family – to belong to it – and to please people I love. My identity position in the family was constituted through the performance of ritualised practices and the reproduction of the structures and roles that determine one's duties and responsibilities and one's position within the household. This position could be acknowledged and valued by others because it corresponded to the traditional roles that commonly structure social life in the community. Therefore, through my performance of a specific role through repeated practices in the quest for acceptance and belonging, I contributed to reproduce these same structures and roles.

²⁶ This is not to say that identities of locals are static and do not shift, but rather to underline that certain “liberties” I took (in particular staying in the field after sunset drinking vodka with the men, sipping beer in the yard with them or deciding myself to leave the *toi* and join the men in the field) would have been less accessible to a real Kyrgyz *kelin*.

²⁷ I noticed this also on public buses in Bishkek, where there are strict unspoken rules about who should leave the seat to whom (especially: young to old, men to women). After having spent a while observing the rituals of seat-exchanges in Bishkek's busses, my seated body would automatically stand up whenever an older passenger entered my bus, even before my mind could consciously calculate the variables determining the order of seat-priorities. This continued for a little while once back in Switzerland, where, however, it can be considered even offensive to leave one's seat to a fit woman in her forties.

What I have just described is a very soft and “watered” performance of, and identification with, the role of a *kelin* in a Kyrgyz house. My position in the village community in general and in my host family in particular far from corresponds to the position of a real Kyrgyz *kelin* since I had the freedom to shift from my identity as a *kelin* to my identity as a foreign guest, as an academic researcher, as a European/Swiss, among others. My specific multiple identities granted me a series of bonuses that are not conceded to Kyrgyz *kelins*: for instance, I could plainly tell Dinara that I had to work on my fieldnotes and had no time for helping her with household tasks, and, in general, Dinara had always a different kind of respect for me than she has for her true daughter and daughters-in-law. When I went back to the village in March 2016, at the beginning of my stay Dinara forbid me to perform any household task and insisted that I agree to be treated as an honoured guest. Since I was used to another position in the family from the previous year, I insisted to take back my former role right away. However, she explained: “For one week, you will be our honoured guest from Switzerland. After that, you can return to be our *kelin*” (Dinara, 26.03.2016). Her explanation makes explicit my particular position, and shifting identities, within the family.

Certainly, the role of a true Kyrgyz *kelin* can be also more violently imposed on young women (see e.g. Childress 2018), who have usually much less room of manoeuvre to negotiate their duties within the family and are often much less respected than I was. Whereas I always had my “escape route” from my role as a *kelin* (due to the fact that I am economically independent and have another house and another family in Switzerland, as well as other networks in Karakol and Bishkek), young Kyrgyz women in rural villages²⁸ rarely have access to economic and social resources outside the ones of their own and in-law family. As noted above, refusing to perform a specific role within the family can lead to the exclusion from vital networks and resources.

9.4.4 Identities, affects and power

The analysis of the role and relations of Kyrgyz *kelins* with their families and especially with their mothers-in-law would require research in itself.²⁹ It is worth, however, introducing two examples of how women in Pjak negotiate these roles and relations. While reflecting with me about her role as a mother-in-law, Dinara notes that it is normal for a mother-in-law to be strict with her daughters-in-law and point out her mistakes. Doing otherwise would mean, in Dinara’s vision, that the daughters-in-law would acquire too much power in the house. Dinara explains that this would create problems, especially in front of visitors who would notice her lack of authority over the *kelins*. If *kelins* do not perform their duties and their role in front of guests correctly, this would mean shame for Dinara, who, as *choziaika* (landlady or hostess) carries the overall responsibility towards guests. In this sense, women who reach the status of

²⁸ There are of course exceptions in Pjak, as the case of Aisha in part shows. In the city and even more abroad, sometimes women can build independent networks and capitals. On how migration patterns affect the position of women in Kyrgyzstani villages see Ismailbekova (2014).

²⁹ Little research has touched this specific topic (Reynolds 2012a; 2012b; Ismailbekova 2016).

mothers-in-law reproduce the traditional structures and relations towards their daughters-in-law also as a way to maintain their status in front of guests and to please them.

Aisha is very critical of these relations and roles. She often complains about the strictness of her mother-in-law (who lives in Karakol with her other son and his family) and recalls how she had to struggle to get her approval for the activities and projects she wanted to pursue. When Aisha announces to me that her son will get married soon, I comment jokingly that, at least, she will be a nicer mother-in-law than her own. However, to my surprise, Aisha replies: “No. Of course I will be hard with my *kelin*! A mother-in-law has to be hard with her *kelin*. The mother-in-law is the boss in the house and if she isn’t hard from the beginning the *kelin* will take too much freedoms and neglect the works that need to be done” (Aisha, 14.08.2106). It seems thus that Aisha, like Dinara, is caught in a determined role for which she has only one reference model for how it should be performed. Although both recognise the difficult position of *kelins* in the house, it is difficult for them to question the structures that produce that position, probably also because they are not willing to renounce to the status and benefits (especially the possibility to outsource many of their own tasks) that they acquire from the moment they become mothers-in-law.

This brief excursus on the roles of *kelins* and mothers-in-law in Kyrgyz families contributes to better understanding of the way in which the structures of the social networks described in the previous sections are maintained and reproduced also through embodied rules, affective attachments and personal aspirations, in a process that recalls Bourdieu’s theory of habitus (see T. Lovell 2000). The structures that regulate the distribution of tasks, reciprocities and decision-making within families and their networks and that, often, generate inequalities and discriminations are, indeed, constraining and limiting on the one hand, but also provide, on the other hand, a framework to which individuals can relate to define their identities and belonging and to make sense of their lives. These affects and identifications are an important glue for the networks discussed in this section but also confer them the rigidity and conservatism noted above. Maintaining good relations especially with relatives (also through numerous, burdening and expensive celebrations) is also a way to define and fix one’s identity and belonging. Questioning these structures, for instance by renouncing a lavish marriage ceremony, does not only imply shame with respect to one’s status, but also the loosens one’s identity and belonging. In this context, pride and, even more, shame are two intertwined affects that reinforce the rigidity of the structures discussed. Shame can emerge, for instance, when you do not attend to a *toi* or your cash or in-kind contribution to it is judged too small; when nobody from your family shows up the day fixed for *subbotniki* in your street; when you do not serve guests correctly; or when your guests have to pass a too-rusty yard gate. In parallel, pride emerges when, instead, you fulfil the expectations of others, especially through the performance of ritualised hospitality practices and reciprocations.

Concerning agricultural activities, these reflections imply that questioning their current organisation and decision-making structures is relatively difficult, especially for the younger generations and for women. This does not mean, however, that innovation and change are impossible. For instance, Aisha was able to disrupt some of (but not all) the current power structures: she gained the approval of her mother-in-law and her husband for her activities with Kara-Jer and bypassed the local administration to obtain funds for

her project. Tuman was able to invest an important amount of money for a cultivation experiment that Kumbat did not approve (even if the investment turned out to be disastrous and forced him to move to Russia to pay back the debt he contracted). Samat was able to escape the norm that prescribes that the youngest son remains in his parent's house: he moved to and remained in Bishkek to pursue his professional career.

9.5 Discussion: moralities of work and senses of self and community

I started the present chapter by presenting the picture of an individualised agricultural sector in particular and of an individualised village community more generally (§9.1). The picture emerging from villagers' general statements about their agricultural practices and from their answers to my quantitative survey mirrors the idea transmitted by most accounts of scholars (especially economists), development workers and policy-makers in the region (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 3). However, the deeper examination of villagers' everyday practices – an examination that was possible thanks to a prolonged ethnographic engagement with one field site – has revealed a different picture, where agricultural activities are indeed monetised and partially individualised but, at the same time, they heavily rely on cooperation within personal networks of close and distant relatives, friends and acquaintances (§9.2, §9.3).

How should we understand these contradictions between villagers' representations and their actual practices? A simple explanation regarding the results of the survey lies in the fact that, as discussed in Chapter 5, most respondents preferred to give simple and straightforward answers because they did not want to share too much personal information to someone they suspected was collecting data for the electoral campaign or for the fiscal office. However, the statement that now agricultural activities are performed and managed individually also emerges repeatedly in my other interactions with villagers. Despite the importance, extension and frequency of exchanges within close and large personal networks, villagers mention only few of these exchanges when I ask them explicitly about such exchanges.

Another explanation that is certainly relevant is that villagers' perceptions of what it means to work together depends on what the object of sharing is.³⁰ We have seen already in Chapter 7 that, for villagers, the idea of a cooperative implies collective *production*, whereas forms of collaboration in other agricultural activities outside production are usually not sufficient to define a cooperative. Villagers compare today's individualised agricultural practices with the collective agriculture of the Soviet farm but also with the attempts to cooperate within the diverse forms of peasant farms that emerged during land reforms (see §8.4.1). Both on the Soviet farm and on collective peasant farms, what was carried out collectively was the whole production process: this means not only that agricultural labour was performed in groups, but also that expenses and, especially, revenues were pooled together and then redistributed in the group (of course in very different ways on the Soviet farm than on the collective peasant farms). On the contrary, the cooperation practices described in this chapter mostly do not imply the pooling of

³⁰ I thank Lela Rekhviashvili for drawing my attention on this point.

expenses and revenues, except within the closest networks of households of the same family (especially between parents and siblings). Furthermore, most of these cooperation practices are not carried out within formalised frameworks (for instance of a registered cooperative) and therefore are usually not visible for external visitors, especially for development workers or scholars who limit themselves to quantitative surveys or brief interviews. It is therefore, in the end, not surprising that such practices remain largely unacknowledged and invisible, and that the development workers we met in Chapter 6 state that there is a lack of cooperation in Kyrgyzstani villages.

Yet, I argue here for an additional explanation: that the observed gap between villagers' representations and practices of cooperation emerges, on the one hand, from the co-existence of multiple moralities, in particular moralities of work, and, on the other, from specific local notions of community and senses of self. In this section I thus turn to the analysis of these moralities and notions as a way to make sense of the apparent contradictions emerged in the previous sections.

9.5.1 Private accumulation and moralities of work

Villagers often express nostalgia for the Soviet time when, in their memories, even if they did not have much, they had enough and all were equals. The same villagers, however, often in the same narration, lament for instance that back in Soviet times they were allowed to own only a limited number of animals or that the access to cars or housing was strictly regulated by the state. Now, on the contrary, there is no legal limitation to the number of animals, cars or houses they can own: villagers conclude that this is one of the advantages of the current system. Villagers thus deplore that the past "equality"³¹ has been lost but simultaneously they welcome the new system in which private consumption and accumulation are free from legal limitations, even if they recognise that consumption and accumulation are not unlimited *de facto*, since they depend on the availability of capital. The narrative about the lost equality and the acquired unlimited potential for consumption and accumulation is recurrent in Pjak (and frequent also outside the village); however, different social groups weigh the two sides of the narrative differently. On the one hand, in general, villagers who are relatively well-off emphasise more the current freedom of private consumption and accumulation, even if they recognise that other worse-off villagers can enjoy this freedom only limitedly. On the other hand, villagers who are less economically fortunate usually underline the loss of equality, even if they still welcome the new – at least potential – consumption opportunities.

When commenting on this transformation, both well-off and worse-off villagers often mobilise a famous Kyrgyz proverb that I hear frequently also outside the village: "who works, will eat".³² An equally widespread narrative that praises hard work and blames laziness parallels this proverb: we have encountered some manifestations of this narrative (especially the blame of laziness) in the previous

³¹ The quotation marks are imperative since, as I have shown in detail in §8.3, Soviet society was far from being egalitarian.

³² The original Kyrgyz phrasing is "*ishtegen tishteit*", sometimes also in the variant "*köp ishtegen köp tishteit*" (who works a lot, will eat a lot). See also Féaux de la Croix's discussion of the same proverb (2017, 235–50).

chapters, especially in Part III as referred to the failure of cooperatives. The proverb and the parallel narrative can be interpreted in this context as conveying a meritocratic morality where personal effort pays a proportional benefit and where a lack of such effort is the cause of hunger (or poverty more generally). This morality emphasises one's own individual responsibility – for success, wealth and poverty. Villagers often underline, with a mix of appreciation and concern, that this is the way “capitalism” works, whereas in “socialism” people would still have something to eat at the end of the day regardless of whether they were working hard or fooling around.

The proverb, however, can also be interpreted outside a meritocratic morality. For instance, sometimes villagers use it to convey an almost opposite message: that, whatever will happen – whatever political structure, economic ideology, or government shift – life is hard and you *always* have to work if you want to eat. In fact, the verb *tish* literally means “to bite”, which, at least according to my interpreter, does not primarily convey an idea of opulent and abundant eating but rather an image of eating for surviving. The proverb, therefore, is not necessarily a “capitalist proverb” and, indeed, its diffusion very probably predates Kyrgyzstan's independence (and thus the diffusion of a capitalist, or rather neoliberal, morality of individual responsibility and meritocracy). Féaux de la Croix (2017, 243–46) has suggested that different discourses (including moralities) of work converge in the proverb. These discourses originate from Kyrgyz kinship ideology, Soviet ideology, Islam and, more recently, neoliberal capitalism. All these ideological traditions value work in general and hard work in particular and, therefore, the proverb can endorse all of them. However, as Féaux de la Croix (*ibid.*) shows, the *meaning* and *purpose* of the work that is valued is different in each tradition: neoliberal capitalism values work as entrepreneurship and, as discussed, emphasises individual responsibility and meritocracy; Islam as self-disciplining and as service to others and to God; Soviet ideology as uplifting, emancipatory and as the means towards Socialism; Kyrgyz kinship ideology as service to the older generations and as a way of honouring them. Therefore, although one of the work moralities conveyed by the proverb endorses private accumulation and economic success as the legitimate reward of hard work, other parallel moralities promote instead various alternative understandings of work as service to others and thereby disregard, reject or even violently oppose private accumulation. Indeed, it is not uncommon that villagers interpret an excessive accumulation of wealth as a sign of greed and selfishness, especially if this wealth is not shared at least in part with others (in particular with relatives and friends within one's personal networks). In addition, if a person is particularly wealthy, villagers often insinuate that this wealth might originate in some dubious practices, especially corruption (see also Féaux de la Croix 2017, 239–46; Gambold and Heady 2003).

