Ethnographies of Doubt

Faith and uncertainty in contemporary societies

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Outline for an Ethnography of Doubt

Mathijs Pelkmans

If 20 years ago it was fashionable to hypothesize the 'end of history' in the sense that (competing) ideologies had lost their relevance (e.g. Fukuyama 1992), this opinion is rarely voiced today. The proliferation of new nationalisms, fundamentalisms, and (neo-)liberal civilizing missions underline that ideas and ideologies continue to play central roles in the collisions and collusions of our globalized world. Precisely because of the conspicuous presence of nationalisms, populisms and fundamentalisms, it is essential *not* to take their strength for granted, but to examine the dynamics of conviction and doubt through which their efficacy and affective qualities are made and unmade. Religious and secular convictions can have powerful effects, but their foundations are often surprisingly fragile. In fact, the firmer the endorsement of ideas, the weaker the basis of these notions may be. Recent converts are often particularly fervent in acting out their conviction, precisely because of their greater need (and momentary ability) to suspend lingering doubt. And intense ideological movements can only retain their fervour by actively denying ambiguity.

This volume's attention to experienced doubt serves to unravel the ways in which convictions gain and lose their force. Several contributors analyse the dynamics by which loosely

held ideas are propelled into committed action, a process in which doubt and ambiguity are sidelined. Alpa Shah (Chapter 7) demonstrates how doubt and hesitation surface in the daily lives of Maoist revolutionaries in India – that is, among actors who tend to be depicted as insularly committed to an ideological cause. By detailing their daily concerns Shah demonstrates not only that lived reality is messier than it appears from a distance, but also that tremendous energy is required to produce unambiguous conviction. Such painstakingly attained conviction frequently offers no more than a fragile and temporary haven. For example, the Muslim converts to Pentecostalism I studied in Kyrgyzstan appeared to be unwavering and steadfast 'followers of Jesus', but in many instances this certainty was fleeting; the flash of conviction giving way to more complacent attitudes or even to complete withdrawal from church life after months of intense engagement (Pelkmans 2009a). Another case in point is the initial enthusiasm for 'capitalist modernity' which thrived in Hungary around 1990, but which faded once the disillusioning reality of free market reform made itself known (see Bartha, Chapter 8). Whether or not such instances affirm Wittgenstein's assertion that 'Doubt comes *after* belief' (1969: statement 160) requires further discussion, but they do underline the extent to which doubt and belief are intertwined. Therefore, rather than seeing ambivalence and hesitation as indications of 'imperfect conviction', the chapters of this volume show that belief and disbelief implicate each other in important ways.

Doubt does not exclusively point to ontological and epistemological referents, to the questions 'what is?' and 'what is true?' Lived doubt points also (and sometimes more pressingly) to pragmatic referents, to the question 'what to do?'[1] Questions of being, of truth and of action should always be seen in relation to each other: both in the banal sense that a sense of 'what is' provides direction (but not unilinear direction) to action, and also in the more profound sense that when nothing is worth fighting for (when nothing is deemed to be true) apathy and hopelessness may set in. This aspect is emphasized by David Napier's discussion (2009) of how the unravelling of bonds of

trust between governments and citizens in Western Europe may result in apathy, not least because the disappearance of trust has immediate epistemological consequences. After all, the distrusted object is never believed.

Such disorienting experiences occur on a grander scale when entire ideological systems collapse. This is true even when scepticism about those grand ideologies had been rampant, such as in the former Soviet Union. The traumatic effect of the collapse of communism was reflected in the 1990s in the widespread complaint that 'we are not living, we are just surviving' (*my ne zhivem, my tol'ko vyzhivaem*). This phrase not only pointed to the radical decline of living standards, but also contrasted purposeful, meaningful living with animalistic, pointless surviving. But such rhetorical assertions of meaningless survival hardly provide closure: as Zigon (2009) aptly titles an essay about the sense of disillusionment in Moscow, 'Hope Dies Last'. Indeed, even in the direst situations people will find new points of orientation and aspiration. By paying attention to such cycles of hope, belief, doubt and disillusionment, the chapters in this volume explore rather than assume the role of ideas in social and political action. In doing so they produce deeper insight into the complex mechanisms and dynamics by which specific ideas gain and lose their credibility, and show how ambiguous reality is acted upon to produce (temporary) conviction.

These introductory reflections prompt the question of definition. I am reluctant to define doubt, precisely because it is not the word as such that is of interest here, but rather a range of social phenomena which, it is hoped, can be better understood with reference to a quality called 'doubt'. Nevertheless, the constraints of writing in language require reflection on the concept and its position in existing fields of meaning. Doubt connotes an active state of mind which is directed at a questioned object, and is unstable in the sense that it pushes for a resolution (which potentially erases doubt). This associative understanding directs attention to several analytic features that can serve as first points of orientation. (i) The implied agency (directed at the questioned object) sets 'doubt' somewhat apart from the associated term,

uncertainty. That is, uncertainty can be the context in which doubt is activated: doubt cannot be at rest, whereas uncertainty cannot be wilfully employed. (ii) Although often equated with scepticism, doubt has more focus due to the implied presence of an alternative. At least, that is what the presence of the number two in *dubitare* – the Latin origin of the word – suggests, echoed in the German *zweifel* and the French *doter*. Doubt, in this sense, is about 'being of two minds', about wavering between one possibility and another. (iii) Instead of being the opposite of belief, doubt is often implicated in it. After all, belief without doubt is the same as 'knowledge' (see Toren 2007). (iv) Just as doubt has a complicated relationship with belief, so it does with action: rather than necessarily leading to inaction (although that is certainly a possibility), doubt may also be a facilitator of action by triggering a need for resolution.

These suggestions imply that doubt underlies, and may also energize, many aspects of human thought and action, and thus that analytic attention to doubt is not only warranted but in fact long overdue in the social sciences, including anthropology. The argument here is twofold. First, the flip side of what is conventionally called conviction has not received appropriate attention in empirical sciences such as anthropology, sociology and political science. Second, studies of conviction (and its effects) are in need of a more dynamic and relational approach. As intimated above, doubt and belief should not be seen as opposites, but rather as co-constitutive parts. Doubt highlights fragility and instability, but the act of doubting also entails a quest for an 'essence'. In order to understand this complex relationship it is necessary to capture the doubting moment. The challenge then is to move beyond what Crapanzano (2004: 8) dismissively calls a 'topographical approach', one that fixes and categorizes states of mind and that labels actions, to an approach that is able to capture 'processes'.[2] Two moves are necessary here. The first is to acknowledge the relational nature of doubt and (dis)belief, of hesitation and (in)action. The second is to pay attention to the temporal dimension, and explore how hope, belief, doubt and disillusionment may over time feed into and give way to each

other. In other words, the analysis needs to do justice to relational as well as temporal connections.

