

## INTRODUCTION

# TRAVELING INTO THIN AIR

In 2007, while working for a development project and living in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe, I made many friends who traced their origins back to the mountain valleys in the east of the country. The mountains my friends referred to as their homeland, the Pamirs, are located in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO)<sup>1</sup> and span the borderlands where Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and China meet. Gorno-Badakhshan is often perceived as an isolated backwater from a Dushanbe point of view, and the topos of remoteness frames depictions of GBAO. Descriptions of the Pamirs range from orientalist views of the region as a wild, romantic, spiritual place to a deserted mountain area that is inhabited by bellicose people.<sup>2</sup> While usually referred to as “far away” (*dur*) by people in Dushanbe, development reports and studies often label the Pamirs “extremely isolated” (Breu and Hurni 2003, 6) or “extremely peripheral” (Vanselow 2011, 32). Discourses of natural beauty, spirituality, and danger, both in the sense of human aggression and natural disasters, derive from such notions of remoteness.

Many of my friends in Dushanbe, with or without origins in the Pamirs, associate the mountainous region with purity and health, speaking of hot springs, pilgrimage sites, and fresh mountain air, but also with destruction, referring to bad roads, landslides, and civil war. And yet only a very few people from western Tajikistan have actually been to the Pamirs, and even those who feel a genealogical connection to Gorno-Badakhshan often have an ambivalent attitude toward the region. For them it is not only their “homeland” or “motherland” (*vatan*), but also



I.1. A road maintenance outpost between Murghab and Osh. Photograph © Bernd Hrdy, 2009.

represents, on the one hand, a safe refuge and, on the other, boredom, and it constitutes a place that often has to be left for a better life in Dushanbe or abroad.

A trip from Dushanbe to Khorog, the capital of Gorno-Badakhshan, can take anywhere from one hour to several days. When the weather is good, a lucky, or privileged, minority of travelers can secure seats on a small passenger plane. All others have to rely on private ground transport that is organized by drivers who regularly commute between the two places. If the final destination is located even farther to the east in the district of Murghab, travel time increases from one to several additional days, depending on season, weather, road conditions, and vehicle. Many people in the eastern parts of Gorno-Badakhshan therefore orient themselves toward the city of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan which, even when the road is in bad shape, can usually be reached within a day or two.

From a Khorogi point of view, the image of the stretch of road to Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan, which traverses the district of Murghab, is often that of a deserted, wild, and unhealthy land. High altitude (above 4,000 meters), the lack of oxygen, the tendency of strange dreams to occur, and rumors of unpleasant ghosts make the place undesirable to visit. And just

as I did not find many people in Dushanbe who had been to the “remote” Pamirs, during my fieldwork I also did not meet many from Khorog who had been to the even more “remote” Murghab. While some had stopped in Murghab’s district center (also called Murghab) on the way to Osh, hardly anyone could remember more than Kyrgyz herders with their herds of yaks and flocks of sheep and a handful of scattered settlements where life could only be imagined as unbearably difficult. A conversation I had in 2009 with a young scholar from Khorog who had just completed a degree in political science at a university in Great Britain emphasizes the extent to which Murghab is subject to cultural and geographic fragmentation within Gorno-Badakhshan. Indeed, after having read Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* while he was in Great Britain, he stated that people in Murghab were “our oriental others.”<sup>3</sup>

The “double remoteness” of the settlements along the road between Khorog and Osh is also reflected in the literature on Murghab, which paints a picture of an archaic wasteland that is inhabited by Kyrgyz cattle breeders.<sup>4</sup> Thus, when I decided to pursue my first period of fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation on the communities along Tajikistan’s Pamir Highway in the summer of 2008, I had little more to rely on than the stereotyped image of a rough and impoverished land far away from everyone and everything. This lack of knowledge on Murghab defined my initial fieldwork preparations. None of my urban friends in Dushanbe and few people in Khorog could really give me any advice on how to plan an enterprise like this, let alone provide me with contacts in Murghab with whom I could potentially stay. Advice ranged from buying a military jeep for transportation to bringing my own food and piles of special clothes to help me ward off the Arctic cold the Pamirs are infamous for in the flatlands. Only when I became friends with border guards from Khorog and their Murghabi fellow soldiers did things become easier. I bought a white secondhand four-wheel-drive Lada Niva at the bazaar in Dushanbe and a satellite phone for emergencies, and I was given the address of a friend of a friend in Murghab.