I do not have the possibility to dig deeper into the variations and nuances of all the aforementioned moralities (and many others); I argue, however, that some of these moralities converge into a morality of cooperation and sharing that at least in part contrasts with the meritocratic morality that endorses private accumulation. Three examples, among many others, confirm the importance of this alternative morality for villagers. First, in Soviet times, it was despised when a specialist took too many resources for himself (or more rarely herself) without sharing them with the other specialists: this despidal was due to the deception of expectations of reciprocation based also on a specific morality of sharing with one's peers.

Second, recalling when her family, as one of the first who started private agricultural activities in one of the early peasant farms in the early 1990s, Keres commented that she felt ashamed in front of other villagers for exploiting the collective resources of the ex-Soviet farm for her own private benefit. In this case, her shame originated from the contrast between her activities and a morality (and ideological rhetoric) of cooperation and collective property. Third, remember that some villagers complained (and still complain) about Kumbat's greediness because he did not share the potato seeds he received from a project to start the seed breeding activities of Ak-Bulut with them. Here, the complaint is motivated by expectations linked to a specific morality of sharing within patronage networks.

9.5.2 Private business as support to others

I noted at the end of Chapter 7 (§7.4.6) how, in villager's accounts, the concepts of cooperative and private business sometimes overlap and how both concepts are somehow related to ideas of charity or mutual support. There, I concluded that, in villagers' representations, the concept of cooperative is thus fluid, unstable and dependent on the specific connections and associations my interlocutors trace to different moments and in different contexts. This fluidity does not only concern cooperatives specifically but also villagers' understandings of work and economic business more broadly. When Kumbat tells about how he used to give advice to other villagers, distribute agricultural inputs or manage the storing and selling of potatoes in Ak-Bulut's warehouse, he emphasises that, through these activities, he is *supporting* people. He does not necessarily differentiate between what pertains more strictly to the formal cooperative, his private activities of seed breeding, or his informal exchanges with relatives and friends. What counts for him is the fact that he is helping and serving others through these activities – regardless whether these activities are monetised or formalised. Adis reproduces a similar narrative when he states that Ak-Bulut supported farmers in the whole province and country, while intending that Kumbat was also privately selling seeds outside the village. Daniar, when intending to show me the “cooperatives” in the village, shows me instead what are rather private economic activities (e.g. the small brick factory, the fishing pond) and explains that these activities are supporting villagers. Sultanbek presents the cooperative Tokoi (which, as seen, is rather his own private enterprise) as an activity that helps villagers by offering them job opportunities and the possibility to process their wool. Villagers seem thus to present private business activities as activities that support the village and the community.

Similarly, when Aisha speaks of her processing factory project in Pjak, she never presents this as the establishment of a private enterprise, but rather as a collective activity she would like to initiate with the aspiration to help villagers by providing job opportunities and the possibility to process their wool and fruits in the village. She also underlines that her ambition is to help especially women and notes that, by providing female villagers an opportunity to make some money autonomously, these women will be able to emancipate themselves from their subordinated position in their families. Aisha never enters into details of how she plans to concretely manage the economic profits the factory should generate or how she imagines its governance structure. She does mention several times, however, that she would like to do some charity in the village with the revenues: for instance by distributing hens to the poorest households

so they can generate some additional income by selling the eggs. In this sense, Aisha seems to reproduce what she criticises about the way Kumbat manages his business activities in general and Ak-Bulut in particular. In fact, Aisha laments the lack of transparency about the cooperative's accounts (for instance, she often underlines that nobody knows what happens with the revenues generated through the warehouse) as well as the lack of democratic mechanisms for its governance, and she accuses Kumbat of authoritarian, top-down management. At the same time, Kumbat, like Aisha, also insists that Ak-Bulut exists for the well-being of villagers and underlines that he regularly does charity in the name of the cooperative (for instance by offering potatoes and flour to the kindergarten).

Another example is Batyr, a man from Pjak in his early forties who established a profitable trading business based in the bazaar in Karakol, where he now lives. He comes regularly to Pjak, however, where he runs the biggest farm in the village with his brothers. Speaking about the agricultural machines of the farm, he explains that most of the revenues they generate go towards their repairs and spare parts. Despite the limited profitability of the machines and of the farming activities more generally, Batyr explains why he invests his money in them:

The first reason to invest in the machines was to help my relatives in the village. Because life in the village is difficult: they barely survive. Therefore I decided to invest more than 70,000 dollars [to buy two tractors]. Of course it wasn't so profitable. I could have invested the money in the town, even less: with 40,000 dollars here [in Karakol] you can open your own restaurant or shop. In comparison with the activities in the village the businesses in the town are more stable and they are cleaner. In the village it's more difficult. [...] It's variable, it depends from the weather, it's unstable. And it's seasonal too. Also the work of the tractor is seasonal: people need it for just one month and the rest of the year they don't care. In comparison, trade [in the bazaar] is stable, for the whole year! (Batyr, 08.08.2016)

Batyr underlines that it would have been clearly more profitable to invest the money in his trade activities than on the farm. Nevertheless, he invested a considerable amount of money for the machines and continues to invest money and time on the farm as a way to support his relatives in the village. Here, Batyr, like Aisha and Kumbat above, emphasises that he is not a reckless businessman looking only at his own profit, but prefers to invest some of the capital he accumulates to helping his relatives in the village.

Whereas presenting private business activities as support to others might seem odd in a first moment (it indeed puzzled me during my early fieldwork), I argue that this strategy is understandable, if not obvious, when considering the multiple moralities discussed in the previous section. Even when their success and wealth are the result of their hard work (and therefore legitimate within the meritocratic morality), many villagers still need to justify their success by underlining that they share their gains with others and that their private business activities are, in fact, a way to support the community. In this way, these villagers relate and, at least discursively, comply with the moralities of sharing and cooperation on which are based, among others, the reciprocity relations within personal networks that are so crucial for their livelihoods.

9.5.3 Identities of and through work

Many villagers in Pjak who are busy from dawn to bedtime working in their houses, household plots or fields, caring for their children and elders, or doing reparations and maintenance in their houses define themselves as unemployed. The few villagers who do not define themselves as unemployed are in general those who have fixed employment as wage labourers, for instance at the local school, the local administration or some enterprise in the region, those who manage an independent trade activity (e.g. Batyr and some shop³³ owners) and a few farmers. Féaux de la Croix (2017, 221–22) has suggested that “‘unemployment’ is a new official category in the post-Soviet situation, referring to the absence of formal employment, a wage, pension and most other social entitlements linked to employment in the Soviet era”. This representation of work as wage labour in part explains why many villagers define themselves as unemployed; however, it remains open why not all farmers define themselves as unemployed.

Several villagers tell me that there are only three or four *fermeri* (Russian: farmers) in Pjak, although most households not only base a large part of their livelihoods on agricultural activities but also invest a considerable amount of labour in them (see also *id.* 229). I realise this once when I am chatting with some villagers, including Amirbek, in a shared taxi to Karakol. My interpreter is not with me and I thus speak Russian with the men. When they ask me what I am doing these days, I answer that I am interviewing *fermeri* in the village. They comment that there are only a few *fermeri* in Pjak and wonder whom I met. I am in turn surprised by their answer and comment that I thought that almost everybody was a *fermer* in the village: indeed, almost everybody cultivates a piece of land. Also, when speaking with villagers in Kyrgyz, my interpreter often used the English term “farmers” as a translation of the Kyrgyz term *dyikan*, which in Russian should translate as *fermer*. Amirbek explains that a *fermer* is someone who has “big land, big cattle and a big garage” (Amirbek, 02.07.2016): to enter the category of *fermer* you thus need to run a farm with a minimum amount of land and a minimum number of animals and own some agricultural machines. Amirbek comments that, for instance, Batyr (§9.5.2) is a *fermer*. My interlocutors in the taxi seem thus to recognise that *fermer* can be a profession or an employment (even if it is not wage labour), but only if the farm in question fulfils certain requirements of size and technology – in short, if it is a *modern* farm (see my discussion in Part III and Fig. 24). On the contrary, more villagers define themselves as *dyikans* – and the same farmers usually simultaneously categorise themselves as unemployed. Thanks to a fortuitous misunderstanding in translation, I thus realise that, although the literal meaning of the Russian and the Kyrgyz terms overlap, in everyday use the two terms diverge.³⁴ Probably, the use of the Russian term also in Kyrgyz language (which borrows Russian words especially for concepts linked to technology or bureaucracy) reinforces the “modernity” of *fermeri*, who work in “modern” farms.

These reflections suggest a hierarchisation of work in villagers’ representations – a hierarchisation based on a specific notion of modernity but also, more generally, on a specific understanding of economy. This

³³ There are four or five main shops in Pjak, which are indeed quite small; however, several houses have a tiny room in their yard that serves as a shop with irregular opening hours. The owners of these “yard shops” usually define themselves as unemployed.

³⁴ I am thankful to Christine Bichsel for helping me making sense of this misunderstanding.

hierarchisation values mainly wage labour³⁵ and marketised³⁶ activities while devaluing other activities such as care work or subsistence farming. This resonates indeed with Gibson-Graham's (2006b, 46–71) reflection that identities are mainly constituted through an idea of work based on a limited definition of economy as the realm of monetised and formal economic activities in the public sphere (see also §8.2). Typically, the plethora of activities that contribute to a household's or an individual's livelihoods but that are performed outside this limited realm are not fully recognised as work.³⁷ The consequence of the hierarchisation of work is thus also a hierarchisation of identities: modern legitimate *fermeri* on the one hand and “unemployed” villagers (once more defined by their lack) on the other.

At the same time, however, the identity as a modern worker (be this a businessman/woman in general or a *fermer* in particular) is not unproblematic in the village and, as discussed, villagers who enjoy some wealth put in place strategies to legitimise this position and to avoid being identified as reckless businessmen/women. The identity as a modern businessman/woman needs to be legitimised through another identification as a person who honours and respects the moralities of sharing and reciprocity discussed above – a person who, through his/her work, supports and helps (or ‘serves’, Féaux de la Croix 2017, 229–35) others.

This is expressed best by Ermek (born in 1959), an ex-tractor driver in the Soviet farm and now owner of a tractor whose services he sells to villagers. In his narrations about his work in both the Soviet and the present time, he often repeats that he is helping people, that he works for them. When I ask him what he intends with this, he answers:

Working for the people means that you are responsible for what you are doing and working hard till the last minute. You should not just give up on something in the middle and you should finish it. *If you chose to be a tractor driver [...] you should work hard and be good in public opinion.* People should be satisfied. *You should love your job and love your tractor as if it was your own clothes.* You should take care of the tractor by filling it with the oil. (Ermek, 03.06.2016, emphasis added)

For Ermek, the work as a tractor driver is not only a form of employment (as it was in Soviet times) or a private economic activity (today) but also – and maybe *especially* – an activity that defines him as a “good” person in front of others (see also Féaux de la Croix 2017, 246–50). He profoundly identifies, also affectively with his “love” for his job and for his tractor, as a person whose work benefits a larger community before himself. Ermek hence makes sense of his life – and of his place in a larger cosmological system – through his deontology as a tractor driver that contributes to the well-being of the community to which he feels to belong.

³⁵ This does not mean that all forms of wage labour are valued. Remember that working against a wage for private persons, especially in the village, is stigmatised (§9.3.3).

³⁶ I intend here activities that are regulated through market relations (such as trade or also agricultural production if it is not performed mainly for self-subsistence). Many of these activities are “formal” in the sense that who performs these activities declares the revenues they generate (and pays taxes on these revenues); it is not uncommon, however, that villagers do not declare at least a part of these revenues or activities. In principle, all farmers should declare the revenues they generate from selling their products; however, since these revenues, for most farmers in Pjak as in the whole province, are usually much lower than the minimum amount taxed, the local administration broadly accepts that farmers do not register and that their activities, in this sense, remain “informal”.

³⁷ This is not to say that other activities are not considered work, but rather to point to the hierarchisation and valuation of different forms of work. For a discussion of the multiple meanings of work in rural Kyrgyzstan, see Féaux de la Croix (2017, 216–20).

9.5.4 Senses of self and community

Ermek's quotation above introduces a further dimension that is central to understand villagers' representations of work and selves: if work is meant to support "others", we should then ask who these others are and how they are framed. In her illuminating outline of the "recent history of work in Kyrgyzstan", Féaux de la Croix (2017, 213–50) underlines that, whereas the idea of work as serving others has not fundamentally changed since Soviet times, what has changed is the collective which work serves. My empirical data confirm that, as she notes, now there is

an alternative collective to the one projected by socialism: the units of generalised reciprocity are today the family and neighbourhood, not the brigade, nation or humanity. What both kin expect and the Soviet state expected, namely service in the form of respect and work, may look similar, but the units these actions and attitudes are directed towards are certainly not: on the one hand, the state, nation and humanity; on the other, family and neighbourhood. (*id.* 232–33)

Indeed, the Soviet state emphasised the nobility of work as a contribution to the larger project of building socialism through the model of Stakhanovites (the followers of Aleksey Grigoryevich Stakhanov, the Soviet miner who became the personification of hard work in the 1930s) and through a well-established system of prizes and rewards for deserving workers, which in part continues today (§8.3.1, see also *id.* 225–26, 243–50). The identification with such rhetoric and work ethic emerges strongly in villagers' narrations, not only when I ask them specifically about their work practices during Soviet times but also as a way to describe and define their person when I ask them to introduce themselves. Frequently, during our oral history sessions, my interlocutors show me the medals and certificates they collected in the course of their professional life as recognition of their achievements and effort. My observations in Pjak therefore confirm Féaux de la Croix's (*ibid.*) reflection that, when villagers in her field site state that "everyone works for themselves now", they do not only refer to the dismantlement of collective work within brigades but also to the reduction of the size and meaning of the "constituency" which work serves and benefits.

But why, still, in their statements as well as in their answers to my survey, do villagers in Pjak not acknowledge that their activities are indeed performed within and *for* a community – even if a smaller one than before? I suggest looking at the notion of individual and individuality, as opposed to the notion of community, to answer this question. I made repeatedly clear throughout Part IV that reciprocity and solidarity relations within personal networks have been central in villagers' lives and livelihoods for several decades and probably more. Belonging to these networks is also crucial for the definition of villagers' identities and for making sense of their lives and of themselves as individuals. The sense of collectivity within these networks is so deep that it is often given for granted and perceived as natural: it is obvious that nobody actually works *only* for him/herself as a single individual but that, instead, each person is defined and intended as part of a collectivity of close relatives and friends. Therefore, I suggest, often villagers do not even think that this is worth mentioning in their answers.