This indicates that the anthropological exploration of doubt is fraught with difficulties, the most pertinent one being that doubt tends to vanish with articulation. This is both an analytic and an empirical problem. As I will argue in the next section, doubt has the tendency to disappear when analytically engaged, a feature which is particularly evident in the long conversation that philosophy and theology have had with doubt. But the difficulty also has an empirical and methodological component. In order for people to verbally express their ideas they have to order and thereby channel their thoughts, and when people act they have already overcome, or at least temporarily sidelined, whatever hesitation and ambivalence may have existed. Academic disciplines working with a 'naturalistic' (in contrast to an experimental) approach tend to register only *articulated* thought and *performed* action, and catching doubt in midair is therefore far from a straightforward task. Nevertheless, the ethnographic practice of living for prolonged periods of time in the midst of people who are pondering different options, who are voicing their hopes, frustrations and disillusionments, can reveal important insights into the role of doubt in everyday life.

Doubt in projects of truth

If doubt has rarely surfaced as an analytic theme in empirical disciplines like anthropology and sociology, it is a different matter in other academic traditions. Non-empirical disciplines such as theology and philosophy have a long-standing interest in the topic. However, they have tended to approach doubt instrumentally. Doubt, especially in its variant of 'systematic doubt', has long been considered a helpful tool for gaining epistemological certainty. Alternatively, when failing to produce the craved certainties, doubt has commonly been depicted as an obstacle, especially to faith. For example, the admonitions of 'doubting Thomas' by successive early church fathers are illustrative of negative attitudes to doubt and its assumed tendency

to erode faith (Bonney 2002: 1–2, n. 1).[3] Such theologies and philosophies are projects of truth and the participants in these projects can, of course, hardly remain disinterested observers of doubt, caught up as they are in the push for resolution. For them doubt ultimately needs to be left behind. Widespread as this instrumental approach to doubt may be, some key thinkers have realized its limitations: Wittgenstein (1969) demonstrates that radical doubt is ultimately bound to fail in projects of truth, while Kierkegaard ([1843] 1985) asserts that doubt in matters of (religious) faith can never be overcome without making a hazardous leap. That is, even systematic intellectual efforts are unable to put doubt completely to rest, and it is this reappearance of doubt in philosophy (and theology) that is of particular interest to the ethnography of doubt. Starting with some straightforward applications of doubt in projects of truth, I will proceed by showing how the seeming certainties unravel.

The instrumental use of doubt in (combined) projects of knowledge and faith goes back to at least the fourth century when Augustine of Hippo wrote about his disagreement with the Academics on the question of whether or not ultimate truth is attainable (1951). His opponents argued that our perception is not sufficiently reliable to serve as the basis for firm knowledge, and that therefore one cannot know truth. Augustine, however, countered that the doubt of the Academics was based on an unstated acknowledgement of truth, and that the truth can be ultimately known through inference of the divine. Augustine's professed certainty was itself rooted in doubt, and his *si fallor, sum* (if I am mistaken, I exist) (1950) is an early anticipation of Descartes' famous *cogito, ergo sum*.[4] Interestingly though, when Augustine writes 'Seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe [so] that you may understand' (1988) he implicitly acknowledges the unavoidable need to make a leap of faith, something that Descartes would endeavour to overcome. Thus, if some aspects of Augustine's writings may be understood as anticipations of Descartes' *cogito, ergo sum*, other aspects resonate in Kierkegaard's important work (see below).

Descartes is often presented as a solid point of reference in discussions of doubt. Jennifer Hecht, in her recent *Doubt: A History* (2003), writes that the *cogito, ergo sum* could have been expressed more accurately as *dubito, ergo sum*.[5] She has a point, because when Descartes reflects on the characteristics of 'a thinking thing', the aspect first mentioned is that it is 'a thing that doubts', which is then followed by a range of other mental activities (1996: II, 8). However, Descartes proceeds by appropriating this valuable insight for his metaphysical project, which amounts to artificially staging doubt for the sake of constructing a logical argument. Thus, when he questions the reliability of his faculties by positing the possibility that his perceptions are part of a dream, he is considering this possibility intellectually but not intimately. Descartes' doubt is merely hyperbolic; it is, in Skirry's words, 'an entertained doubt that serves to clear the mind of preconceptions that might obscure the truth' (2005).[6] The absence of lived doubt in 'systematic doubt' is interestingly revealed in some passages of his *Meditations* where he reflects on the purpose of his project:

> [A]nd from that time I was convinced of the necessity of undertaking once in my life to rid myself of all the opinions I had adopted, and of commencing anew the work of building from the foundation, if I desired to establish a firm and abiding superstructure in the sciences. (1996: I, 1)

What is striking here is that Descartes' words imply the opposite of doubt. That is, he 'was *convinced* of the necessity' of questioning all seeming certainties and he appeared certain about the possibility of finding an abiding superstructure. Descartes did not seem to doubt that his 'systematic doubt' was the right approach to arrive at truth, he hardly wrote about uncertainties that may have haunted him when writing his *Meditations* and he presented his conclusions with the steadfast authority of the academic writer.[7] Unavoidably informed by past (but also present) academic stylistic conventions, his written text refuses to hesitate and thereby reinforces the impression of Descartes

as an unwavering thinker who was able to reach truth through logical reasoning. Thus, even though Descartes dubbed himself a 'being that doubts', he was hardly interested in the process of doubting itself or in the occurrence and implications of doubt in others. Instead, doubt was his instrument to reach solid foundations of knowledge, after which doubt ceased to be relevant and could be discarded.

Despite its limitations, this systematic or entertained doubt is of key importance to any academic discipline. This is so because *without* doubt it would be impossible to move beyond one's own habitual ideas, assumptions and truths, rendering one unable to advance knowledge. Similar to philosophers, anthropologists are trained to question their own assumptions in order to gain new insights (see also Driessen, Chapter 6). But as an empirical discipline anthropology differs from philosophy in that its object is not only 'the abstract' (of knowledge, morality, aesthetics, etc.), but also the concrete ideas, beliefs and activities of various subjects. With respect to this double object of inquiry, and the twofold need to understand as well as represent foreign points of view, it is useful to distinguish between two kinds of entertained doubt in anthropology.