### THE HIGHWAY AS FIELD

My fieldwork actually began when I climbed into my newly purchased car and left behind the last houses of Khorog in the summer of 2008, accompanied by a close friend, the Austrian photographer Bernd Hrdy. Nowadays, the only way to reach Murghab from the flatlands and lower mountain areas is the road that stretches out from Khorog to Osh in

southern Kyrgyzstan. The road, informally known as the Pamir Highway (*Pamirskii trakt*), is part of highway M41, which leads from Termez in southern Uzbekistan via Tajikistan to Kara-Balta, a town a few kilometers west of Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek.

For many travelers, the town of Murghab, with its approximately seven thousand inhabitants, is just a stopover along this dusty, high-altitude stretch of road. However, for people who live along this stretch, Murghab is the road's center and is inextricably linked with its history, geography, and administration. From this vantage point, Murghab is transformed from a peripheral settlement along the road into the link that connects Khorog and Osh and therefore becomes central itself. Located on the plateau high above the road's termini, Murghab offers its inhabitants at least two directions in which to turn: toward Osh and toward Khorog. This feature, in combination with the fact that Murghabis have gotten used to living along this difficult and often mutable stretch of road, reinforces the agency they can exert on the road and turns the Pamir Highway into a place that they shape.

When Bernd and I set off for Murghab in my white Lada Niva, we came across countless remnants of what once belonged to the Soviet road infrastructure, including deserted gas stations, checkpoints, shelters for truck drivers, sanatoriums, and, suggestive of the present and future of the region, a terminal for China trade. The communities that had been established to maintain this infrastructure, to build and sustain the road, are still linked together. In the effort to maintain an open way through the Pamirs' mountain valleys and the high plateau of Murghab, transportation relations were established that have outlasted the Soviet empire that created them. Yet only after visits to many settlements along the road was I able to see that strong kin, friendship, and professional connections had also been established between and within these communities.

With the town of Murghab as the highway's center, many of the road's outposts originate from, relate to, or depend on the settlement. On the first trip to Murghab in 2008, my car broke down in close proximity to such an outpost. Damage to the gearbox had stranded us on one of the mountain passes between Khorog and Murghab and was proof of my complete ignorance of Russian cars at that time.<sup>5</sup> As I soon found out, the bazaar traders in Dushanbe had realized I was a novice and sold me a Niva that was stuffed with cheap Chinese parts. Fortunately, a military vehicle eventually towed us late that night to Mamazair, an outpost for road construction workers, from where I was able to call the family whose



I.2. A car repair workshop along the Pamir Highway. Photograph © Bernd Hrdy, 2008.

contact details I had been given in Dushanbe. As it turned out we had to spend a day in Mamazair before support and spare parts could be brought from the district center. This gave me an initial impression of life in a road-maintenance outpost and encouraged me to visit many more such places where road workers live with their families.

Our arrival in Murghab the next day was not as I had imagined it prior to departure. Being towed to my field site was not only embarrassing but also established my initial role and identity in my new home and neighborhood—that of a rather hapless foreigner in need of guidance. Nursultan, the man behind the contact address, helped us out of Mamazair that first day, and it would not be the last time he would come to my rescue when I got stuck in the middle of nowhere. He, and later on his wife Gulira, became close friends in Murghab.