In some specific occasions, however, villagers make explicit this implicit element. Remember for instance when Sabyr notes that sharing and mutual help among relatives and friends is part of the “Kyrgyz mentality” (§9.3.2). He would not need to emphasise this when speaking with a Kyrgyz, but, while speaking with me in this occasion, he feels the need to explain this sense of collectivity. Remember also when Aziza explains that the seeds she received for free from Kumbat were part of “a traditional friendship support as we have here in Kyrgyzstan” (Aziza, 15.08.2015, §8.5.2). Such observations sometimes emerge in other conversations with Kyrgyz people both in Pjak and in the rest of the country. In these occasions, my interlocutors assume that in Europe mutual support among relatives and friends is weaker than in Kyrgyzstan and, therefore, make explicit to me what would be obvious for a Kyrgyz. While explaining this difference between Kyrgyzstan and Switzerland (or between Central Asia and the West more generally), my Kyrgyz interlocutors express pride for their strong sense of hospitality, sharing and mutual support. In this way, they strengthen their identification not only with a particular work morality, but also with a specific sense of self and community that they perceive as peculiar to Kyrgyz people and to “Kyrgyzness” and in opposition to the “cold” individualism of the West – or of “democracy”, “capitalism” or modernity *tout court* (see Baktigul’s quotation and my comment in §7.3.5).

9.6 Conclusion: making sense of diverging representations and practices of cooperation

It has become even clearer in this chapter that, when scholars and development actors observe a lack of collective activities and a resistance to cooperation in Kyrgyzstani villagers (see Chapter 6), they assume and apply a narrow definition of cooperation that renders invisible many of the numerous forms of cooperation that constitute everyday agricultural activities in Pjak and other Kyrgyzstani villages and towns, as confirmed by the little research available mentioned throughout the manuscript. Similarly, we have seen in this chapter that villagers’ representations of cooperation obscure several of the ways in which, in fact, they cooperate in agriculture and well beyond it. In the previous section I argued that the divergence of villagers’ representations and practices of cooperation emerges out of specific work moralities and identities and of specific notions of community and self. In particular, I have shown that what is defined as “working together” in the village is often limited to a particular kind of work performed for a particular kind of community.

Nevertheless, we cannot simply dismiss villagers’ representations of cooperation as being narrow and biased, but we should ask what they reveal. More specifically, we should ask what villagers’ narrative of the loss of cooperation in Pjak reveals about their current economic and affective situation and about their aspirations and desires. Although today certainly agricultural activities are not performed in the collectivity of brigades anymore, I have shown that they are performed, more often than not, together with relatives and friends. I argue therefore that the villagers’ narrative that now everyone works individually does not lament primarily the individualisation of the concrete performance of agricultural activities; here, “individually” is not to intend primarily in an instrumental sense. Instead, I argue that the

narrative refers primarily to the individualisation of responsibility for one's own economic success or difficulties – an individualised responsibility that is part of the neoliberal/capitalist morality conveyed by one of the possible interpretations of the proverb “who works, will eat”. Although, in principle, villagers subscribe this reading of the proverb, the burden of this individualised responsibility is difficult to assume in a context where economic success is precarious and, in fact, depends also (and probably especially) on a series of structural conditions that are beyond individual influence. The story of Tuman and his cultivation experiment is an example for this point. His failed experiment led his family almost to bankruptcy, and the best strategy he could find to avoid it was to migrate to Russia with his wife, leaving their three small children with the grandparents in the village. Tuman's economic difficulties (as well as their material and affective consequences for his family) may be also caused by his too audacious imprudence, but are certainly first of all the consequence of the combination of the chronic lack of financial capital in Pjak, the exorbitant interest rates of credit, the absolute lack of any form of insurance and the unpredictable climatic conditions (which, it must be noted, are likely to become even less predictable in the next years in the context of global climate change). Like countless other cases, the case of Tuman – a man other villagers usually depict as hard-working and upright – challenges the meritocratic rule that “who works, will eat”. In this regard, I agree with Féaux de la Croix's (2017, 248) argument that statements like the proverb are “also *normative* in the sense of willing the world to be just”: although villagers are aware that in the everyday the meritocratic rule of the proverb does not always apply, they still subscribe to it as a way to reiterate their wish that the rule be always true.

Villagers' lament about the individualisation that has taken place in the village is therefore also a complaint about the precarisation of their livelihoods in a new context whose structural conditions (like, indeed, those of the previous system) are beyond their control – and in part also beyond their grasp. Again, the nostalgia for something that has been lost reveals more about what is missed in the present than what was really in the past (see Discussion Part III). Remember that, in Soviet times, villagers' livelihoods were also precarious: even if employment and minimal livelihoods were more secured then, one's economic position and social status could quickly change if, for instance, s/he lost his/her employment and was sent to jail for several years because caught in an illegal practice.

Furthermore, the lament about individualisation also concerns the social networks that are so crucial in the everyday life of the village. In villagers' narratives, the precarisation of their livelihoods is also paralleled by what they perceive as the precarisation of these networks and the weakening of reciprocity and solidarity relations within them – relations that are the more important as safety-nets and as forms of insurance the more the general context becomes uncertain and beyond control and grasp. Indeed, reciprocities within personal networks tend today to be more frequently monetised; this makes the maintenance of such networks probably more burdensome than before, thereby creating new forms of exclusion. Furthermore, since the limits imposed by the Soviet regime on private consumption and accumulation were lifted, economic stratification has become more visible in the village – for instance in the form of a shiny yard gate. This does not mean that this stratification did not exist before: on the contrary, we have seen clearly in Section 8.3 that specialists of the Soviet farm enjoyed a long list of

privileges (and this was probably a relatively limited stratification if compared with Soviet elites outside a small Central Asian village). However, villagers probably read the increasingly visible stratification as a sign that the redistribution of resources within personal networks through reciprocity and solidarity practices has weakened – if not in absolute terms at least in relative ones.

The point here, again, is not to assess whether exchanges and reciprocities within social networks have really weakened or whether local communities were really so equalitarian as villagers suggest; instead, the point is to understand what claims and desires *for the present* villagers express through the narrative of lost solidarity. I argue that, through this narrative, villagers denounce the lack of forms of social security that could compensate for the economic difficulties and precarity emerged through the profound transformations of the last decades. Here, we have seen that one possible form of social security are solidarity relations within personal networks. Throughout the manuscript, however, we have seen that a wish for a similar function of social security is also directed to the state through the widespread narrative of its “abandonment” of villagers.

Finally, I argue – again in line with Féaux de la Croix (2017, 246–50) – that the individualisation highlighted in the narrative that now everyday works individually refers also to the purpose of work, to the community for which work is performed. The loss expressed in the narrative is thus a loss of a larger collectivity (which in Soviet times included also the state) as well as a loss of a larger project in which individual work efforts and personal trajectories were inserted and found a legitimation and a basis for identification with a broader goal. What villagers miss today is also a recognition of the value of their efforts, and of themselves as individuals; Nazira expresses this clearly when she states that Tuman left the cooperative also because the government did not even send him a “gratitude letter” for his engagement (§7.3.1).

Part IV – Discussion and conclusion

The two chapters composing Part IV have provided an analysis of the transformations of diverse economies of agriculture in Pjak. In line with most ethnographies of transformation after socialism (e.g. Verdery 1996) as well as with Gibson-Graham's (2006b) feminist economic geography, my analysis has confirmed that neither what was before the end of the Soviet Union nor what has come after Kyrgyzstan's independence corresponds to a unitary and coherent system (Socialism or Capitalism). Both, instead, are localised, contingent and unique assemblages of diverse economic practices shaped by diverse local interests, strategies and representations – or one specific expression of multiple possible socialisms/capitalisms. In particular, we have seen in Chapter 8 that liberalisation and privatisation reforms after independence have drastically reduced the role of the state in economic production and welfare provision, especially in terms of state employment in Soviet farms and of the social benefits and social security related to it. Although, according to the model underpinning neoliberal reforms, these reforms were expected to strengthen the formal private sector, we have seen instead that villagers remained dependent on patronage relations and informal exchanges within personal networks, also because formalisation became more difficult due to the reduced administrative and bureaucratic capacity of the state. This corresponds to what several scholars have noted in ex-socialist countries in CEE and the FSU (e.g. Pavlovskaya 2004; Stenning et al. 2010) as well as in other contexts worldwide where neoliberal reforms have been applied (in particular in the framework of structural adjustment programmes in the Global South, e.g. Stiglitz 2003, and more recently in the context of austerity programmes in the Global North, e.g. Farnsworth and Irving 2018).

Nevertheless, I have rejected the idea of path dependency (e.g. Stark et al. 1998) – an idea that induces to read this evolution as the predictable influence of persistent habits and power structures on the outcomes of reforms (and parallel development programmes the like) or, in other words, that posits that essentialised notions of local “culture” hamper the “normal” accomplishment of reforms. Instead, I have shown that this evolution is the result of “direct *responses* to the new market initiatives, produced *by* them, rather than remnants of an older mentality” (Burawoy and Verdery 1999a, 2). In Chapter 8, I discussed how these “responses” have sometimes constituted an opportunity for questioning existing power relations and privileges but also, and more often, how they have reproduced hierarchies and inequalities, especially by reconfirming villagers' dependence on patronage relations with local elites. In Chapter 9, I then showed how these hierarchies continue to shape agricultural practices in Pjak today and how they are constituted through intimate relational practices, which include for instance the reproduction of rigid gender roles within households but also the performance of hospitality rituals by both the host and the guest, like the ones I experienced in Jamilya's *banja* described at the very beginning of this manuscript.

Concerning more specifically the ways in which agriculture is practiced and experienced in the village, I showed in Chapter 8 that agrarian reforms have produced, simultaneously but at different scales, a fragmentation and a reintegration of agriculture. On the one hand, post-independence reforms have

disintegrated the system of Soviet collective agriculture – a system that not only integrated the whole production and marketing process in a single farm but that was also integrated in the broader international socialist economic system. In this sense, production and marketing processes are today fragmented since they are performed within small farming units often only partially connected to national and international markets. On the other hand, the new organisation of agriculture in small farms has reintegrated the responsibility, awareness and knowledge of individual farmers over the whole production and marketing process, in contrast to the fragmentation of tasks of individual workers in Soviet farms. At the same time, both Chapters 8 and 9 showed that the agricultural activities of single households in Pjak have both been integrated into emerging formal and informal markets and have continued to be strongly integrated in social networks stretching well beyond the village.

The empirical material and the analysis presented in Part IV have provided some answers to the questions that emerged from Part III and were formulated in the Introduction to Part IV. These questions concerned in particular how existing local representations, practices and social relations reconfigure the meanings and practices of external initiatives for the promotion of cooperatives as well as how, simultaneously, these initiatives reconfigure local lifeworlds. I summarise here the answers that have emerged from Chapters 8 and 9 and then conclude by reflecting on what they reveal about broader power mechanisms, in particular about subjection processes and individual agency within them.

Re-reading cooperative experiences and agricultural practices in Pjak

The analysis of agricultural activities in Pjak from a diverse economies perspective (following Pavlovskaya 2004; Gibson-Graham 2006b; Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013) has allowed to reveal and do justice to the diversity of economic practices that are performed in the village well beyond what is commonly considered as the economic sphere, intended as formalised and mainly monetised practices. We have seen how, in Soviet times, at the time of post-independence reforms as well as today, villagers' livelihoods depend on a plethora of diverse economic activities that can be formalised or informal, monetised or nonmonetised and that take place in the public sphere as well as in the private sphere. In this context, the existing structures of informal cooperation within social networks have shaped and, at least in part, absorbed the activities promoted by development projects in the village. The resources made available by development projects have been distributed along existing personal networks. The formal framework of the cooperative Ak-Bulut, rather than modifying farmers' practices by establishing and regulating specific collective activities, has represented an additional tool through which farmers have been able to access project resources and further ones. Therefore, although some project activities have been variably framed as part of Ak-Bulut, which activities are formally part of the cooperative and which are not is a less relevant question than who is involved in these activities and what resources can be accessed through them. In this context, the experience of Ak-Bulut (and of other cooperatives in the Issyk-Kul region) is hard to grasp if we base our analysis on an understanding of cooperatives as formalised collective enterprises with clear boundaries and functions, but it can be best understood through a less normative and more open approach that looks at cooperation as a relational

practice (see Byrne and Healy 2006; Gibson-Graham 2006a, 101–26; Emery, Forney, and Wynne-Jones 2017).

Acknowledging in the first place the plurality of diverse economies of agriculture in Pjak has allowed me to analyse the different relations that emerge out of their multiple practices and that in turn shape these practices as well as how these relations have transformed over the last decades. Among these relations, I have emphasised especially the persistent importance of personal networks of different kinds (with close and distant relatives, former and current work colleagues, former schoolmates, neighbours, friends or acquaintances) not only for the access to crucial resources and services but also for villagers' identities and sense of belonging. Focusing on these relations and networks has allowed me to analyse the processes of inclusion and exclusion that contribute to determine an individual's position in the community and has thereby revealed the hierarchies and inequalities constituted through these relations. Concerning the experience of Ak-Bulut and of other cooperatives, my analysis illuminates the blind spots that the institutionalist analyses discussed in Chapter 2 leave on power relations and inequalities. We have seen, for instance, how the framework of Ak-Bulut and of other development project has, on the one hand, benefitted a particular kind of person while excluding other villagers. Simultaneously, however, the redistribution of project resources within personal networks has also allowed to include villagers that were not formally targeted by projects. On the other hand, the involvement in the cooperative and in other activities promoted by development agencies has also implied an additional burden for local elites, especially in terms of responsibility and accountability towards external institutions as well as towards villagers.

My analysis has confirmed the importance, discussed in Chapter 4, of not assuming that communities are homogeneous but of instead understanding communities as inessential and as emerging through intimate everyday practices and relations (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016; Amin and Howell 2016; Karner and Weicht 2016). At the same time, it is also important not to assume that inessential communities emerging from cooperation are progressive and inclusive by definition (Amin and Howell 2016). I have shown repeatedly that the communities emerging from cooperation practices in Pjak are internally stratified, exclude parts of their members from decision-making and rarely distribute equitably the benefits and burdens they generate. Inclusion and exclusion patterns at different scales result from power relations within these communities and their intersectional overlaps.