First, there is a need to question, reveal and suspend one's own subjective and sensory knowledge (Kapferer 2001). The destabilization of this embodied knowledge allows the anthropologist to establish a connection with other people's truths and thereby to understand their worlds and worldviews. As Kapferer suggests, anthropologists need to combine 'radical doubt with the phenomenological recommendation of the willing suspension of disbelief' as a way to overcome prejudices and unexamined assumptions while simultaneously taking alternative realities seriously (2001: 342).[8] Examples of this abound in ethnography, from Evans-Pritchard's (1937) flirtations with the logic and rationality of Zande witchcraft, to Harding's (1987) involuntary thoughts about God. Harding describes how, when driving away from an interview with a Baptist pastor who had used the occasion to witness to her, she almost ran into another car. Understandably shaken by this near accident, she found herself

involuntarily asking: 'What is God trying to tell me?' That is, by opening herself up to the possibility of an alternative truth, as she did by listening attentively and intensely to a pastor trying to convince her of 'the truth', Harding found herself on the path to conversion. The experience was discomfiting, but also essential for gaining insight into what Baptist conversion amounts to (1987: 169–70). Harding (presumably) never fully converted; she found herself straddling the boundary between belief and disbelief. This reflects the disciplinary ideal of the anthropologist *almost* 'going native' yet refraining from going all the way.[9] Complete identification with one's research subject tends to be looked at with a mixture of contempt and intrigue, which ultimately converges in the opinion that those who 'go native' cease to be anthropologists because in those instances the critical distance necessary for academic thinking and writing has collapsed.

Going native in the sense of fully internalizing another system is not the only 'risk' of opening oneself up to other truths. Whereas a failure to suspend disbelief leads to a reproduction of assumptions, taking alternative realities *too* seriously leads to an equally problematic essentialization of 'the native point of view', to use Malinowski's (1922) term. So this is the second kind of doubt that needs to be entertained: retaining a 'healthy' dose of scepticism towards the assertions made by interlocutors (for example that spirits exist), not necessarily by challenging their ontological status (do spirits really exist?) but rather by questioning how widely and intensely those ideas are shared (is 'belief' in spirits uniform and stable?). In the past anthropologists have not always fared well in this respect. Half a century ago Firth (1959), for example, intimated that anthropologists too easily assumed uniformity. He quotes the anthropologist Nadel, who stated in one of his ethnographies that 'There is no doubt in the minds of the Nupe that God, as he created the world, so he can also control it and intervene in its course' (Nadel 1954, cited in Firth 1959: 139). Firth concedes that such a statement may be acceptable as a classificatory act but adds that it is a 'bold thing to assert that in the minds of 300,000 people there is "no

doubt" about God's power' (1959: 139). Such a claim is unhelpful to say the least if the goal is to understand the intricacies of religious experience. That is, questioning one's own assumptions *and* questioning assertions made by others are equally important in revealing the complexity of meaningful life. Uncritical attitudes to 'belief' or any form of knowledge now largely belong in the anthropological dustbin. As Engelke, perhaps too optimistically, asserts, few would still 'claim, after having worked in, say, a Zulu village for eighteen months, that "the Zulu believe"' (2008: S14). Indeed, in long-term fieldwork one becomes aware of the contingencies, ambivalences and variations in people's engagements with truth claims (but I don't think that this awareness always finds its way into ethnographic texts).

The twofold critical stance – towards internal assumptions and external assertions – is not only important for generating analytical and empirical questions, but also for reaching higher levels of reliability. Ethnographic data (like most empirical data in the social sciences) is unavoidably incomplete, limited in scope and influenced by the situated positioning of the researcher and the application of specific research techniques. Rather than trying to cover up these gaps or hiding from them behind the mask of formal methodology (as in scientistic approaches), most anthropologists would argue that deeper understanding is served by explicating them (e.g. DeWalt and DeWalt 2002: 81). In this volume (Chapter 6), Henk Driessen reflects on these issues when writing about the Spanish Civil War and the difficulties in finding out, decades later, what 'really happened' at the local level. Because of the tensions and secrecy surrounding this violent past, both the ethnographer and most local residents had only piecemeal knowledge of what had happened. Knowledge remained fragmentary, incomplete and unstable because the sensitivity of the topic prevented the pieces from being shared and the dots from being connected. Driessen points out that this lack of transparency was useful for maintaining 'peace' but was also deeply disturbing to the victims' descendants as it frustrated them in their desire for closure. Only 70 years after the events did some of the long-hidden facts emerge and a public memorial

ceremony was organized. This memorial provided closure for some, but for others the surfacing of 'facts' unsettled an accepted history, triggering a contestation in which Falangist descendants claimed that the representation of the past was unfair and one-sided.

What is the position of the ethnographer when 'the truth' is so blatantly out of reach? Should topics about which one cannot speak with authority be left out of scholarly work? If so, would that not do injustice to the complexity of lived experience? As Driessen rightly points out, the academic expectation of coherence often results in texts (including ethnographic ones) that are cleansed of fragmentary and ill-fitting evidence, thereby sidelining the hesitations of the researcher and the ambivalence of his or her subjects. That is, anthropologists are not to be absolved of marginalizing doubt. As producers of scholarly texts they are required to put their doubts aside; the imprinting of words on paper (after the last editorial correction) brings an end to the wavering because certain words, rather than others, are chosen to describe, to interpret and to explain the world. The contributors to this book, for example, cannot present their findings without trying to convince the reader that the claims they make are plausible and deserve, at the very least, the benefit of doubt. Likewise, this introduction fails to doubt the relevance of the topic at hand and makes unwavering statements (but no absolutist claims) about the subject. As Hastrup says, 'in analysis and writing, a sense of closure must be attained' and this amounts to 'a temporary objectification of relational knowledge, from which others may then proceed' (2004: 458). That is, closure is not inherently problematic but it does need to be seen for what it is: a pragmatic and temporary act that facilitates (and enables) scholarly presentation and communication.

Temporary objectification is unavoidable, but this does not require all ambivalence, uncertainty and doubt to be erased from writing. Most anthropologists, certainly those writing in the heuristic, interpretive and phenomenological traditions, tend to be less interested in systematically testing hypotheses than in fostering insight and understanding. Hence they do not

aspire so much to produce works and words that are 'certain' but rather ones that offer plausible and convincing accounts of other worlds (see Golden-Biddle and Locke 1993). Such modesty may be seen as reflecting the fragility of ethnographic evidence, but more importantly it is indicative of the kinds of inferences that *can* be made about the social world when it is approached in all of its complexity. To quote Hastrup again, 'the point of anthropology is not to tell the world as it is … but to interpret it and to suggest possible (theoretical) connections within it as perceived and inferred from being in touch with a world that cannot be taken for granted' (2004: 468).