In contrast to my initial embarrassment and dependence on the first people I met, there were also positive effects that came with my inability to pretend I was local. My vehicular breakdowns, which occurred on a regular basis and in almost every part of the district, made me a rather well-known figure in and around Murghab. On numerous occasions strangers would approach me and ask, “Aren’t you the guy whose white Niva with Dushanbe number plates broke down in my village some time ago?” Thus the breakdowns were not only a source of embarrassment—

they also opened doors and gave me the opportunity to make new contacts and interview people.

The day of our arrival from Mamazair was the beginning of a slow integration process into Nursultan and Gulira's family. While I have lived with several other families along the Pamir Highway for extended periods of time since that first visit in 2008, Nursultan and Gulira gave me a home I could always go back to. In addition, their large circle of family members and friends allowed me to extend my network of people from the town of Murghab to various other places along the road.

This book is based on the ethnographic data I began to gather during that first trip and continued to gather over the course of more than fifteen months of fieldwork conducted from 2008 to 2015. Except for the last fieldwork period in 2013 and a shorter follow-up visit in 2015, I lived in Murghab as a single man. At the beginning of my research in Tajikistan, I was twenty-seven years old and thus considered a man on the far edge of marriageable age. Being unmarried and "around thirty" is atypical for men in Murghab; it usually raises suspicions and is seen as suggestive of problems. In my case, within Nursultan and Gulira's family it gave me a status best described as "older brother-and-uncle" (*aka*), no longer the "son" (*bala*) I had been considered in my previous fieldwork experiences in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, this change of social status led to an initial distance from family members. On the other hand, it lent a certain gravitas to my research and granted me the authority to enter into discussions with elders. While I had been regarded a "boy" (*jash bala*) during previous fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan, I was now a peer to many of the family members and the odd *aka* to the children in the house and neighborhood.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I gave priority to conducting open interviews to learn more about people's lives in the region, a perspective that had rarely been explored from an anthropological point of view. Furthermore, I participated in official and private events such as weddings, national celebrations, life-cycle rituals, election campaigns, funerals, Friday prayers, and memorial days. In addition, I met with district officials to discuss their opinions on my research topic and questions and to gather statistical information. After a while people started to recognize me and would sometimes approach me of their own accord.

During my first stay in Murghab in 2008, I concentrated my interviewing and participant-observation efforts on the town. As my research progressed I soon began to look beyond the district center. In the course of collecting life stories and narratives of mobility and tracing family net-

works and transnational connections, it became clear that concentrating exclusively on the town would not do justice to the way people perceive and situate themselves in the world. The Pamir Highway as a cross-border link between the cities of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan and Khorog at the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border still determines many aspects of life in Murghab, as do the villages and road maintenance outposts between these two cities. This is why, after my first visit, I began to accompany people along the Pamir Highway and beyond as a fellow traveler and interlocutor. In doing so, I also tried to do justice to the broader meaning that the highway has for the people who live on and along it. As a result, I visited and stayed with people along the road, met their old companions from the army and work, and observed how they maintained kin relations, established new friendships, pursued economic opportunities, and became different people in different places.

On the one hand, people along the Pamir Highway make use of the road as travelers on a pathway. At the same time, many of them have also long been involved in making and maintaining the highway as a place in the course of constant construction and repair work.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in addition to people's mobility on and along the road, the highway, in its historical and present materiality, fosters the "cementing" of social relations (Harvey 2010). As a territorializing entity, the Pamir Highway also gives us, like many others roads, insights into "modern state formation" (Harvey and Knox 2008, 80) and highlights the importance of the material base that goes hand in hand with cultural change.<sup>8</sup> Hence, following Matei Candea (2007, 181), this book is an attempt to conceive of Tajikistan's Pamir Highway as a "window into complexity" that allows us to view a panoply of sociality but which can never be a "holistic entity to be explained."