Post-independence reforms and projects have surely reshaped the scope and composition of these communities. In Soviet times these communities, at least discursively and symbolically, included a larger community of Soviet citizens (and even humanity more generally) and, in any case, materially included a collective work unit in the Soviet farm and all employees of the farm (and thus all households in the village). Today, the communities constituted through cooperation practices in the village are much smaller and include mainly close relatives and friends. Nevertheless, post-independence reforms and projects have only partially transformed power relations within these communities and have not significantly reduced – and in some regards have even increased – internal inequalities and exclusion patterns. In particular, by not assuming households as homogeneous entities, my analysis has shed light

on their internal fragmentation and hierarchies, which usually continue to benefit male and older members over younger and female ones.

Representations and practices of agriculture and cooperation in Pjak

In Part III I had already shown how the narrative of the failure of cooperatives by some scholars, development actors, governmental actors and villagers produces negative affects of inadequacy and lack. I had also suggested that villagers' narrative about the loss of cooperation can be seen as a way to contest the idea, suggested by development actors and some scholars, that Kyrgyzstan's rural population as a whole (and, more broadly, postsocialist societies the like) is unfit for cooperation because of its historical and cultural legacies. On the one hand, villagers endorse this idea by mobilising the notion of a "Kyrgyz mentality" of passivity and laziness that limits their active cooperation within farmers' groups such as cooperatives. On the other hand, villagers' parallel narrative of loss suggests that cooperation has been there before – and that it is actually and indeed a central element of Kyrgyz culture or "Kyrgyzness". Villagers seem thus to suggest that the cause for their incapacity to engage in cooperation might be more recent: it is rather the consequence of a process of individualisation and social and economic stratification fuelled by the decollectivisation process started after the independence of the country. Whatever the specific terms and causation models, however, the common denominator of these narrative is the firm belief that Kyrgyzstani villagers today are unfit for cooperatives and cooperation as well as, more generally, "normally functioning" market economies, development or modernity, and that this unfitness is caused by a series of fundamental lacks and/or losses. This strongly resonates with the assumptions and arguments of broader developmentalist discourses, not only in the context of ex-socialist societies but also in the wider Global South and, more recently, in the Global North (e.g. Pigg 1992; Escobar 1995).

In Part IV it became even clearer that these assumptions and arguments are based on narrow understandings of cooperation and rigid categorisations of economy. On the one hand, development workers and some scholars refer to a particular kind of cooperation within formal institutions based on Western models; on the other hand, villagers refer in part to these models (or better said, their own reinterpretation of these models) and in part to their representations of traditional solidarity relations within kinship and friendship groups. We have seen, however, especially in Chapter 9, that both these representations make hardly visible other forms of cooperation that are indeed widespread in the village and crucial for agricultural activities and for villagers' livelihoods and that, in the process of post-independence transformation, have strongly shaped the emergence and organisation of new agricultural markets and of private farming. My analysis of diverse economies of agriculture in Pjak has instead made these processes visible and has, as highlighted above, shed light on the inequalities and power relations that shape them.

Whereas in Part III I especially discussed how the specific narratives and representations on cooperatives and cooperation emerge from a particular understanding of, full or bounded, economic rationality (mainly of individual profit maximisation), in Part IV I have shown how other economic and social rationalities

intertwine, how they underpin these narratives and their assumed categorisations and how they relate to multiple identities and moralities. In particular, I argued at the end of Chapter 9 that some forms of work (as wage labour or as activity within “modern” farms) are more valued than other ones (household tasks or “traditional” exchanges within social networks) and that this hierarchisation produces negative identities defined for their lack of the more valued forms of work. I have also argued, drawing on Féaux de la Croix (2017, 213–50), that the work of a single individual benefits today a more reduced “constituency” than in Soviet times (a closer circle of relatives and friends versus the large community of Soviet farms and Soviet citizens or even humanity as a whole). This reduction implies a devaluation of individual work with respect to its lost embedding in a larger project and produces an additional sense of lack among villagers.

All these lacks (in particular of cooperation and work), once more, contrast with the observation of actual practices in the village, where – as I have extensively illustrated throughout Part IV – agricultural activities are often performed in collaboration with relatives and friends and where villagers are often busy all day organising and performing field activities and household tasks. I have thus argued, in line with Gibson-Graham (2006b, 46–71; see also Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013, 1–48), that dominant understandings of economy devalue and delegitimise a large range of economic practices that are on the contrary crucial for people’s livelihoods and that these dominant discourses thereby produce negative identifications with lack and inadequacy.

These negative identities are produced also through processes of othering at multiple scales, for instance in villagers’ comparison between their precarious livelihoods and their image of a prosperous Switzerland or Europe. Kay, Shubin and Thelen (2012) have argued that postsocialist ruralities are object of a “double othering” as *postsocialist* (in contrast to Western) and as *ruralities* (in contrast to urbanities). Indeed, we have seen for instance that Batyr compares the “clean” business activities in Karakol with the unstable and difficult farming activities in Pjak. At the same time, however, the divide between rural and urban is also framed in another way that ascribes to the rural term of the comparison positive values. In particular, these values relate to a notion of “Kyrgyzzness” that includes strong cultural traditions and genuine relations with a clean natural environment. The village is perceived as a space where solid traditional bonds of kinship determine relations of solidarity and mutual support, the air is clean and the food is organic per default; this is in opposition to the perceived urban environment of the capital, where social bonds are weaker, people are spoiled, the air is polluted and the food one can find at the bazaar is of bad quality and comes from China. This comparison, again, happens at different scales, for instance between the even cleaner and more genuine – but at the same time even more backward – space of *jailoos* (summer pastures, see Féaux de la Croix 2017, 51–81) and the village space where individualism is already widespread – but at the same time where modernity has at least partially arrived (see the comparison of Fig. 24 and Fig. 25). This alternative othering suggests that the hegemonic discourse is not granitic and other narratives and representations can emerge: in the next section I turn to discuss how this happens.

Multiple subjectivities and individual agency in the intervals of hegemonic discourses

In the discussion at the end of Part III I had advanced that, within the hegemonic discourse on the promotion of cooperatives, intervals of discontinuities leave space for the emergence of alternative framings, strategies and subjectivities. The analysis in Part IV has allowed to identify better the existing plural subjectivities, to understand more comprehensively how these subjectivities emerge within or are constrained by the hegemonic discourse on the promotion of cooperatives and, more generally, the political and social context of contemporary Kyrgyzstan, and to reflect on the consequences of these processes for villagers' everyday lives.

I have already noted above that villagers' different and apparently contradictory mobilisations of the (near or distant) past constitutes also a way to contest the dominant narrative stating that their current state of inadequacy is a legacy of their culture and their Soviet past. At the end of Chapter 9 I argued, in addition, that villagers' mobilisation of elements of their past experiences (better said, of their current reinterpretation of this experience) is also a strategy – even if often unconscious – to contest some specific conditions of their present economic, political and social condition and therefore to express their wish and hope for the changing of this condition. In particular, I argued that villagers' narrative about the loss of cooperation within weakening social networks points to three perceived problems with their respective wished solutions. First, the discursive individualisation of the responsibility for a person's economic and social success – a discourse that corresponds to the logic of neoliberal capitalism – clashes with a context in which this success is in fact precarious and depends on structural conditions beyond individual control. In this regard, villagers express the wish for a meritocratic but also equalitarian society, where individuals enjoy equal opportunities and their success truly depends on their personal effort. Second, the weakening of social security systems (either in the form of social networks or of state welfare) exacerbates the precarity of villagers' livelihoods in a new socio-economic system that is already precarious *per se* and of which individuals cannot fully make sense¹. In this regard, the narrative about the abandonment by the state parallels the narrative of lost solidarity: both express the wish for stronger social security that could compensate for the uncertainty of the socio-economic context. Third, in a discursive context that, as discussed above, produces mostly negative identities of lack, villagers miss the identification with a larger and higher goal that would confer sense and value to their lives. In this regard, they express the wish that their personal efforts and everyday struggles be acknowledged and valued.

In Chapter 9 we also saw that villagers are able to navigate between different moral frameworks to legitimise their activities and position within the local community. They do not straightforwardly adopt or reproduce a morality of meritocracy and individual responsibility but adapt it according to the other moral framings available in their local cultural context. In this way, they are able to reinterpret – and thereby legitimise – a capitalist logic of private accumulation by mobilising the repertoire of what is considered

¹ Needless to say, with this I am not arguing that villagers are unable to do this because of their postsocialist condition or whatever "lack" of understanding or knowledge. Who can indeed claim to be able to fully make sense of the structural features *and* the contingent randomness of capitalisms (and socialisms)? Surely not myself. Probably many orthodox economists and maybe some structural Marxists have claimed they can: the countless fundamental critiques and additions to their models confirm, however, the opposite.

the local traditional morality of sharing and cooperation. The villagers who enjoy (even precarious) economic success thus are proud to show this success for instance through visible signs of material consumption and to conform thus to the valorisation of personal effort and hard work that is common and valued in what is considered Kyrgyz tradition as well as Islamic, Soviet and neoliberal ideology. At the same time, however, the same villagers frame their economic success as benefitting their community before themselves, which allows them to comply with the morality of sharing. This double framing allows villagers to legitimise economic success as the result of personal effort that at the same time benefits the community. It also allows them to constitute one's identity as a good worker/person who serves others and honours reciprocity obligations and cultural traditions – an identity that is socially valued and rewarded within the village community. The post-Cold War context has thus provided a discursive legitimisation for private accumulation – a framework that makes available and values the subject position of the active private entrepreneurs. At the same time, this position can be fully legitimised only through its embedding within other moral repertoires, in particular the one of sharing and solidarity – the entrepreneur becomes thus a charitable entrepreneur. Both framings, or discursive structures, are maintained and reproduced through villagers' aspirations to correspond to legitimate and valued identities as a way to cultivate a sense of belonging to a community in which individuals can inscribe the meanings of their personal lives, especially after the overarching socialist project has become unavailable as an identification element.

Furthermore, both framings contribute to the legitimisation not only of this new subject position but also of new or reinforced inequalities and discriminations. I illustrated this through the example of my own compliance with and reproduction of gender-based roles and discriminations through everyday intimate practices as a way to be acknowledged as a “good person”, to please people I love as well as to feel a legitimate belonging to my host family and community. Although the new moral repertoires made available by marketisation have indeed allowed some villagers to at least in part challenge these inequalities and discriminations (like in the case of Aisha), I argue that these new repertoires have not fundamentally altered the power structures underpinning such inequalities and discriminations. In particular, the legitimisation of private accumulation through both the identity as hard-working businessman/woman and the identity of the generous patron who cares for his/her close ones and for the larger community in fact even reduces the accountability of wealthy villagers towards less fortunate ones. For instance, we have seen that Aisha, by mobilising the repertoire of the charitable entrepreneur can avoid engaging in more open negotiations with other villagers about how to redistribute the surplus that should be generated through her future processing factory. Similarly, by insisting that his private business is supporting the village community, Kumbat prevents other villagers the possibility to participate in decisions about the distribution and management of the resources mobilised through his cooperative.

Making sense of the past and wishing for a better future

The power structures highlighted in the previous section remain equally unchallenged by villagers' use of the past as a way to contest the present. I argue that this is the case because most references to past

experiences are based on an idealisation of these experiences as positive and on the parallel obscuring (or forgetting, see Brockmeier 2002) of negative experiences. Villagers recall past hardship only marginally – and often as a source of pride or as a joke. Kumbat and Dinara usually state that life in Soviet times was good, although Kumbat spent several years in jail in the 1980s and his family suffered profound hardship; Kumbat mentions his jail experience to me only once or twice and he frames it mostly as a funny anecdote. On the contrary, older villagers recall the hardship during the second World War and its aftermath very frequently; this hardship, however, is also a source of pride, which is inscribed in the Soviet rhetoric about the Great Patriotic War and its victory over fascism. Frequent are also references to the hardship during the 1990s; in this case too, however, often villagers add with pride that they were able to overcome that crisis by their own.

Throughout the manuscript we have rarely heard villagers pointing explicitly to inequalities and discriminations in the past. The material presented in Chapter 8 has, however, confirmed that “Kyrgyz society was highly stratified before the Russians arrived” (Judith Beyer 2016, 21) and that this stratification persisted during Soviet rule. Oral histories by villagers have shown that this stratification, in Soviet times, was based on a particular kind of technical expertise that was rewarded with broad privileges linked to specialist positions within the Soviet farm. Later, the activities of international development organisations in the village did not fundamentally alter this stratification: privileged positions in relation to projects have been usually based on one’s authority in the community but also on technical expertise – even if in different forms. Furthermore, villagers’ accounts of the past almost completely silence the well-known violent practices of repression and control by the Soviet regime towards its citizens. Although the oral histories and evaluations of the past presented in the two chapters originate mainly from the generations that had direct experience, at least in their childhood, of Soviet rule, younger generations seem not to deviate significantly from the patterns just discussed. Joldosh (born in 1991), for example, explains to me that for him the Soviet time (which he mainly reconstructs through his grandmother’s tales) is like a fairy tale: everything was nice; food and other goods were abundant and cheap; all were equal and society was based on solidarity and on a profound *drujba* (friendship) that united all citizens.

Villagers thus use memories as a way to contest the present and “as part of the process of imagining a different future”; in this sense, “references to past ideologies and practices are [...] part of the negotiation of contemporary realities that can be seen as a ‘rational’ response indeed from the perspective of the local actor rather than as an unreflective nostalgia for outmoded models of thought” (Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008, 346). Indeed, the past offers powerful moral repertoires to contest the present – and even more, it provides symbolic resources and discursive repertoires to make sense of the present, where, in fact, others are usually difficultly available (see *ibid.*). The problem, however, is that in this way the power relations that shaped representations and discourses in the past not only remain unchallenged but are even reproduced.

I argue that the idealisation of the past and the selective remembering of its positive elements, furthermore, tend to evacuate responsibility and accountability from both past and present power

structures: this limits the possibility to engage with the roots of inequalities and injustice in the past and, as a consequence, also of those in the present. In this way, the wishes and desires expressed by villagers through their memories often remain desires (fantasies, indeed) for something that never was and that never can be, unless the mechanisms of fantasy are disrupted. Only by traversing these fantasies and by tackling the power structures they mask – in the past and in the present – it is possible to engage radically with villagers' legitimate wish for a better future. In the concluding chapter of this manuscript I propose a framework for cooperatives and cooperation that could allow us, as scholars, to engage with this wish.