The improvisatory qualities of ethnographic research mean that, in principle, it is better endowed than scientistic approaches to accommodate doubt, hesitation and second thoughts within the research process. By allowing analytical questions to emerge from 'the field' (rather than fixing them beforehand) and by resisting the strict separation between data collection and analysis so characteristic of mainstream social science (Spradley 1980: 27–8), ethnographic research is amenable to adjustment and fine-tuning (see also Malkki 2007 on improvisation). This feature is also reflected in the strategic (and sometimes eclectic) adoption of research techniques and the ways they are adjusted to fieldwork circumstances. As Engelke (2008: S12) notices, for some this may spark the 'depressing conclusion … that in our practicality, we are nothing more than the academy's *bricoleurs*', but a more positive view is that these characteristics point at the potential of ethnography to do justice to the complexity, fluidity and ambiguity of the human experience. I follow here Crapanzano's plea for the self-conscious amateur, whose fresh perspective and lack of formalism falls short of *projecting* scientific certainty, but who is able to generate important questions and reveal hidden connections.[10]

One might be tempted to pose the question of how much doubt is admissible in academic work, or conversely, how determined the quest for certainty should be. But the point is that there is no ultimate answer: complete certainty can only be pretence, while radical doubt is not only stifling but ultimately unsustainable. I have argued that doubt is unstable in the sense

that it pushes for a resolution, and a similar tendency exists within anthropology. The polarization between realists and relativists (Wilson 2004) that culminated in the 1990s illustrated the fragility of the ethnographic project. But equally interesting is that neither the realists nor the relativists were able to sustain their extreme positions. The relativist critique of positivist faith in scientific knowledge was certainly justified. However, although critics rightly asserted that ethnographic knowledge is contingent rather than absolute (could it be any different?), the resulting scepticism was not only unproductive but also undeserved. In fact, unearthing biases, revealing problematic assumptions and identifying weaknesses in the collection, analysis and representation of data should be an inherent part of the academic enterprise. To respond to the relativists (or postmodernists) in their own terms: the voiced frustrations with anthropology revealed more about unreasonably high expectations regarding knowledge production than about the relation between ethnography and the worlds it aims to describe and understand (see Carrithers 1990 for a similar argument).

Far from being confined to anthropology the problem of certainty extends to various disciplines, including philosophy. This can be illustrated by briefly returning to Descartes, who presented his technique as one that was able to move from radical doubt to absolute certainty, but in doing so revealed a rather paradoxical aspect of Cartesian doubt: it strives towards its own abolishment. As Peirce argues: 'no one who follows the Cartesian method will ever be satisfied until he has formally recovered all those beliefs which in form he has given up' (1868: 140). Not only was Descartes' radical doubt feigned doubt (as established above), his assertion to have reached truth was fragile, as attested by the ongoing controversies concerning the so-called Cartesian Circle.[11] In academia, doubt cannot be ultimately overcome, nor can it be extended meaningfully to its extreme conclusion. Caught between the impossibilities of reaching absolute truth and knowing nothing, there are at least two ways forward. I reflect on these possible routes using the writings of Wittgenstein, Peirce and Kierkegaard, who not only reveal the impossibility

of radical doubt and the illusion of absolute certainty, but also point out the role of certainty in doubt, and of doubt in certainty.

Wittgenstein demonstrates the impossibility of ultimate 'radical doubt' in three steps. The first is that doubt gradually loses its meaning when the alternative becomes too unlikely (1969: 56 and 93). Differently put, when 'everything speaks in its favour, nothing against it' (1969: 4), doubt can only survive at the logical level through a sustained cognitive effort. The second is the tendency to mistake logical statements for empirical ones. So even if one is able to doubt all propositions at the logical level, this does not imply that it is possible to do so at the empirical level as well. And this relates to the third and crucial point, namely that the weighing of alternatives must rest on an (often unstated) sense of reality. This last point refers to Wittgenstein's 'hinges', which serve as anchors for doubt (1969: 341 and 343). As he puts it: 'If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either. If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty' (1969: 114–15). This statement can not only be used to repudiate scepticism (see for example Moyal-Sharrock 2003), but can also be applied to the study of lived or experienced doubt: attention to doubt simultaneously reveals the implicit certainties on which this doubt is based. For example, if a man has doubts about his love for a woman (does he love her? does he love *her* more than *another*?), he reveals that love as such is an unquestioned reality for him. He may subsequently start doubting love itself, but this new doubt is then hinged on an unstated certainty about (the value of) life. It is possible that he will generalize his doubt even further, but if he does so there will no longer be room for doubting (his) love.[12]

If it is impossible to doubt everything, it is equally an illusion to think that absolute certainty can be reached (without doubting it). This is less an epistemological than a sociological point. The issue is that truths that are absolutely certain (i.e. truisms) no longer matter, and therefore no longer require evidence or proof. As Peirce writes: '[after full agreement] is reached, the question

of certainty becomes an idle one, because there is no one left who doubts it' (1868: 140). Absolute certainty fails to trigger reflection (or any other intellectual effort), and therefore tends to go unnoticed. Things that matter cannot be known with absolute certainty. This tension was astutely observed by Kierkegaard in his discussion of subjectivity and objectivity, claiming that objective truth is an 'indifferent truth' (1941: 182). Seeing that objectivity and passion do not go together, he stated that 'all interest, like all decisiveness, is rooted in subjectivity' (1941: 173). His particular preoccupation was with faith, which he summarized as being 'precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty'. On this basis he concludes: 'If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe' (Kierkegaard 1941: 182). Although we need to be careful with generalizing the insights of a Danish theologian, the energizing quality of doubt in conviction is one that has wider applicability, as we will see below.

I argued that the relevance of studying doubt lies in the fact that doubt connects belief and disbelief, action and inaction, and moreover that these underlying uncertainties may provide the energy needed to produce conviction and decisiveness, just as they can produce scepticism and apathy. Due to its unstable qualities doubt is always on the move, as it were. While one can conceive of belief and disbelief as remaining in position (even if only a fragile one), it is difficult to imagine that doubt can stay put or to think of people resting in their doubt. That is, it would be problematic to speak of untroubled or placid doubt (because the act of doubting presupposes interest). Doubt is about wavering between different options and thus presumes an awareness of, and a (somewhat) active stance towards, the dubious object. This in turn tends to be resolved in, or lead to stances that lean towards, either belief or disbelief. Doubt's propensity to be resolved in diametrically opposed directions is what makes its relation to action so intriguing. It points to the role of shaky ideas in haphazard action – and most ideas are shaky and most action is haphazard.

Lived doubt

The preceding pages outlined the relevance of doubt for ethnographic research and the scholarly enterprise more generally. However, the ethnography of doubt should not primarily be about methodological issues or the systematic doubt of academics, but rather about lived doubt, doubt as it reveals itself in specific social situations and points to questionable elements. One of the central problems with the empirical study of doubt is that doubt is likely to disappear with articulation. This is partly because we tend to register ideas only in so far as they are externalized, and this externalization is one of the mechanisms by which doubt can be repressed or sidelined. It is thus important to try and catch doubt in midair, something which is difficult but not impossible. Because of their long-term and intensive engagement with the people they study, anthropologists are particularly well placed to explore how people deal with the absence of absolute truths and how they make choices between alternatives. Rather than restricting research to interview settings, to stylized observations, or to one-off questionnaires, the contributors to this volume followed people in their everyday lives and witnessed how they changed their opinions, how they tried to make sense of what appeared meaningless and how they came to terms with not being certain. Such an approach can reveal how doubt emerges when authority structures are eroding, how it becomes imminent when rapid changes in the political and social environment demand reinterpretations of reality and how uncertainties and ambiguities are sidelined to make room for purified convictions and beliefs.