## NAVIGATING THROUGH THE FIELD

The people with whom I interacted in the field are different in age, gender, language, ethnicity, religion, and profession. Baktygül, for instance, is an elderly Kyrgyz woman who used to be employed as a teacher and child-care worker in the Soviet Union and later became a leading figure in the field of herbal healing in Murghab. As a "heroine mother" (*mat'-geroinia*) of ten, she spends her time commuting between various places in Murghab, Osh, Khorog, and Dushanbe, following in the tracks of her children. Holiknazar, on the other hand, is a middle-aged Pamiri man whose family is spread out between Murghab, the mountain valley of Bartang, and Osh, where his wife is from. His life spans all these places. In contrast,



Kamal usually stays in Murghab because he is a busy and perpetually overworked government official; in his own words, “Somebody has to keep working up here.” Yet he sends his wife to sanatoriums in Kyrgyzstan for treatments and his children to Dushanbe to study.

This short description of some of the people whose lives I shared between 2008 and 2015 and with many of whom I still keep in touch via e-mail, Facebook, WhatsApp, or phone illustrates the multiple points of orientation that are of great importance to people along the Pamir Highway. Such multiplicity naturally includes linguistic complexity, a result of the fact that people along the Pamir Highway maintain communication with one another and with individuals from a wide range of places both within and outside of Gorno-Badakhshan.

To live along the Pamir Highway means to be multilingual. Statistical data from the local government (*ökmöt*) in Murghab from 2015 list approximately twelve thousand of the district’s fifteen thousand inhabitants as ethnic Kyrgyz, thereby implying that they speak Kyrgyz, a Turkic language of the Kipchak branch, as a first language. The remaining three thousand people are ambiguously labeled “Tajik,” a term that refers to their ethnic categorization in official documents but hides the fact that at home the vast majority of these people do not speak Tajik, a southwestern Iranian language, but a range of Pamir languages that are not mutually intelligible to Tajik speakers.<sup>9</sup>

The question of language in Gorno-Badakhshan has been highly politicized since the early days of Soviet rule. In order to ensure, at least pro forma, a coherent Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic based on a majority of Tajik speakers, Soviet planners showed little appreciation for the distinct Pamir languages that are dominant throughout the region and across the borders in Afghanistan and China (Bergne 2007, 62). Despite the fact that Soviet ethnographers observed the emergence of a common Pamiri (*pomiri*) identity among speakers of Pamir languages as early as 1935 (Hirsch 2005, 279), Pamir languages received no official status beyond the right of usage and therefore do not qualify for either a standardized script or recognition as a language of instruction in schools (Straub 2014, 177).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in the Soviet Union, many inhabitants of Gorno-Badakhshan developed a particular affinity for Russian, which used to be the dominant language of education in the region. As a result, with Tajik now the official national language, Russian still used for technical and international (*mezhdunarodnyi*) communication, and Kyrgyz and various Pamir languages spoken at home and in public, people along the Pamir



Highway often navigate among half a dozen languages in their everyday lives.<sup>11</sup>

Not surprisingly, the region's multilingualism presented a challenge to me as I conducted fieldwork along the Pamir Highway. Fortunately, the major languages represented in Murghab for the most part coincide with language training and practical experience that I received prior to 2008 in the course of my studies and field research across Central Asia. Thus I started my fieldwork with a working knowledge of Kyrgyz, Russian, and Tajik, and could add to this by studying Shughni, a Pamir language of southeastern Iranian origin, while in the field.

What brings together the main actors of this book in more general terms is their close attachment to Murghab as a region and to the Pamir Highway as a social landscape. The "social" in this landscape is visible through the connections they have established among themselves and with other individuals and particular places. One of my main aspirations in the course of my fieldwork was to be able to follow these connections, which are primarily ordered and organized along the road. In quantitative terms I traveled more than ten thousand kilometers along the Osh-Khorog road between 2008 and 2015. This figure includes trips in trucks, in shared taxis, and in my own car.