10 GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The analysis of agricultural cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan has represented the entry point for a broader discussion of how local communities reinterpret the formal institutions for cooperation promoted by international agencies. This discussion in turn is part of a broader reflection on how communities and individuals locally rearticulate global processes of neoliberalisation and marketisation – a reflection focused on, but not limited to, the experience of ex-socialist countries in CEE and the FSU. My reflection is inserted in the scholarly traditions of the ethnographies of postsocialism (e.g. Burawoy and Verdery 1999b; Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008) and the ethnographies of aid (e.g. Mosse 2005; Olivier de Sardan 2005). Both traditions have provided an empirically grounded alternative to models of social change that are based on unfounded assumptions and on teleological visions of development and modernity and that, therefore, neglect entire dimensions of social reality. Although scholars in both ethnographic traditions have convincingly argued for the importance of this alternative since the 1990s, it is unfortunately still relevant three decades later: we have seen throughout the manuscript the tenacious persistence and problematic symbolic, affective and material consequences of the approaches that have been at the centre of the critique of these scholars. My research reiterates and renews their call for an “engagement with processes and meanings of transformation as it is lived, experienced and negotiated everyday [... an engagement that] provides a most important counterpoint to the bird’s-eye perspective of transitology and to neoliberal ideology” (Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008, 343).

Failures and successes of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan

In this manuscript, I have presented and discussed my ethnographic engagement with the specific local reality of a village in northern Kyrgyzstan – a standpoint from which I have been able to observe the local re-articulation of the processes of economic liberalisation, state restructuring and nation-building that have been ongoing in the country since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. I have thus shown that villagers re-appropriate the activities promoted by development projects in Pjak or in other villages of the Issyk-Kul province, thereby adapting these activities to existing practices and moralities. In particular, I have made clear that farmers reinterpret the formal framework of the cooperative Ak-Bulut and of other cooperatives and use it mainly as a way to access external resources to be then redistributed along their personal networks rather than as a way to reframe and change their agricultural practices. More in general, villagers have in part embraced new market logics and today base their agricultural activities on monetary exchanges and commercial relations with new private actors such as local or international trade companies and intermediaries; at the same time, however, monetised or nonmonetised informal exchanges within networks of relatives and friends that stretch from the house to international remittance flows are crucial for villagers’ agricultural activities and livelihoods. This confirms the observations of the few studies that have looked, even if only marginally, at cooperation practices in Kyrgyzstan beyond formal institutions (e.g. Sabates-Wheeler 2007; Lerman 2013a, 26–27; Dörre 2015). It also joins conceptualisations within feminist economic geography of economic systems as assemblages

of multiple diverse economic practices stretching across multiple places (in particular Gibson-Graham 2006b; Smith and Stenning 2006).

Moreover, my analysis has revealed that other logics and moralities besides those of the market and of neoliberal capitalism affect the ways in which the surplus generated through agricultural activities is consumed or redistributed within households, personal networks and the village community as a whole. For instance, what villagers praise as the Kyrgyz tradition of sharing solicits successful farmers or entrepreneurs to share at least a part of their gains in the form of gifts that are variably framed as reciprocal obligations or charity. Or, coming back to my experience introduced at the beginning of the manuscript, what villagers emphasise as the distinctive Kyrgyz hospitality urges Jamilya to honour me as a guest with her food even if I thought I was only her customer. This does not only resonate with other ethnographic observations from Kyrgyzstan (e.g. G. Botoeva 2015; Féaux de la Croix 2017) but also meets the reflections of scholars who showed that markets are embedded in social relations and institutions (Polanyi 2001) or moral economies (Thompson 1971; 1991) or, even more convincingly, that markets are *per se* social, moral and political constructs (e.g. Krippner 2001; Palomera and Vetta 2016; Tilzey 2017).

Given this context and its complex processes, it is obviously reductive to state – as it is commonly done by scholars, development or governmental actors and residents of Pjak the like – that cooperatives have failed in Kyrgyzstan. Certainly, international agencies and governmental programmes have largely failed to establish cooperatives as formal and bounded collective enterprises. They have similarly failed, more generally, to establish (or “craft”, the term used by institutionalist scholars) formal cooperation institutions with democratic governance and management mechanisms, as the examples of Water User Associations or Pasture User Committees mentioned in Chapter 9 confirm. Even more certainly, the promotion of agricultural cooperatives by international and local actors has not resulted in the establishment of “perfect” agricultural markets in post-independence Kyrgyzstan – but this is also and mainly because, as many have acknowledged, perfect markets exist only in economic models (e.g. Narotzky and Besnier 2014 among many others).

Nevertheless, the promotion of cooperatives programmes has achieved to provide, directly or indirectly, material resources to some farmers, who have thus been able to reinforce or expand their agricultural activities. This has offered local elites new opportunities for intermediation, in part confirming their economic and social position. At the same time, however, these elites have also faced an increased burden of responsibility towards both external agencies and villagers and have at least in part redistributed their benefits within their personal networks, producing a kind of trickle-down effect. The material and symbolic resources provided by development programmes – in parallel with the emergent agricultural markets – have also offered opportunities to some disadvantaged villagers to, at least partially, challenge some of the local power structures. This has been possible not only because of their improved economic situation and integration in markets as postulated by the logic, often mobilised by development programmes, that increased revenues lead to emancipation; but also (and perhaps mainly) because the

engagement with development actors has allowed these villagers to build alternative personal networks beyond the local ones.

Finally – and what constitutes one of the main arguments of my analysis – the apparatus, or *dispositif*, of the promotion of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan, which includes also the narrative about the failure of cooperatives, has certainly achieved to (further) persuade villagers that they lack something and that this something is the fulfilment of the project of neoliberal development that international programmes for the promotion of cooperatives and, more generally, for development or postsocialist transition explicitly advocate or implicitly endorse. If we agree with Escobar (1995) that one of the aims – pursued with intention or by default – of the whole development apparatus is the reproduction and fixation of dichotomous categories of “developed” and “underdeveloped” and if we agree also with Ferguson (1990) that another of its aims is the de-politicisation of a particular development model that is instead presented as universal and whose realisation is claimed to be a technical and not a political matter, we can then conclude that, in these regards, the promotion of cooperatives in Kyrgyzstan has been indeed successful.

In the reminder of this concluding chapter, I discuss how the traditional scholarly approaches on cooperatives and cooperation presented in Chapter 2 contribute to this specific “success”¹ but also how individuals – in Pjak and outside the village – have been able to contest and resist, at least to some extent, the discursive power of such approaches. I therefore argue, then, for a different epistemological and ontological approach that would help re-valuing the progressive potential of cooperatives and cooperation experiences and re-inscribing them into a more inclusive, emancipatory and equalitarian vision. I conclude the manuscript by reflecting on the contribution of my analysis to broader disciplinary debates and social theories and on the possibilities for further research and engagement.

A hegemonic discourse with disempowering consequences

My analysis has joined the rising critique to institutionalist approaches to cooperation – a critique that recent commoning scholarship especially has convincingly articulated (e.g. Nightingale 2011; Singh 2017). I have also built on the recent and still rare voices that have called for abandoning normative understandings of cooperatives as tools for anti-capitalist resistance (Gibson-Graham 2006b, 101–26), as tools for inclusive development or private business within market economies (Emery, Forney, and Wynne-Jones 2017), or as tools *tout court* (Byrne and Healy 2006). Following these voices, I have analysed cooperatives not as formalised bounded entities but as the always transitory result of cooperation practices. This has allowed (1) to challenge the assumptions and essentialisations of institutionalist approaches on cooperatives and cooperation, (2) to expose the symbolic, affective and material consequences of the hegemonic discourse these approaches contribute to constitute and (3) to reveal the ways in which individuals reproduce or contest the power of this discourse.

¹ The quotes, indeed, underline the irony of this meaning of success.

The main assumption of institutionalist approaches is that institutions can be “crafted” according to selected sets of rules and that these institutions will then determine individual behaviour in a specific direction (see e.g. Ostrom 2000). This assumption bases in turn on another assumption: that individuals respond to the incentives and sanctions provided by institutions following an economic rationality (even if a “bounded” one) of profit maximisation. The empirical material presented in the manuscript confirms instead that, first, the “crafting” of institutions (in my case the promotion of cooperatives) is already *per se* a fragmentary process of negotiation and reinterpretation by different actors (in my case development workers and governmental actors) who have each different resources, interests and aspirations (Chapter 6) and that, second, the always incomplete and ambiguous institutions constituted through this process are in turn negotiated and reinterpreted by the individuals who are supposed to comply with the rules of such institutions (in my case farmers, Chapter 7 and Chapter 8). Complex and often contradictory overlapping rationalities, but also moralities and affects, shape these processes of negotiation and reinterpretation – processes that are therefore always undetermined and contingent (Chapter 9).

Critical institutionalist scholars have questioned these assumptions from within the institutionalist scholarship by drawing attention to processes of “institutional bricolage” and to the role of alternative rationalities in these processes (e.g. Cleaver 2007). However, they have left other assumptions unchallenged, especially the ones about the power structures and identities that shape these processes: notably relevant for the Central Asian context are in this sense the essentialised and homogenising notions of cultural legacies, especially as related to the Soviet past and to older clan-based patronage logics² (see e.g. Schring 2009; Soliev et al. 2017). My ethnographic material refutes the idea that inherited cultural features determine the actions of individuals in path-dependent patterns. Instead, in line with the non-deterministic reading advanced by ethnographers of postsocialism, my analysis shows that individuals respond to (or, more precisely, engage with) changing institutional conditions by re-articulating and reframing their practices in complex and open-ended ways that include also, but not only, reinterpretations of past experiences and re-actualisations of past practices. My analysis also shows that these processes of re-articulation and reframing continuously reconfigure the personal networks in which patronage or other reciprocity practices are inserted; these networks include loyalties that are based not only on clan or kinship ties but also on friendship relations that emerge for instance from collective work experiences in the Soviet farm, from neighbourhood everyday life or from childhood school connections.

² Studies on Central Asia (e.g. Collins 2006) frequently highlight clan-based relations (and sometimes the power structures that underpin them), whereas this is rare in studies on the Global North – as if, in the latter context, clan/kinship relations did not determine inequalities and discriminations. A personal anecdote shows the opposite. While I am finalising the present manuscript, a friend calls on my phone to tell me about her latest experience in the house of her parents-in-law in a Swiss village. She is frustrated because whenever her family visits their house, the parents-in-law implicitly expect (and sometimes explicitly pretend) that my friend and her partner perform several time-consuming and physically demanding tasks in the house and garden. These tasks, my friend lucidly notes, emerge not out of the old couple’s material or psychological basic needs but rather out of its wish to maintain a certain social status in the village (for instance by offering their homemade *schnaps* as a gift to other villagers). The old couple partially involves its son in the planning of tasks and leisure but never includes my friend. It also usually neglects, in this planning, to consider the equally time-consuming and physically demanding tasks the young couple has to simultaneously perform to care for its two young children. My friend’s tale strongly resonates with what I highlighted in Chapter 9, in particular the exclusion of female and/or young family members from decision-making, the double burden falling of women (but in the, at least in some regards, gender-fairer Switzerland, also of young men) and the importance of informal flows of goods and labour within families as well as within local personal networks.

Finally, institutionalist approaches – like most community development programmes – tend to assume a homogenising and often romanticised view on local communities, neglecting their internal differentiations and stratifications, of which I have provided several examples throughout the manuscript.

Institutionalist approaches and most other current approaches on cooperative theory and cooperation promotion discussed in Chapter 2 fail therefore to consider and acknowledge other dimensions of social reality beyond a particular, and limited, economic dimension. The simplified reading of social reality produced by these approaches does not remain confined in academic texts (as, unfortunately, is too often the case for their critique) but circulates through specialised degree programmes in educational institutions and through management and design practices in development agencies' offices and reaches local development workers, governmental actors and villagers. The example of the repetition, in academic texts and practice-oriented reports, of Lerman's phrasing about the "psychological resistance to cooperation" in ex-socialist countries (e.g. Gardner and Lerman 2006, among several others, see §6.1.3) and the example of how I encountered Lerman's arguments in conversations with development workers and villagers in Kyrgyzstan reveal the process of circulation of a specific kind of knowledge that becomes, through this circulation, a reality. This specific knowledge is part of, and at the same time constitutes, a broader discourse that becomes hegemonic because it provides the legitimation frame for a series of institutions, knowledges, experiences and identities that, in turn, contribute to produce and legitimise that same framing (see Escobar 1995).

More concretely, the simplified vision of cooperation and institutions produced by scholarly accounts and the consequent recommendations by the latter for the practical implementation of cooperation initiatives (for instance through the application of sets of 'rules', see Ostrom 2000) constitute a handy knowledge that development agencies and their employees can easily appropriate and apply in their programmes. This kind of knowledge is especially convenient within the specific institutional settings of a development apparatus dominated by the logics of short-term mandates and projects, competition for donor funding and requirements of clear indicators and measurable evidence of success. The problem, however, is that, since most of the assumptions underpinning this knowledge are questionable, the probability that development projects follow in practice the path expected in theory is very low, if not null (see e.g. Mosse 2004; 2005). After all, development programmes (but also, similarly, reforms after socialism, structural adjustments or austerity programmes), in order to evolve how they are expected to, would require that the assumptions on which these expectations are based be true: that, for instance, a class of peasant farmers who respond to economic incentives and who profit of what are considered self-evident benefits already exists. Even when acknowledging the absence of such a class, development programmes assume that it will emerge as soon as the correct institutional settings and incentive structures are in place. Ironically, this is reminiscent of the Bolsheviks' plan to establish a proletarian state in the largely unindustrialised Central Asian region, in the absence of a proletarian class that was supposed to emerge as soon as the Soviet regime was put in place.³

³ I thank Christine Bichsel for suggesting this parallel.

The result of all this, as I have shown in detail especially in Part III, is a narrative of failure that places responsibility for this failure not on the simplistic assumptions of cooperation initiatives and of cooperative theory but on a series of essentialised lacks among individuals and entire communities. The hegemonic discourse thus not only legitimises a simplified and partial knowledge as universal but also *produces* a simplified reality subdivided in dichotomous categories. It generates not only a process of “double othering” along the lines of East/West and urban/rural, as argued by Kay, Shubin and Thelen (2012, 57–58) but an even more complex process of multiple othering along the additional lines of, among others, development/backwardness, modernity/tradition or technical expertise/local experience and at multiple overlapping scales, for instance *jailoo*/village, village/city, Kyrgyzstan/Switzerland or Central Asia/Europe. Symbolically, the hegemonic discourse provides a limited repertoire of identities, or subject positions, and the ones available to villagers are mostly in the negative pole of the dichotomies.