This section of the introduction discusses the qualities and effects of such experienced doubt, and will revolve around four theses: (i) *Doubt is activated uncertainty*. Here I look at how doubt emerges from the background, how it dissipates, but also how it attaches itself to dubious objects, transforming them in the process. Therefore, (ii) *the doubted object is both ephemeral and unstable*. This means not only that the object of doubt is slippery, but also that the act of doubting is unstable. Moreover,

(iii) *doubt embodies an inherently contradictory energy*, positive and negative, and this makes the effects of doubt difficult to predict. Finally, (iv) *doubt invokes its opposites*, thus implying a relational and temporal dimension in which doubt, certainty, disillusionment and resolution feed into and give way to each other. These analytic themes illuminate some of the tensions and contradictions which both underlie doubt and spur it on as it reveals itself in everyday life.

(i) Doubt as activated uncertainty

Doubt and uncertainty are related concepts, but uncertainty lacks the agency that is implicit in doubt. People may live in uncertainty because the times are uncertain, but although it is possible to live in doubt, it would be odd to blame this on doubtful circumstances. While uncertainty rests in the situation, doubt is located in the actor.[13]

Despite such differences between doubt and uncertainty, the concepts are intimately connected: lack of clarity and absence of certainty tend to trigger doubts. This is a central theme running through this volume. The chapters by Bartha, Naumescu and High each discuss instances in which familiar worlds have been thoroughly shaken. Mette High's contribution (Chapter 3) is a case in point. She describes how the political, economic and social disruptions that swept through Mongolia in the 1990s produced a deep sense of disorientation. The dismantling of the socialist economy left people scrambling for resources, resulting in a retreat to subsistence pastoralism, which was only matched by a boom in small-scale gold mining. But the extraction of this potent, almost sacred, mineral from an animated earth threatened to upset the natural and spiritual world. Rumours circulated that in the mines human flesh was being sacrificed and vicious hailstorms were interpreted as signs of an impending apocalypse. That is, the destabilization of the physical world made spiritual forces even more unpredictable than they always had been. For High's interlocutors the question was how to deal with these disconcerting unknowns. Many pastoralists avoided and even

condemned the mining activities, while those who were involved in mining tried to manipulate the unreliable elements (that is, the spirits), by making new and more powerful sacrifices. Despite such attempts to tame danger, the future continued to loom like an unpredictable cloud over the lives of pastoralists and miners alike. This is not to say that *all* certainties had vanished. In fact, unease with dubious human actions and concern about spirits' unpredictable reactions reinforced awareness of the spirits' existence, leaving little room for doubting their potential to act upon the world.

A variation on this theme is the situation found in a rapidly ageing village of Old Believers in the Romanian Danube delta (Chapter 4). Vlad Naumescu explores the concerns that beleaguer this community of steadfast believers. In the wake of the economic transformation of the 1990s the younger generations had left the village, which meant that no one was available to replace the village priest after he became incapacitated. Without a priest to decide on religious matters and to properly conduct the rituals, the remaining, mostly elderly, residents were driven to despair. No matter how devout their religious enactments, without a priest they were 'simply *not true*' as one of Naumescu's interlocutors lamented. The importance of ritual detail and correct practice in Old Believer Christianity meant that villagers faced an 'incompleteness of their Christian existence'. The external doubts (as Naumescu calls them) that pertain to the question 'what to do now?' came to a climax when intersecting with the doubt that is inherent to Christianity – in particular as expressed through the mystery of the resurrection – in the days before Easter. But while intensifying the turmoil, the resonance of internal and external doubt paradoxically also sparked hope for a miracle in these times of decline and fear.

These cases thus demonstrate how disruptive societal change triggers doubts about what to do, how to act and what will happen in the future. They also show that some certainties were either left untouched or even gained strength in the process. Indeed, doubt about how spirits would react, or about how to properly

conduct rituals, projected conviction onto the existence of spirits and Biblical truth respectively. To link this back to Wittgenstein (1969), the act of doubting may strengthen the hinges to which the doubts are attached.

Maurice Bloch analyses the mechanisms by which doubt is activated and deactivated at the micro-level (Chapter 2). In the course of a conversation triggered by this anthropologist, a group of Zafimaniry forest dwellers in Madagascar found themselves engaging with the question of whether animals are capable of thinking, and whether or not one is conscious while asleep. The conversation then entered increasingly uncertain territory: can trees think? Are ancestors who appear in dreams alive? Concomitantly the responses became less steady. Instead of pushing for the (always elusive) ultimate truth, those involved acknowledged the limits of their knowledge and thus, Bloch argues, remained in doubt. The momentarily heightened sense of doubt blended into the background, waiting to be triggered again.

These insights make an interesting comparison to Heidegger's complaint that philosophers tend to 'make things too conspicuous' – an act with distorting effects because a fundamental feature of being-in-the-world is that people are not always explicitly aware of their surroundings or even of themselves. When this tendency is ignored then 'being in the world is characterized far too explicitly and sharply' ([1953] 2010). Applied to the topic at hand this means that systematic intellectual inquiries into doubt run the risk of simultaneously transforming it. When taken out of the setting in which it occurs, doubt loses part of its original meaning and implications.[14] The ethnographic materials show that sharpness and blurredness correlate with the extent to which a concern is pressing. In other words, there are situations in which ethnographic subjects (that is, all humans) become philosophers. And, as I claimed above, philosophizing is not without effect. Doubt as activated uncertainty triggers reflection and this mental activity influences the object on which it focuses, a process to be covered in the next section.

(ii) The ephemeral dubious object (and the restlessness of doubt)
Doubt is an awkward topic because it cannot stand the spotlight. Doubt may lurk in the background; it may rise up and then plummet. Once the dubious object is caught in the centre of attention it needs to be acted upon, until it is tamed, sidelined or transformed. The underlying question in this section is whether doubt can be at rest. I have intimated above that this is not possible, and yet Bloch (Chapter 2) argues that the Zafimaniry, being unable to force a resolution concerning the questions that were addressed to them, 'remain in doubt', and quite comfortably so. These seemingly contradictory positions can be reconciled, though, by pointing out that there are different ways to deal with the restlessness of doubt. Without presuming to give an exhaustive enumeration I suggest that restlessness can be halted by: (a) diverting one's attention, so that the object of doubt is no longer in the spotlight; (b) reinterpreting the object of doubt in a way that makes it less 'dubious'; (c) denying that doubt is doubt; or (d) removing the alternative when confronted with two possibilities.