My mobility along the Pamir Highway, which is regarded as part of a sensitive border region, occasionally raised the concern of Tajikistan's secret service. The KGB, as the agency is still colloquially called, sometimes considered my movements suspicious. Even though I had permission from the Academy of Sciences in Dushanbe to conduct research in Murghab, my activities appeared strange to the agents. Talking to villagers, participating in life-cycle rituals, and spending my time in cars for the sake of being on the road did not meet the officials' expectations of proper research. As a lone foreign man, I did not match the image of the scholars who had come from Moscow and Leningrad to do research in Gorno-Badakhshan during the Soviet period. Back then, scientists traveled to the region in group expeditions and conducted research on flora and fauna rather than on roadside communities. And with a long history of espionage in the border region of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I did not blame the authorities for keeping an eye on me.<sup>12</sup>

Conflict, aside from the problems with authorities, was a central theme during my time in the field. Yet it was not conflict on an individual, interpersonal level that evoked anxiety but notions of war on a broader scale.

From the beginning of my work along the Pamir Highway in 2008, the conflict in Afghanistan had been present in people's minds. In addition, in 2009 other violent events appeared on the agenda. By then the armed conflict in Tajikistan's Rasht Valley had begun and led to rumors of political dissolution and fears of the return of the civil war that had brought turmoil to the country in the 1990s.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the Uyghur riots in the neighboring Chinese province of Xinjiang brought debates about violence and death to Murghab.<sup>14</sup> This was not only fostered by the geographic proximity of Xinjiang but also by the fact that many people in Murghab have relatives on the other side of the border in China. Another tragic and violent event during my fieldwork was the unrest in Osh, which began shortly after Kyrgyzstan had been politically destabilized in the spring of 2010.<sup>15</sup> In the aftermath of a coup d'état, ethnicized violence broke out in the city and caused immigrants from Murghab to temporarily or permanently flee back to the Pamirs. In this regard, the latter part of my fieldwork was informed by feelings of instability and insecurity that affected not only people along the highway but myself as well.<sup>16</sup>

With Osh set ablaze, my friends in the city scattered to the four winds. Some moved back to Murghab. Others left for Bishkek or even more distant places in Russia and Kazakhstan. Among these friends were Kyrgyz, Russians, Tajiks, and Uzbeks. But it was not only the dissolution of a sense of community that led to a change of attitude in Murghab toward southern Kyrgyzstan. When in the summer of 2010 there were no deliveries from the looted bazaar in Osh, confidence in the city as a major economic point of reference was shaken. To be sure, traders quickly found ways to reorganize commercial routes, and shortages of fruit and vegetables were limited to a brief period of time. Yet a sense of being surrounded by unrest increased during this period. In addition, in 2012 fighting between government forces and local militia broke out in Khorog and lasted for several days.<sup>17</sup> In Murghab, this further contributed to the feeling of being surrounded by violence. At the same time, Murghab constituted a kind of safe haven in a region of conflict. Indeed, the argument commonly voiced by people from Murghab had proven right in a sense: Murghab was "pure" (*taza*) and unaffected by immediate violence in troubled times because it was—like the moon—"far away" (*alys*).

## RECORDING MODERNITY

Murghab's geographical remoteness puts a distance between people along the Pamir Highway and places of conflict in the surrounding flatlands.

Yet they are clearly not isolated; they are, on the contrary, closely connected to other places and actors, both within and outside the region. These connections become visible through, for instance, development projects in the region, China trade, the presence of transnational religious movements, drug and ruby trafficking, international trophy hunting, labor migration, and the presence of government agencies. Despite these ties beyond the Pamir Highway, Murghab has largely remained absent from research agendas and its position is still, as Willem van Schendel (2002, 651) has put it, that of an “area of no concern” in the margins of the nation-state.<sup>18</sup>

In the course of my fieldwork, people along the Pamir Highway frequently referred to their homeland’s ambiguous status within Tajikistan, and “encounters across difference” (Tsing 2005, 3) with government officials, foreigners, and fellow citizens from the western parts of the country triggered heated debates. As a consequence, my interlocutors raised questions such as “Who are they and who are we?” “Who is more developed?” and “Who is modern and who is not?”