As a consequence, the hegemonic discourse produces mainly negative affects among villagers – of lack, deficiency or inadequacy – with disempowering and disheartening effects on individuals. Finally, because the hegemonic discourse renders largely invisible existing discriminations and inequalities, but also existing cooperation practices, it forecloses the possibility to concretely tackle such discriminations and inequalities as well as to build on and expand such cooperation practices. I have argued, following Byrne and Healy (2006; also Healy 2010), that development workers, governmental actors and villagers, but also many scholars, are in this regard fantasmatic subjects: they are trapped in a fantasy mechanism that produces simultaneously an unrealisable object of desire and the symptoms that prevent its realisation. The consequence of all this, then, is that these subjects are often unable to engage ethically (in the sense intended by Healy 2010) with the concrete everyday challenges of cooperatives or cooperation initiatives and with their concrete opportunities in the here and now.

Disruptions: individual agency in intervals of discontinuities

I have joined feminist post-structuralist scholars, in particular the tradition building on Butler’s work (e.g. Gibson-Graham 2006a; Nightingale 2019; see Butler 1997) in noting that hegemonic discourses and subjection processes are never fully accomplished and that individual agency can emerge in their intervals of discontinuities. I have thus shown that individuals, in Pjak and outside the village,⁴ engage in different ways with the hegemonic discourse discussed above: they negotiate multiple moralities and identities and thereby shape the hegemonic discourse, sometimes strengthening and sometimes contesting it. Whereas, as we have seen throughout the manuscript, villagers do reproduce the dichotomous categories of the hegemonic developmentalist discourse, identify with the negative subject positions it provides and suffer the negative affects it produces, they also strive, simultaneously, to reclaim an autonomous and more positive identity for its negative pole. They do so by mobilising another powerful framing that is available

⁴ Outside Pjak, we have seen especially the example of development workers in Chapter 6. Since I have engaged in a much more limited way with these actors during my fieldwork, I have been able to only suggest some of the ways they seem to navigate between different framings, moralities and aspirations or how their multiple subjectivities emerge. I could not deepen my analysis in this direction, but Féaux de la Croix’s (2013) study on Kyrgyzstani development workers does well to confirm my impressions.

to them: the repertoire of “Kyrgyzzness” that is employed and legitimised especially by the nationalist narratives emerged within the nation-building process following Kyrgyzstan’s independence (see e.g. Everett-Heath 2003; Isaacs and Polese 2016). If, on the one hand, within the developmentalist discourse Kyrgyzstan is the backward Other of the developed West or North, the nationalist discourse, on the other hand, attributes to – invented (see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992) – Kyrgyz traditions and positive values related to solidarity, community and genuineness in opposition to the assumed cold individualism and detachment from nature and community of Western societies. Kyrgyzstani ruralities represent, in the overlapping of the two discourses and their processes of multiple othering, the two most extreme poles: they are considered backward and deficient in their comparison with urban development on the one hand and, on the other, they are valued as strongholds of genuine Kyrgyzzness in opposition to Western societies and Kyrgyzstani cities.

I argue that the two developmentalist and nationalist discourses imply two different sets of moralities, which in some regards converge and, in some others, diverge. Villagers continuously reinterpret and renegotiate these moralities: in different contexts they draw on one or the other repertoire to legitimise their practices and identities or to make sense of the reality they experience. On the one hand, we have seen that the logic of sharing (endorsed by the nationalist discourse) counters the logic of private accumulation (endorsed by the developmentalist discourse) when villagers redistribute the surplus generated through their private activities (in a cooperative or outside it) among their relatives and friends as a way to honour Kyrgyz kinship or friendship traditions and to comply with their values. If read through Thompson’s (1971) moral economies lenses, this process is an example of how local social relations embed emerging markets attempting to reduce the negative social consequences of the latter on local communities. If read through Polanyi’s (2001) “double movement” lenses, the process is an example of how a movement of social protection parallels a movement of marketisation. However, I have also shown that the reciprocity obligations implied by the logic of sharing within personal networks can represent a burden and, in Fraser’s (2013) formulation, limit the “negative liberty” offered by markets (for instance the possibility to bath in a private *banja* without having to perform hospitality rituals, or starting a business activity without having to rely on one’s mother-in-law approval) and thereby their potential for emancipation from oppressive social relations.

On the other hand, I have shown that some villagers creatively construct an identity as “charitable entrepreneurs” as a way to justify and legitimise their practices of private accumulation through the mobilisation of the repertoire of traditional sharing. Here, although the two logics (accumulating versus sharing) diverge, the discursive mobilisation of the latter supports the material realisation of the former. The two logics converge thus in a specific morality of (hard) work – a morality that directly attributes the responsibility of economic success to the individual, as is expressed by the Kyrgyz proverb “who works, will eat”. Villagers reproduce this specific morality in their narratives but, simultaneously, they see that it does not correspond to their everyday experiences of economic success or failure. Therefore, while they endorse the principle that economic success is a matter of individual responsibility, they simultaneously mobilise the dichotomous categories of the developmentalist discourse to evacuate this individual

responsibility from themselves and shift it on structural elements such as the “Soviet legacy” or “Kyrgyz mentality”. In this way, these categories are further reinforced, as are the negative identities and affects they produce.

Considering all this, we can conclude, on the one hand, that the villagers who are in some ways related to the cooperative Ak-Bulut (or to other cooperatives) are postfantasmatic co-operator subjects (as intended by Byrne and Healy 2006 and as discussed in Chapter 4) because they do not base their decisions and negotiations concerning the cooperative on the normative, idealised model of cooperative promoted by development agencies. Instead, they reinterpret this model every time a concrete question emerges and engage with the question in an open-ended way, considering alternative moralities and identities and deciding, for instance, to redistribute to other villagers the surplus generated through the cooperative even if this is not officially foreseen by the formal regulations of the cooperative. In a similar way, when development workers or governmental actors suggest to a group of farmers to register as a cooperative to access a credit scheme or when they renegotiate the terms and contents of the activities planned in their programmes, we can see them as postfantasmatic subjects who have been able to overcome the normativity of the hegemonic discourse.

On the other hand, I argue that villagers related to Ak-Bulut, like other villagers less related to it as well as many development workers, governmental actors and scholars, are simultaneously fantasmatic subjects in many other regards. First, the nationalist discourse is not less essentialist and normative than the developmentalist discourse: its notion of “Kyrgyzzness” is dangerous not only because it excludes other ethnic groups but also because it is romanticised and homogenising and, therefore, it masks social stratifications and inequalities inherent to communities. Second, the legitimisation of private accumulation through the mobilisation of the repertoire of traditional sharing in fact withdraws accumulation processes from others’ scrutiny and further reduces the possibility to renegotiate these processes to make them more inclusive. Third, contesting, like I have shown villagers do, the logic of individual responsibility for economic success is paramount: however, the way it is contested through the reproduction of the dichotomous categories of the developmentalist discourse fails to diagnose – and therefore tackle – the actual structural conditions that make the rule “who works, will eat” invalid in practice. Tackling these structural conditions would mean, for instance, to renegotiate governmental social security and redistribution systems, to redefine farmers’ participation and decision-making power in political and economic institutions or to redefine traditional roles within households. I have shown that villagers implicitly raise their claims concerning these issues through nostalgic narratives about the past. However, I have argued that these claims, too, are based on romanticised and essentialised reinterpretations of past experiences and, therefore, similarly fail to diagnose and tackle the roots of inequality in the past as in the present.

A postcapitalist framework to engage with cooperatives in postsocialism

Despite the critique I have raised through my analysis, I argue that scholars and activists should not completely dismiss the idea of cooperatives as frameworks to foster cooperation and inclusion. Inspired by the longstanding engagement of Gibson-Graham (e.g. 2006a), Healy (e.g. 2010; Byrne and Healy 2006) and other scholars who have followed their path (e.g. Emery, Forney, and Wynne-Jones 2017 and the authors of their edited special issue), I advance an alternative approach to rethink cooperatives in postsocialism in theory and to engage with them in practice. Certainly, the approach I propose does not provide handy “rules” or schemata to be easily applied in development projects and is thus, in this regard, incompatible with the current structure of the development apparatus discussed above. I argue, however, that this should not be a reason to reject the approach I propose, but rather an argument for the necessity to rethink *also* the structure of today’s international development system.⁵

I thus call for an antiessentialist approach to cooperatives. This means, first of all, to engage in a process of deconstruction of essentialist assumptions and normative notions about cooperatives and cooperation – assumptions and notions that circulate widely and that are rooted deeply in subjects, including ourselves as researchers.⁶ This concerns above all our understandings of identities, rationalities and institutions. We should ask what identities/rationalities/institutions we are assuming, whether they correspond to what we can observe in the social reality we are engaging with and, if not, what the symbolic, affective and material consequences of these assumptions are. Here, in particular, we should pay specific attention to avoid essentialist understandings of communities (which is indeed crucial at the end of a decade that has seen the steady rise of such understandings) but also to acknowledge the heterogeneity of antiessentialist communities, asking how power relations produce their internal differentiations and stratifications (Amin and Howell 2016; Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2016). The rejection of essentialism should concern cultural, social and also economic categories, embracing a postcapitalist stance that disrupts the hierarchical categories through which we are used to make sense of economic practices (Byrne and Healy 2006; Gibson-Graham 2006a). Here, in particular, we should include and value in our analysis economic practices that are too often neglected, especially informal and nonmonetised practices and those that are performed in the private sphere.

⁵ An engagement in this direction, building on the countless already existing attempts in the same direction, is far beyond the scope of this manuscript, but certainly represents a much-needed project for scholars, development practitioners and citizens globally. Such an endeavour could start from the official recognition by development institutions of what is already evident to every individual development worker with some experience in the field and what ethnographers of aid have reiterated for decades: that a development project *in practice* necessarily differs from its *theory* because actors inevitably reinterpret and renegotiate its meanings and activities in their everyday. This not only could reduce the blaming of so-called project beneficiaries for the deviations of projects from their planned goals and activities. It could also bring about a process of emancipation of individual development workers who could finally be transparent on their experiences in the field without having to “embellish” them to make them fit rigid evaluation schemes and expectations of compliance with project goals.

⁶ A last personal anecdote proves the deep roots of such assumptions and notions and how difficult is to abandon them. After I have engaged six years with these reflections in the framework of my doctoral research (and even longer if we consider my previous academic, professional and personal experiences), the capitalocentric structures deeply rooted in my subject still manifest in my writing practice. I am thankful to Bruno Meeus who, while reviewing one of the last sections of this manuscript, noted, with his striking and inspiring sensibility, that I put concepts such as “market” or “economy” almost systematically in the subject position of my sentences, even when these are turned in the passive form. The way I unconsciously structured my sentences relegates other entities, such as social relations, moralities, or even human actors, to secondary grammatical functions. I have revised as far as possible the construction of my sentences in the last sections of the manuscript, while I have left it mostly unchanged in the central chapters – also as a way to testify the subtle, tortuous and always incomplete transformation of one’s own subjectivity.

I call for a postfantasmatic approach to cooperatives, through which we do not focus on an idealised future or a nostalgic past but we engage ethically in the actual present. This means that we should strive to traverse our own fantasies about idealised models of cooperatives and cooperation, to abandon our teleological visions of development and to let go of our fixation on symptoms that our fantasies themselves produce. We should abandon normative and purist visions of how a cooperative should be; instead, we should learn to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2016; see also Nightingale 2019) of acknowledging, accepting and engaging with the intrinsic fragmentation, contingency and incompleteness of always open-ended, undetermined and unpredictable social processes. Only in this way can we “pass to the act” and “act ethically” (Healy 2010, 503): engage with the contingent present, here and now, with concrete open questions that raise day after day, and negotiate these questions by considering all their implications for the human and nonhuman entities that are affected by them and by assuming our responsibility for our decisions and actions. This means, more concretely, to engage openly with the social relations and practices that we can observe in a specific local reality – such as patronage relations, reciprocity networks, informal exchanges or even illegal practices. We should, first, ask what inclusions or exclusions, benefits and inequalities these relations and practices produce and, then, act ethically *from* them to tackle the roots of the exclusions and inequalities we wish to transform.

I call for a relational approach to cooperatives. This means that in order to transform what we wish to transform, we should first of all transform ourselves and our relations with the entities concerned by this transformation. Cooperatives, then, are not anymore formal institutions that are crafted to prompt individual behaviour in a wished direction, but become one among other possible ways to nurture and reconfigure relations (Singh 2017; Nightingale 2019). Within this approach, a particular engagement with the affective dimensions of cooperatives is indispensable. While engaging with the assumptions, notions, fantasies, relations and practices discussed in the two previous paragraphs, we should thus interrogate their affective consequences and, if the affects they produce are negative, we should reflect on how to nurture more positive ones through what relations.

As a compass to orient ourselves in this transformation, I suggest that Fraser’s (2013; also 2015) conceptualisation of a “triple movement” can be helpful, even if perhaps not enough. Fraser argues for a progressive project that comprises the elements of three “movements”: an attention to social protection (to whom and how to redistribute surplus) and to emancipation (who has access to rights and recognition) combined with a regulated marketisation that offers negative liberty to individuals. Fraser, however, does not expand on the importance of political (and here I intend political in the broadest sense) decision-making, which for her is a component of emancipation. I propose a stronger focus on this element, intended not necessarily as the establishment of formal institutions of representative democracy but rather, more broadly, as participation in decision-making processes at several levels, from the household to national and international formal political institutions through informal groupings of whatever kind. Furthermore, I insist on the importance of ethical responsibility as a way to acknowledge the intertwining of our and others’ actions within complex social systems and the implications of our decisions for multiple communities at multiple scales.