Bloch's contribution offers an example of the first method. The Zafimaniry accepted the limitations of their knowledge (in that sense they were not Cartesians), but their ability to do so reflected the lack of importance attributed to the doubted object: the topic of conversation was clearly intriguing to those involved, but questions such as whether trees can think did not have immediate practical relevance to their everyday existence. The Zafimaniry did not (need to) overcome their doubts by pushing for a resolution. The abstractness of the questions meant that the object could be sidelined as soon as the conversation ended, as a result of which doubt was deactivated.

This sidelining of doubt is not always an option, as Binder's chapter on spirit-mediums and their clientele in Taiwan illustrates. Binder followed clients who sought fortune, health and other successes in life. Their attitude towards mediums tended to be ambivalent, not least because it was well known locally that many of them were frauds, and distinguishing between fraudulent and genuine mediums was one of the clients' central preoccupations.

The result was a dance around the notions of authenticity, rationality and mystery, in which mediums tried to project, and clients detect, truth. The clients' efforts to detect truth underscored their wish to gain certainty; however, this goal could never be completely reached. In apparent resignation, several of Binder's interlocutors depicted their stance towards mediums as 'half belief half doubt'. This seems to suggest, similar to Bloch's assertion, that it is possible to rest in doubt without needing to push for a resolution. However, Binder also observes that such lukewarm ambivalence becomes impossible when too much is at stake. Clients who had established long-term relationships with one medium or were seeking solutions to particularly pressing problems could not afford to rest in doubt. Longing for clarity yet unable to wholeheartedly accept the mediums' claims to spiritual power, some resorted to another strategy: they adjusted their expectations of what mediums could achieve. That is, they rendered the object of their doubt less magical and more mundane, by starting to see the mediums as counsellors who were sometimes wrong in their assessments and predictions, but who nevertheless had a special gift or talent that enabled them to provide valuable advice and support.

The process of reinterpretation in Liberatore's contribution (Chapter 9) is of a rather different nature: here the *alternative* is made less attractive, while the doubts of those involved are denied the status of doubt. Liberatore traces the trajectory of young Somali women in London as they became practising Muslims. Their religious quests were fraught with hesitation. They wondered if there would be shame in heaven, and if heaven would really be worth all the sacrifices demanded in this world. In order to progress on their spiritual journey, the women learned to rationalize their doubts by translating them into another idiom. In conversations with religious authorities their doubtful thoughts were interpreted as the result of insufficient *iman* (faith) originating from Satan, and were therefore not 'genuine' doubt. That is, internal doubt was given an external explanation, which made it liveable. Meanwhile, the allure of the girls' previous non-pious lives – one in which they went clubbing, listened to R & B music, dressed differently – was diminished in at least two

distinct ways. It was made less relevant socially as they became part of a relatively tight community of practising Muslims in which those desired elements were absent; and conceptually, by joining in a discourse that interpreted 'worldly life' as sinful. That is, the alternative partly shrivelled, not so much because they *overcame* doubt but because they reinterpreted these doubts and their referents. In this process the alternative became less pressing. However, it did not necessarily completely disappear.

What these routes have in common is that they alleviate the tension by 'domesticating', rather than overcoming, doubt. However, issues that are (made) irrelevant today may become pressing again in the future. Likewise, the reinterpreted object may resume its previous features. And translating doubt into 'low faith' is a useful temporary move, but does not in itself expel various worries and qualms. It is tempting, then, to conclude that doubt can never be completely overcome in cases of subjective truth that truly matter (cf. Kierkegaard 1941; Peirce 1868). Doubt can be domesticated, transferred to an area beyond the horizon of our immediate consciousness, but it resists disappearing entirely. As Crapanzano writes: 'The beyond is like shadows … It slips away – to appear again just when we have thought, in relief or in despair, that we have finally done away with it' (2004: 16).

This does not mean that there cannot be a permanent escape from doubt. Arguably the most effective way to get rid of doubt has not yet been mentioned – arriving at a situation from which there is no return. This applies particularly to doubts that involve a choice between concrete alternatives – such as jobs, beloveds, or business deals – rather than subjective truths. In the face of indecision, people may accept the advice of friends (or their inner voice) to 'just do something', to make a haphazard decision that usefully or tragically 'destroys' the alternative. That is, in many practical situations the way back may be blocked because the objects of doubt are temporally restricted: someone else has been hired; the other beloved is no longer in love (or has become a parent); money for a second business deal is unavailable. In such instances doubt becomes irrelevant and gives way to other sentiments: possibly to relief and contentment with the choice that

was made, perhaps to the acceptance of one's 'destiny', or else resulting in regret and other negative or bittersweet emotions, in the reflection 'if only I had acted differently'.

(iii) Ambivalent energies: stimulators, moderators, obstacles

> The thoughtless who never doubt
> Meet the thoughtful who never act (Brecht 1979).[15]
>
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity. (Yeats [1921] 2008)

The tensions within and between these lines from two famous poems introduce two aspects related to the energetic quality of doubt. The first is about doubt as either a stimulant to or a detractor from action, with Yeats and Brecht here leaning towards the stance that doubt impedes action (for good or bad). The second aspect is normative, contrasting thoughtless passion with thoughtful inaction. The ambivalence is palpable – leaving the reader wondering which of the alternatives is less detestable. That is, aside from the question of whether doubt stimulates or hinders activity, doubt also influences the quality of action. Berger and Zijderveld draw attention to this when stating that decisions are often made 'in a state of ignorance' (2009: 140). Their examples include laws about abortion without knowing 'when human life emerges', and it is easy to think of policies whose effects cannot be predicted. In such instances, they advocate 'a cautious, prudent, indeed *doubting* approach' (2009: 141).

Such considerations address the potentially debilitating and tempering effects of doubt. In addition, doubt also has an energizing effect, as was already noted with respect to the role of doubt in stimulating the quest for (academic) knowledge. At first glance this realization creates an awkward situation. If doubt is seen as energizing and tempering, as well as debilitating, the disappointing conclusion might be that the role of doubt is, well, ambivalent. But there is no need to halt there. Aiming for more clarity I will argue that in the first instance doubt *enables* both

conviction and action. It is only in the second instance, when the need to press beyond doubt emerges, that it may play a tempering or an obstructing role. It is important, then, to focus not only on the role of doubt in building up energy but also on the mechanisms by which this energy is released, as this will reveal the interplay between the energizing, tempering and debilitating effects of doubt.