For example, in the early stages of my research in 2009 I spent a lot of time at a friend’s house in Murghab that was quite different from any other building in the neighborhood: an antenna on the roof signaled the existence of a radio station inside the house. Years ago a development organization from Australia or New Zealand—no one really remembered—had installed radio stations all over Gorno-Badakhshan in order to achieve better communication in case of natural disaster. These radio stations have now gone out of fashion, as various companies have begun to establish mobile networks throughout the region. At that time, however, these solar-powered radio stations had a special status as a means of communication to far-distant villages. On the rather flat and sparsely populated high plateau of Murghab, few people really worry about disaster; even when earthquakes shook the desert they would often go unremarked upon. Thus, people usually turned to the disaster prevention network when they wanted to ask their relatives in the village what to bring from the bazaar, how grandmother was doing, and if they had finally found the errant yak. This subsequently turned houses with radio stations into places of high social density. People would come and go, share tea and bread, and exchange the latest news.

In addition to being a mere tool for local communication, these radio stations also encompassed aspects of global connection. No traveling was required to go beyond Gorno-Badakhshan—simply by switching

the frequency people could hear voices from other countries and regions. Listening to what other people talked about to each other in everyday conversation, from Russia to Africa, turned the radio station into a small window on the world. Due to its capacity to transmit news and information in real time, the internationally sponsored radio station brought fragments of other parts of the world into the Murghabi house. In my presence, people listened to “strange” (*kyzyk*) and “incomprehensible” (*neponiatnye*) languages on the radio. They were also puzzled by Afghan radio operators who would sing love songs over the radio all day. Visitors to the house wondered why the guys in the neighboring country “had gone crazy again” (*s uma soshli*). In subsequent discussions, one common argument was that Afghans were still enmeshed in “savagery” (*dikost'*), hence there was no need to wonder about their absurdities. In other words, being “modern” distinguished the listeners from Afghans and they could thus not understand Afghan behavior anymore.<sup>19</sup>

People along the Pamir Highway frequently discussed such topics with reference to temporality and by drawing qualitative distinctions between themselves and those on the other side of the border, notably through the concepts of *kadim* and *sovremennyyi*. *Kadim* primarily means “old” or “ancient,” while the term *sovremennyyi* is a Russian word that means “contemporary,” “up to date” and, in a broader sense, “modern.” These terms and respective synonyms and periphrases crop up frequently in my interview recordings and protocols from participant observation. In these data, debates about the role of “the old” and “the contemporary” (and their embodiments) predominate and surface in reference to such diverse spheres as gender, politics, morality, ethnicity, and religion.

Many of the interviews I conducted during my fieldwork were not simple dialogues between me and an interlocutor but conversations among three or more people. This setting resulted from the fact that houses along the Pamir Highway usually include only one heated room, where family members, guests, and sometimes coworkers assemble and chat. Thus, some meetings that had initially been planned as one-on-one interviews turned into long informal talks about everyday life in the region. Occasionally, the busiest of people would also take me on walks and visits to neighbors, allowing me to record their conversations. In such situations, the topics of discussion were not under my control and I took on the role of observer, interjecting a question for clarification once in a while.

My ethnographic data also point to the importance of the material foundations of modernity, ranging from infrastructure and technology

to clothing. In this regard, Bruno Latour's (2007, 68) call to "follow the actors in their weaving through things" was of particular relevance in the course of my fieldwork. In a region where a road, the Pamir Highway, informs decisions relating to "progress" and "backwardness," infrastructural artifacts and objects moving along the highway become active participants that often influence people's course of action. Against this backdrop, this book builds on Göran Therborn's (2003) argument that modernity is not multiple but diversely "entangled." With reference to the concepts of "shared" and "connected" histories, such an approach seeks to avoid a priori categorical definitions of different "modernities" such as, for instance, Western, Islamic, and Soviet.<sup>20</sup> Instead, and with reference to Shalini Randeria, Martin Fuchs, and Antje Linkenbach (2004), this book's focus lies on the processual character of modernity in the sense of local "projects" that are continuously in the making in the course of people's everyday lives and are subject to ordering, evaluation, and hierarchization.

## STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This study is organized around two core parts. The first part focuses both on the Pamir Highway as a place in and of itself and on more discrete places along the road. In this regard, I trace historical links between present-day encounters in Murghab, Tajikistan's easternmost district, and the Soviet Union's efforts to modernize and integrate its Afghan and Chinese borderlands into the larger framework of the Union from the 1930s onward. I furthermore show how modernity, initially an imposed and ideologically enforced category, permeated the region in the course of road construction and provisioning, creating a sense of privilege and distinction vis-à-vis the surrounding flatlands. In the second part of this book, I look at three contemporary sites of engagement along the highway in which modernity is key: identity, Islam, and the state. While highlighting each of these different sites in separate chapters I show that they are closely intertwined by means of local "projects" of modernity through which people along the road situate themselves amid marginalization, political processes, religious reform, and economic change.

In chapter 1, I introduce the interconnection between the road and modernity. Using examples from my ethnography on the road I show how these tie in with Göran Therborn's (2003) take on modernity as a particular "time conception" that can be simultaneously directed toward the past and the future. Multiple meanings of modernity become, for instance,

visible in the context of current Chinese road construction, through which the government of Tajikistan has attempted to promote repeated processes of modernization in the region. I argue that people along the Pamir Highway also perceive these attempts as a threatening attribution of backwardness to the Soviet period, which they, in contrast, generally recollect as a time of progress and prosperity.

In chapter 2, I focus on the people who have spent their lives constructing and maintaining the Pamir Highway and have thereby contributed to transformation and place making in the district of Murghab. In this regard, I show that their care and concern for the road derives not only from its role as an existential supply line but also from having lived with and on the highway. Thus, on the one hand, I look at the affective qualities of infrastructure. On the other hand, I also show how this infrastructure has facilitated the unintended construction of new landscapes in Murghab, as reflected in the emergence of local histories and places of pilgrimage.

In chapter 3, I foreground identity as a site of engagement along the Pamir Highway. Analyzing the use of time as well as debates about TV shows and movies, personal hygiene, and ethnically coded customary practices, I show that people living in places along the road navigate through a multiplicity of identities in their everyday lives. At the same time, I argue that despite the high degree of internal differentiation within in the region, the people uphold a shared sense of distinction—based on the rubric of modernity—from places beyond the highway.

In chapter 4, I explore the role of Islam in the district of Murghab. Taking seriously people's stance toward religion as a force that has the potential to perfect modernity and is therefore not in contradiction to it, I look at various attempts to reform Islam on the highway. In this regard, I show that such reforms are organized along particular trajectories that are informed by sectarian difference and political change. For instance, while Kyrgyz *daavatchys*, representing the Tablighi Jama'at, a globally active movement for faith renewal, have become sidelined in the course of Tajikistan's war on terror, Shia Ismaili institutions carrying out projects of development and religious reform are now firmly rooted in the region and widely perceived as part of statecraft.

In chapter 5, I look at the salience of marginality and the state along the Pamir Highway, focusing on the introduction of laws, trade, and imaginaries of ideal political rule. In this respect, I show that the region's marginality is the outcome of political processes in the course of which

people along the road have become “illegible” to the state. I also maintain that recent road construction and the opening of the Kulma link to China further contribute to notions of marginality in the region due to people’s exclusion from major trade endeavors. Finally, I explore oscillating visions of ideal political rule against the backdrop of such exclusionary practices, on the one hand, and violent conflicts in the surrounding valleys and flatlands on the other.