For such a complex and ambitious project, we cannot eschew a deep intellectual and affective engagement through methodologies that do not limit our multi-dimensional experience as researching subjects and that instead leave large room for openness to the unexpected, the unknown and the unthought. A weak theory approach combined with feminist ethnography as the one I have engaged with in my research is, therefore, an appropriate starting point. It is not, however, enough: a more active commitment to collaboration for a more explicit collective transformational effort is needed. Adequate for such a commitment are certainly, but not exclusively, action-research practices within hybrid collectives that would include, besides social scientists, for instance farmers, villagers, development workers, governmental actors, natural scientists and artists (see Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010b).⁷

Outlook

I made clear in the manuscript that my reflections were triggered in particular by the negative affects I felt when engaging with the institutionalist literature on (“failed”) cooperation in postsocialism. My theoretical reflections and my approach to the empirical material were fuelled by my wish to counter the determinism of approaches that tend to conceptualise institutions as rigid structures that govern individual behaviour. As a way to counterbalance the excessive focus on determined and determining structures of institutionalist approaches, I emphasised and insisted on the fluidity and plurality of social entities and on the overdetermination and open-endedness of social processes. A further, rebalancing, step could consist in reconsidering the regulating (but never fully determining) power of institutions on individual behaviour.⁸ Such a step could rehabilitate the notion of “institutions” – intended not only as formal ones such as cooperatives but also as informal ones such as kinship. Here, however, it would be crucial to conceptualise institutions not as rigid structures but as fluid entities – as Vasile (2019b) suggests with the notion of “enlivened institutions”.

I have built my critique to institutionalist approaches to cooperation on the commoning scholarship emerged recently as a feminist current within political ecology (see Clement et al. 2019). By applying to agricultural cooperatives the reflections articulated within this scholarship, I have expanded these reflections beyond their focus on entities that are part of the traditional realm of commons – such as forest, fish or pasture land – and of the more recent “new commons” – such as information resources and technology (the digital commons), the body or atmosphere. I have shown the validity and usefulness of the relational approach developed within the commoning scholarship to illuminate and better make sense of forms of cooperation that do not emerge out of relations with a specific commons entity – as in the case of the cooperative Ak-Bulut, where we cannot consider agricultural land strictly as a commons. By insisting on the importance of a specific attention to the subjection processes – and their affective consequences – produced by hegemonic discourses on economy, my research contributes to enrich the reflections of commoning scholars, who sometimes overlook to engage explicitly with a thorough

⁷ See also the several examples of such practices by the members of the Community Economies Research Network (<http://www.communityeconomies.org>, accessed 23.12.2019).

⁸ I thank Bruno Meeus for suggesting this step.

deconstruction of economic categories and with an analysis of their consequences. I also introduce into these reflections the concept of fantasy and a more precise attention to dimensions of temporality (reinterpreted pasts and aspired futures) – two elements that are still underinvestigated within the commoning scholarship. Thereby, I contribute to the recent and promising dialogue, within the commoning scholarship, between its political ecologist and postcapitalist currents (*id.*). Certainly, my analysis could be reinforced and expanded through an engagement with the specific sensibilities promoted by the political ecologist current. In particular, a deeper analysis of the role of nonhuman entities – especially soil, seeds and climate – in the processes I have described in the manuscript would allow to strengthen the significance of my research in relation to environmental processes and challenges, in the historical context of the decade that is about to start where tackling these challenges has become imperatively urgent.

My research confirms the validity and importance of a postcapitalist approach in economic geography (see in particular Gibson-Graham 2006a) and enriches the theoretical apparatus of this approach with reflections grounded in empirical material from a context – postsocialist ruralities – that until present has not been included in the reflections of postcapitalist scholars. I argue that two elements are particularly relevant in this regard. First, in the Central Asian postsocialist ruralities, the overlapping of processes of multiple othering at multiple scales is better visible than in the contexts with which postcapitalist scholars are used to engage (in particular the deindustrialising Global North and the Global South). My analysis has revealed the disheartening consequences of these othering processes and calls thus for a stronger commitment to their deconstruction and analysis also in contexts where these processes are less visible. Second, the particular historical trajectories of ex-socialist countries in CEE and the FSU endows the present realities of these countries with dimensions of temporality that are different from those from which postcapitalist theory has emerged. In general, in the deindustrialising Global North, where Gibson-Graham has mostly engaged, the industrial past represents modernity and prosperity: subjects thus experience today a loss and perceive their trajectory as a regression with respect to a linear teleological vision of history. On the other hand, in the Global South, the past is represented as backward (even if romanticisations of local traditions and communities are common) while the present is experienced as a transitory stage towards development/modernity within the same linear teleological vision of history. In ex-socialist countries in CEE and the FSU, instead, the past represents something else; socialist experience represents a different kind of modernity and perceived prosperity that, after the end of the Cold War, has, however, lost its legitimacy. The present is thus both a regression from the past modernity but also a transitory stage towards another kind of modernity. We have seen that these particular dimensions of temporality importantly shape the processes I have described in the manuscript. Therefore, I suggest that a deeper reflection on specific localised dimensions of temporality could be illuminating also in the other contexts and that a comparison of the role of these dimensions in these different contexts could be productive to deepen our understandings of diverse economies – and of economy *tout court*.

Finally, then, the results of my analysis of marketisation processes in a Kyrgyzstani village are not relevant only for the specific and limited local context but, I argue, join the contributions of other

ethnographic analysis of postsocialism “to reconceptualizations of taken-for-granted concepts such as ‘the market’, ‘class’ or ‘civil society’” (Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008, 356) – but also, in my case, as “economy”, “development” or “modernity” and as “past”, “present” and “future”. Such reconceptualisation, indeed, “enabl[es] further theorizations of social change and pos[es] questions about the validity of the models now applied in postsocialist countries for established capitalist societies themselves” (*ibid*). In particular, my analysis contributes to better understand complex processes of subjection and the room for individual agency left by their discontinuities as well as to better grasp the role of temporalities, multiple othering processes at multiple scales and affects within these processes. In a decade that is commencing with the risk that increasingly vigorous sovereignist/nationalist forces use the urgency of the environmental crisis to advance and impose their authoritarian agendas, understanding how individual agency can destabilise or disrupt hegemonic power is vital.

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ANNEX I – WHO IS WHO: PERSONS MENTIONED IN THE MANUSCRIPT

Name	Gender, ev. year of birth	Main characterisation	First occurrence
<i>Aibek</i>	Man, 1963	Kumbat's neighbour, ex-mechanic in the Soviet farm	§8.4.2
<i>Aisha</i>	Woman, 1975	Member of Kara-Jer cooperative	§7.2.3
<i>Adis</i>	Man, 1969	Farmer, Kumbat's relative	§7.3.3
<i>Amirbek</i>	Man, 1983	Villager met in a shared taxi	§9.5.3
<i>Arstan</i>	Man 1975	Kumbat's oldest son	§9.2
<i>Aziza</i>	Woman, 1952	Kumbat's friend, ex-accountant in the <i>sovkhos</i>	§7.4.5
<i>Baburbek</i>	Man	Development worker at GIZ	§6.2.1
<i>Baktigul</i>	Woman, 1954	Ex-accountant in the <i>sovkhos</i>	§7.3.4
<i>Batma</i>	Woman, 1963	Kara-Jer Cooperative's Chairwoman	§7.2.3
<i>Batyr</i>	Man, 1974	Owner of a big farm enterprise	§9.5.2
<i>Begimai</i>	Woman, 1972	Deputy in the village council	§9.3.6
<i>Bermet</i>	Woman, 1980	Kumbat's daughter	§9.3.1
<i>Bob</i>	Man	Development worker at a UN organisation	§6.2.2
<i>Damir</i>	Man	Villager met in the street	§7.4.1
<i>Daniar</i>	Man, 1974	Deputy of the village council	§7.3.4
<i>Dinara</i>	Woman, 1953	Kumbat's wife	Chapter 1
<i>Ermek</i>	Man, 1959	Kumbat's neighbour, ex-mechanic in the <i>sovkhos</i>	§8.4.2
<i>Bolot</i>	Man, 1941	Ex-specialist in the <i>sovkhos</i>	§8.3.1
<i>Elzada</i>	Woman, 1972	Interpreter in 2015 and 2017	Chapter 1
<i>Gulperi</i>	Woman	Development worker at Bio-KG	§6.2.4
<i>Indira</i>	Woman	Development worker at ICA-Asia and Pacific	§6.5
<i>Jamilya</i>	Woman, 1981	Elzada's in-law relative in Pjak	Chapter 1
<i>Jibek</i>	Man	Civil servant, province level	§6.2.2
<i>Joldosh</i>	Man, 1991	Bermet's husband's cousin	§9.2
<i>Jumabek</i>	Man, 1934	Ex-specialist in the <i>sovkhos</i>	§8.3.5
<i>Leila</i>	Woman, 2002	Osmon's daughter	§9.2
<i>Kairat</i>	Man, 1951	Well-off farmer	§7.4.4
<i>Kasym</i>	Man	Civil servant, <i>aiyl</i> level	§6.2.1
<i>Keres</i>	Woman, 1951	Granddaughter of a local leader	§8.1.3
<i>Kumbat</i>	Man, 1949	Ak-Bulut's Chairman	Chapter 1
<i>Mamat</i>	Man, 1952	Kumbat's friend, historian in his free time	§8.4.1
<i>Meder</i>	Man, 1981	Arstan's colleague and friend from Bishkek	§9.2
<i>Mirislam</i>	Man, 1927	Ex-brigadier in the <i>sovkhos</i>	§8.3.5
<i>Nadyrbek</i>	Man, 1975	Civil servant, district level	§6.4.1

Annexes

<i>Nazgul</i>	Woman, 1936	Former simple worker in the <i>sovkhos</i>	§8.3.5
<i>Nazira</i>	Woman, 1958	Director of the kindergarten	§7.3.1
<i>Nurbek</i>	Man, 1980	Owner of Ak-Bulut Cooperative's tractor	§7.2.3
<i>Nurlan</i>	Man, 1968	Civil servant, <i>aiyl</i> level	§6.4
<i>Osmon</i>	Man, 1982	Kumbat's son who lives in Pjak	§9.2
<i>Roku</i>	Woman	Development worker at a UN organisation	§6.3.2
<i>Saikal</i>	Woman, 1992	Interpreter in 2014 and 2016	§5.2.4
<i>Samat</i>	Man, 1989	Kumbat's youngest son	§9.3.1
<i>Sezim</i>	Woman	CUK director	§6.2.1
<i>Sabyr</i>	Man, 1992	Arstan's oldest son	§9.2
<i>Stanislav</i>	Man, 1951	Oktjabr Cooperative's director	§7.1
<i>Sultanbek</i>	Man, 1968	Tokoi Cooperative's Chairman	§7.3.4
<i>Talant</i>	Man	Development worker at JICA	§6.2.2
<i>Tuman</i>	Man, 1984	Kumbat's son who lives in Russia	§7.3
<i>Ulan</i>	Man, 1967	Kumbat's relative	§7.2.2
<i>Zamir</i>	Man, 1955	Aziza's husband, ex-head accountant in the <i>sovkhos</i>	§7.2.2

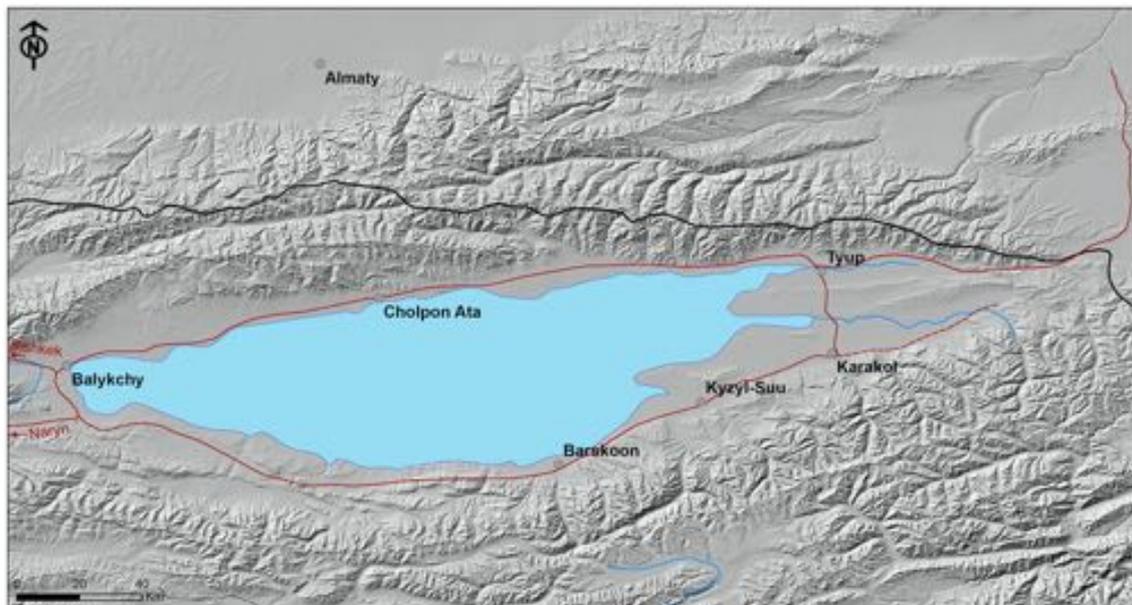
Note on anonymisation: all names of persons, villages and cooperatives are fictitious.

ANNEX II – FIGURES¹

Figure 1: Map of Kyrgyzstan; © STRM data V4, elaboration by C. Pellet and M. Kummert



Figure 2: Map of the Issyk-Kul region; © STRM data V4, elaboration by C. Pellet

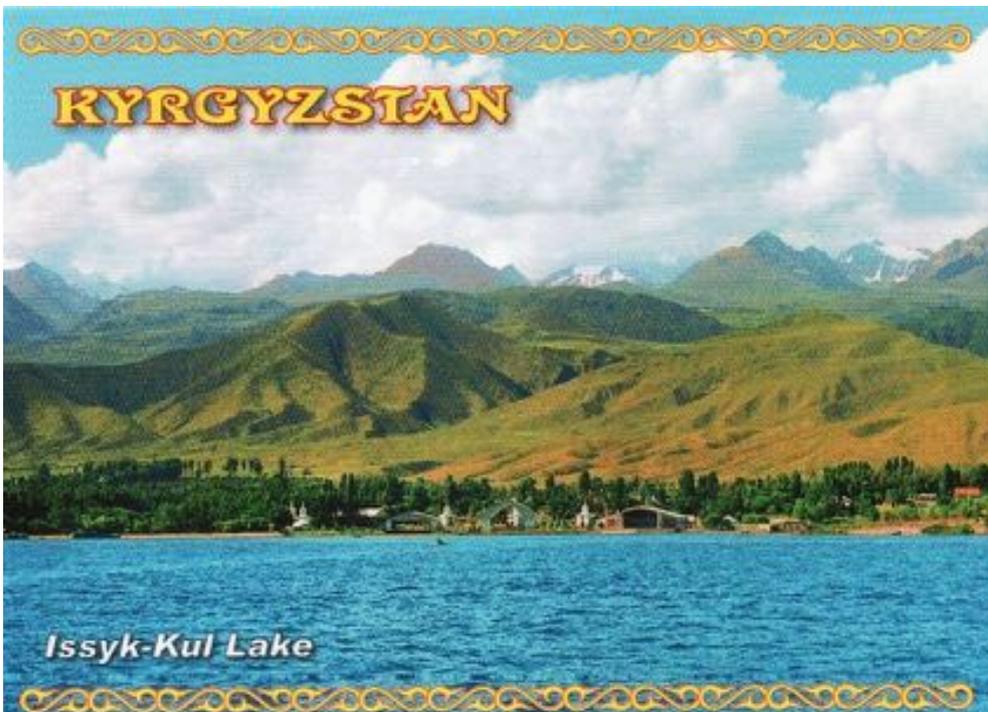


¹ Pictures by the author unless indicated.