At this point it is helpful to consider the contradiction inherent in the idea of doubtless conviction. This point has already been hinted at in connection with Peirce's (1868) statement that absolute certainty is idle and therefore dissipates. Put differently, it is pointless to *believe* things that are self-evident. As Christina Toren suggests, we would misrepresent our informants if we 'casted as *belief* what our informants *know*', because in contrast to knowledge, belief refers to 'considering something to be true in the face of the possibility that it might be false' (2007: 308–9). This juxtaposition of 'knowledge' and 'belief' resonates with a distinction made by Bloch in an earlier essay between 'unexamined intuitive belief' and 'reflexive beliefs'. The second type of beliefs 'are reflexive because they have to overcome the nagging doubt that perhaps it is not true', leading to an 'exaggerated kind of "belief" act' (2005: 110). Thus the atheist who exclaims that God does not exist is making an 'exaggerated act of disbelief', which indicates imperfect or challenged knowledge. That is, expressions of conviction or belief are often manifestations of doubt – of suspended doubt – because why else would there be a need to express the thought? This intertwining of (dis) belief and doubt has important consequences. Although in some respects it may be justified to say that doubt is situated between belief and disbelief, such a statement is nonetheless problematic; whereas the first two can be seen as 'positions', doubt is both a connector and a precondition of belief and disbelief.[16]

Examples of this energizing effect are easy to find. The vigour, enthusiasm and intensity of the novice or the convert are almost proverbial. Berger and Zijderveld usefully suggest that this is so because contrary to people who have grown up in a particular religion, class or office, in the case of converts

'the taken-for-granted-ness must be laboriously constructed and vigorously maintained. For this reason, converts are typically more fervent than "natives"' (2009: 80). In line with this thought, several contributors to this volume indicate that it is precisely the lack of certainty that drives the quest for truth. When Liberatore (Chapter 9) writes about her Somali informants' wavering in becoming practising Muslims, it is clear that their struggle is simultaneously a highly energized quest. The women's patchy knowledge and their doubts about 'what is true' motivate them to seek information and advice from religious authorities, and indeed to incorporate these in their thinking and acting.

In these examples the drive that produces conviction and action stems from incompleteness, meaning that the challenge emerges from within. The challenge can certainly also come from without, in which case conviction (as energized 'knowledge') is produced through encounters with those who do not share in 'the truth'. The missionary – as a generic type – is arguably the avatar of such dialogically produced conviction. The Pentecostal missionaries I followed in Kyrgyzstan can serve as an example (Pelkmans 2009a, 2009b, 2010). They operated in a tense environment in which Islamic leaders as well as ordinary Muslims disputed the missionaries' religious claims. The sometimes heated discussions between missionaries and Muslims were presented in sermons and informal church gatherings as heroic encounters in which the Christian message and its spokesmen ultimately prevailed. Moreover, these defences of 'truth' – for example against the allegation that the Trinity indicates polytheism – were simultaneously attempts to try and convince Muslims of the Christian message. The invigorating effects of external challenges were not only noticeable in the missionaries' speeches and acts, but sometimes expressed by the men themselves. As one Kyrgyz missionary told me in what came across as a particularly frank moment: 'We pray for [local government] officials to stop hindering us. But this may not be God's way. Our faith *thrives* when it is being repressed.' That is, such external challenges were a means to strengthen conviction while contributing to the intensity of Christian life (the opposite possibility, in which the

external challenge *undermines* belief, will be discussed in the last section of this introduction).

This example suggests that distinguishing between internal and external challenges may be easier in theory than in practice. As Coleman argues, even when missionaries fail to convince others, their acts are not without effect: 'they have an audience of at least one, given that the evangelical speaker is also perforce a listener, attending to a message that achieves an important part of its purpose merely by being powerfully and passionately projected out into the world' (2003: 24). Efforts to convince others of the truth – as in revolutionary and missionary movements – also work (intentionally or not) to convince oneself. In lived experience, external threats and internal doubts and convictions cannot be meaningfully separated.

The important point here is that convictions are not simply present, but are rather produced in dialogue with challenges (challenges which may take the form of doubt). It is intriguing and worrying, then, to see that systematic analytical attention to the relation between doubt and conviction, and between doubt and violent action, is rare. Alpa Shah's contribution (Chapter 7) is an important exception. She illustrates the fragility and the patchiness of political conviction by following a young man who ponders joining the Maoist revolutionary army. His journey is a quest not just for truth, but for 'clarity in social relationships', aiming to find out who and what can be trusted. While ontological certainty remained elusive, conviction was produced (to an extent) by testing relationships, which enabled this man to occupy a more committed position. In this process, Shah writes, conviction and certainty was being 'carved out of uncertainty and ambivalence'.

It is difficult to judge how widely Shah's insights apply; clearly more research needs to be conducted on the fragility of conviction. It is nevertheless worthwhile to reflect on the apparent reluctance to analyse the role of doubt in committed action. A partial (and rather impressionistic) insight can be gained by typing the terms 'doubt' and 'terrorism' in various search engines. Intriguingly such searches mainly produce results that

pair terrorism with the *absence* of doubt,[17] which bespeaks not only the wish (or at least tendency) to speak unambiguously about terrorists and terrorism, but also a failure to analyse how committed action is produced. Critical attitudes are perhaps more common in the arts, for example in the work *Terrorist* by Iranian artist Khosrow Hassanzadeh, which critiques the dominant stereoptypical notion of 'terrorist' by displaying the very people in which he has most faith – his mother, sister, himself – *as* terrorists (see Shatanawi 2006). The artistic quality of this and similar artworks partly derives from the ability to upset dominant discourses of terrorism and the underlying assumptions about committed political action. By challenging such assumptions artists may generate intense controversy. A good example is the film *Paradise Now* (2005) directed by Abu-Assad. The film follows two young Palestinian men who are recruited to carry out suicide attacks in Israel, and zooms in on their hesitations, contradictory feelings and the ultimate haphazardness of their actions, some of which are left for the viewer to guess. As Gana points out in her discussion of the film, 'the narrativization of suicide bombing' seeks to understand an act that is more conveniently seen as being 'beyond understanding', while at the same time aiming to leave 'intact its unthinkability' (2008: 23). Narrativization unavoidably humanizes actors (terrorists in this case), creating intense discomfort precisely because *terrorism!* needs its exclamation mark to make sense as a concept.

To return to the central point of this section, while doubt plays a relatively straightforward role in building up energy, important variation is found in how this energy is released. The release is only possible by forcing a break, and this is true as much for academic as it is for embodied doubt. By radically sidelining doubt at the moment of its greatest intensity, truly committed action can be produced – constructive as well as destructive. In comparison, a gradual release of doubt tends to have tempering effects. In political decision-making such mechanisms exist in the form of the 'checklist' which allows doubts to be systematically eliminated in order to allow for progressive action. Finally, if doubt cannot be sidelined it may either cause an energetic (as

well as exhausting) wavering between options, or have a debilitating effect, preventing any action from taking place.