Figure 3: Flyers from Nurlan's fridge/shelf (2015)



Figure 4: Postcard of the Issyk-Kul lake²



² https://colnect.com/en/postcards/postcard/58675-Issyk-Kul_Lake-Pictorial_Tour_of_Kyrgyzstan-Kyrgyzstan (accessed 18.12.19)

Figure 5: First view of the Issyk-Kul lake from the bus coming from Bishkek (2017)



Figure 6: Land use in the Issyk-Kul region; KHMI et al. (2006, 4)

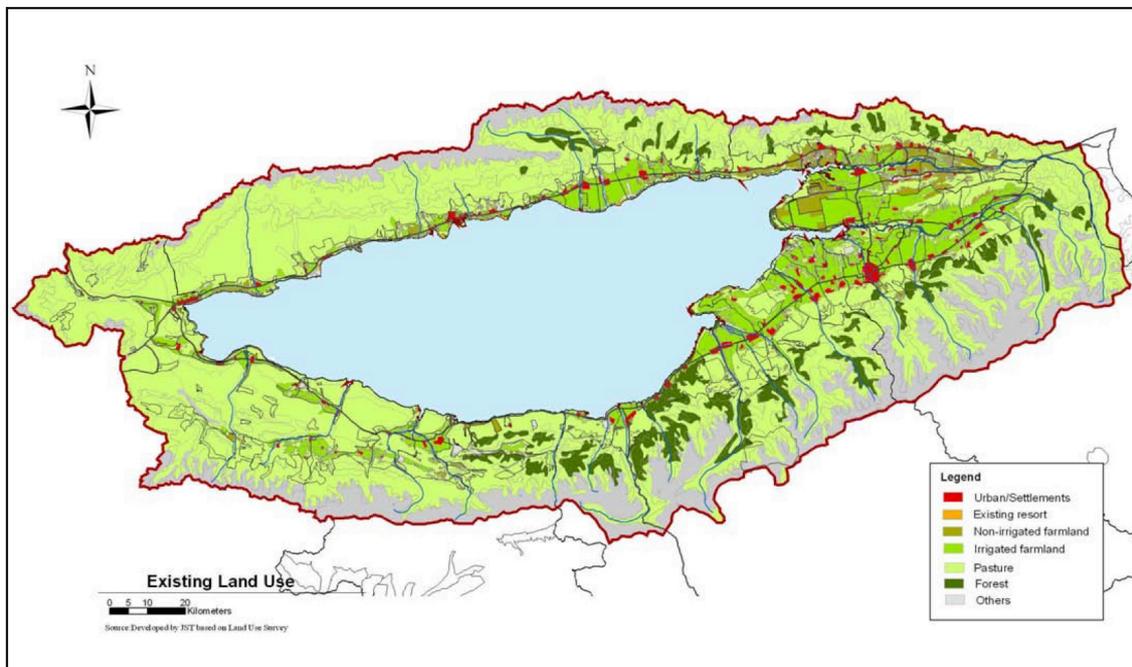


Figure 7: An agricultural landscape in the Issyk-Kul region. Typical small plots contrast the larger fields cultivated by a production cooperative. (2016)



Figure 8: Map of Kok-Bulak *aiyl* by a villager (2016)

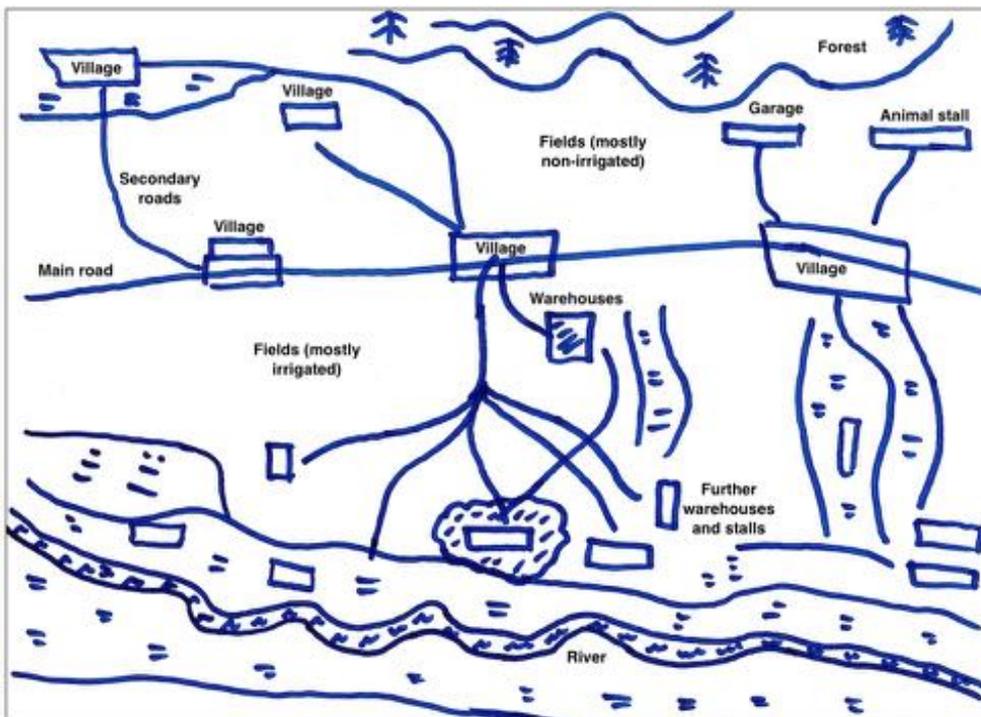
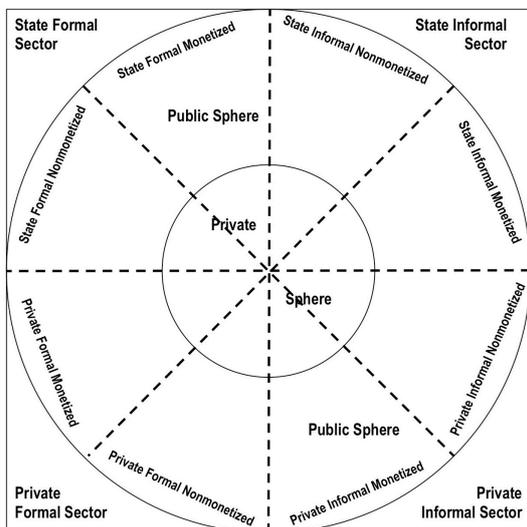


Figure 9: Diverse economies iceberg³



Figure 10: Pavlovskaya's representation of diverse economies; modified by the author from Pavlovskaya (2004, 335)



³ The original iceberg can be found in Community Economies Collective (2001). The figure here reproduces the newest version of the iceberg developed by the Community Economies Research Network: <https://www.communityeconomies.org/index.php/resources/diverse-economies-iceberg> (accessed 15.10.2019).

Figure 11: Diverse economies of Soviet agriculture; adapted by the author from Pavlovskaya (2004, 335, 337)⁴

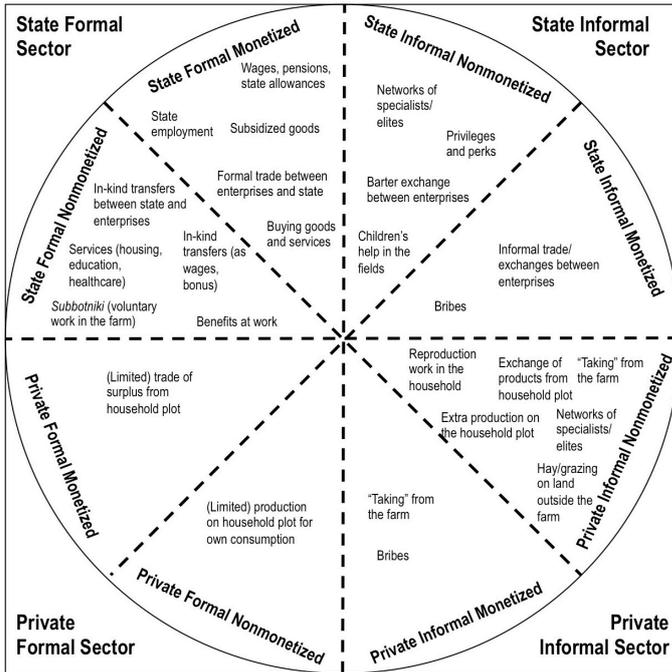
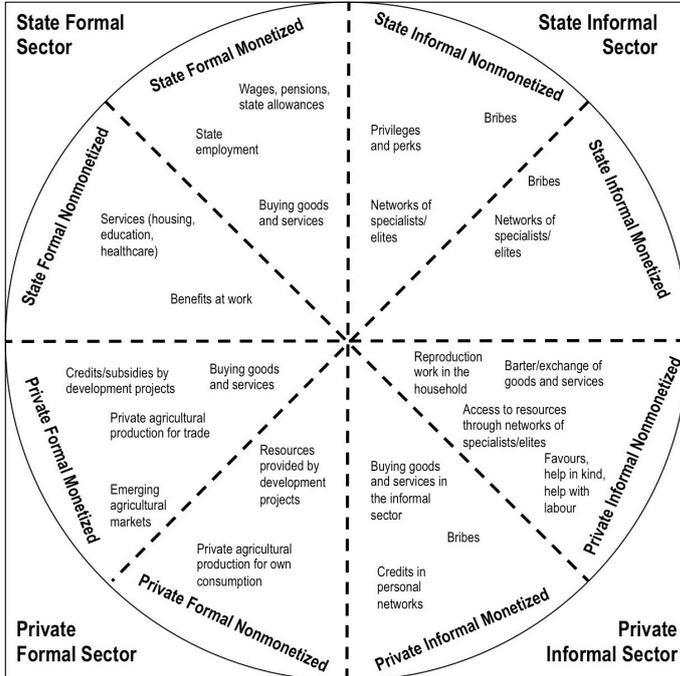


Figure 12: Diverse economies after Kyrgyzstan's independence; adapted by the author from Pavlovskaya (2004, 335, 337)



⁴ Note that in Figure 11 and Figure 12, I drop the separation between the private and the public spheres. I do so for aesthetic reasons but also because ascribing a practice to one sphere or the other is often very difficult.

Figure 13: A second-hand tractor (2015)



Figure 14: Barley stored in the summer kitchen (2017)



Figure 15: A lavish marriage (2017)



Figure 16: Sowing potatoes by hand (2016)



Figure 17: Kumbat's family, drawing by the author

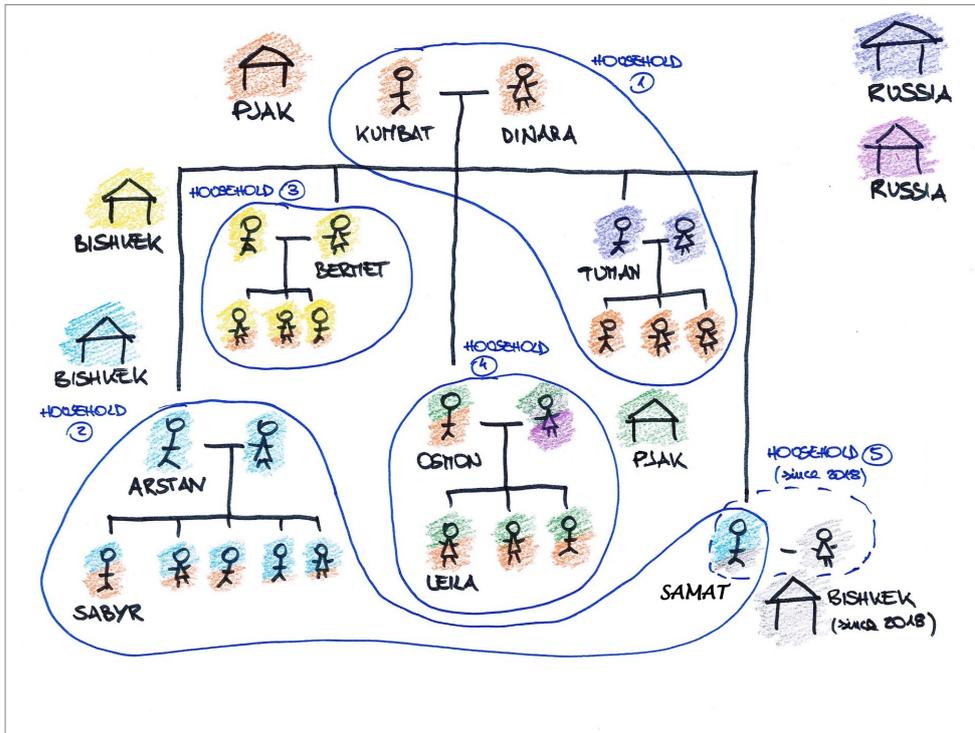


Figure 18: Summer remort and cleaning (2015)



Figure 19: Exchange of food within the extended family. The author celebrating her return from Kyrgyzstan with her parents and jams from Pjak. (2016)



Figure 20: Construction work through *ashar* (2015)



Figure 21: Sick potato plants. A villager points to them during a walk with the author. (2016)



Figure 22: Irrigation infrastructure (2016)



Figure 23: The author performing hospitality rituals (2016)



Figure 24: Modern farming in the Issyk-Kul region; drawing by a boy from the region (2016)



Figure 25: Typical *jailoo* landscape with yurt; drawing by a boy from Bishkek (2016)