I started this section by highlighting the ambivalence in the poetry of Yeats and Brecht, yet quoted lines that stressed the negative energy of doubt: 'the thoughtless who never doubt / Meet the thoughtful who never act' (Brecht 1979). This is an intriguing and provocative thought, but rather than entertaining the possibility that the thoughtless never pondered, analytically it is more fruitful to think of 'thoughtless action' as the result of having broken with doubt. Likewise, do the thoughtful – those who excessively doubt – really never act? Elsewhere in his poem Brecht writes: 'the most beautiful of all doubts / is when the downtrodden and despondent raise their heads and / stop believing in the strength / of their oppressors' (1979). Here, Brecht ascribes revolutionary potential to doubt, and I would argue that this potential exists precisely because these doubts extend straight into new certainties – the downtrodden not only becoming conscious of their oppression but moreover convinced that the oppressive forces can be defeated. Brecht's revolutionary doubt analytically coincides but normatively contrasts with Yeats' thought that 'The best lack all conviction, while the worst / are full of passionate intensity.' That is, while the mechanisms by which energy is released coincide – namely by dismissing doubt – Yeats is not talking about subalterns striving for a fairer world, but about oppressors who seek its destruction. Evaluations of the moderating, debilitating and energizing effects of doubt are, naturally, based on a normative engagement with the object to which doubt is attached.

(iv) Relational ties and temporal cycles

> 'The Messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary, he will come only one day after his arrival, he will not come on the last day, but on the last day of all' (Kafka 1991).

The cycles in which doubts play a part can no better be illustrated than by this rather mysterious passage from Franz

Kafka, which appears as an isolated fragment in *The Third Notebook* (1991).[18] The passage can be read in various ways. It can be read to refer to illusion, in the sense that revelation will always be postponed but never delivered, except perhaps 'on the last day of all'. Equally strong elements are the hope and disillusionment of the actor, who after each realization that the Messiah has not appeared will continue to expect his arrival, destined to be disappointed again. The passage also evokes doubt, related to the uncertainty about if, when and to what end the Messiah should be expected. But perhaps most of all, the fragment suggests that these qualities feed into each other. As such it is a powerful vignette not only for this section, but for the human condition in general.

Previous sections reflected on the mechanisms by which doubt and belief, hesitation and action, are linked. Doubt rises from uncertainty and attaches itself to specific objects. It has an agentive force which may provoke conviction, but only by transforming the doubted object. Doubt pushes for resolution, but this resolution may be haphazard or offer only temporary clarity. The relationships are complex, fractured and multifaceted, and yet there appears to be a cyclical patterning to hope, belief, doubt and disillusionment.

Such cyclical patterning is central to Eszter Bartha's discussion of illusion and disillusionment in post-socialist Hungary (Chapter 8). Many of her interlocutors, employees of the Rába car factory, had in the past felt committed to the socialist modernist project and the associated forms of belonging, but had become disenchanted with socialism long before it withered in the late 1980s. As Yurchak (2006) has argued for the Soviet Union, the growing discrepancy between pompous communist rhetoric and everyday reality undermined the efficacy of official ideology, which increasingly failed to produce the affective qualities needed for collective action. In Hungary the workers became similarly disillusioned with the communist project, and shifted their hopes onto the 'capitalist dream'. This dream promised not only a future of abundance, but also an escape from the constraints of socialist bureaucracy. However, once 'capitalism' arrived, the destabilizing effects of the market generated

widespread uncertainty and denied people the possibility (or illusion of that possibility) of making their mark on larger societal issues.

When talking about cycles, disillusionment cannot be the endpoint. Bartha's ethnography suggests three partly interlinked responses to disillusionment: apathy concerning the present situation coupled with a nostalgia for the socialist past; flirtation with nationalist agendas that promise to domesticate the uncontrollable flux of capitalism; and, first and foremost, a reorientation of hopes and aspirations towards the social microcosm of the family. The ethnography also suggests that cycles of hope, belief, doubt and disillusionment will not continue endlessly with the same intensity. The new populist movements, for example, failed to invoke intense fervour amongst those who had been disappointed with the grand political ideologies of the past. For them the cycles were running out of steam. Most of Bartha's interlocutors – middle-aged and elderly men and women – had become wary of all grand ideologies and had lost all hope, however illusory it might have been, of being able to influence society at large. Instead, they focused on more concrete, manageable goals like securing a good future for their children.

Such distinctive cyclical patterning is absent in the other contributions to this volume. Despite this, there are indications that such patterns might have been found had the research continued over a longer time span. For example, the Somali women featured in Liberatore's chapter became interested in Islam at moments in which they had become disenchanted with consumerism and 'worldly life'. Their spiritual quests were fraught with challenges that spurred their conviction along. But other challenges threatened to dissipate their conviction – spending (too much) time with non-practising friends, for example. The chance that firm belief would ebb away was always present, representing a move from belief to doubt. On the other hand, in Naumescu's chapter, the Old Believer villagers found themselves at a low point in the cycle, a point at which there seemed to be no more hope. But they were nevertheless inspired

by the mystery of the resurrection and its hopeful message. In these contributions hope, belief, doubt and disillusionment invoke each other, sometimes keeping each other in balance, at other times swinging from one extreme to the other.

Even if people become cynical or reticent after one too many disappointments the flow of time implies that this will not be the end of ideology (*pace* Fukuyama 1992). The next generation creates and holds fast to (its own) new promises, hopes and dreams. The important point is that the future will remain unknown, and it is this uncertainty that provides the stimulus for continuation. Even if in hindsight hopes turn out to have been 'mere' illusions, these are 'necessary fictions' that not only allow one to attach meaning to a reality that is otherwise too complex to grasp, but function as signposts that provide spatial and temporal direction to action. In his discussion of 'necessary fictions' Slavoj Žižek references Rosa Luxemburg's argument that the first workers' movements had to be kept in the dark about the unavoidable failure of their endeavours, because knowledge of this would have prevented the initiation of any action; as a result, the road would not have been paved for the subsequent revolutionary waves that would successfully bring down the government (1989: 92). Similarly the subjects in this volume – be they Old Believers in the Danube delta, wavering revolutionaries in India or Somali women in London – need to hold on to 'fictions', even if their attachment to them is filled with doubt. A key question in all these examples is: what will happen next? As in all ethnographies, timelines need to be arbitrarily cut. And as in life, the Messiah will only come the day after his arrival.

The challenge of doubt

It should be clear by now that doubt is a challenging topic. Doubt is analytically challenging because of its ungraspable nature, it is politically challenging due to its potential to undermine action, and it is socially challenging because doubt is both a trigger for and the obstacle to reaching wholeness. This can be rephrased by suggesting that doubt is the *embodiment* of 'challenge'. By way of

ending let me flesh out these aspects a bit more fully, drawing on the previous sections.

I have argued that the ungraspable nature of doubt stems from its tendency to disappear with the articulation of thought and the performance of action. When overhearing what people say or observing what they do, we are presented with the outcomes of complex processes of reflection and formulation. When we ask people to give opinions we push them to make conclusions (at least provisional ones). Doubt slips even further away when we register what people do – that is, when we register what they *have decided* to do. Ethnographic research cannot fully overcome this bias, yet its long-term and intimate engagement with subjects has the potential to register changes of opinion, to document the fluctuating intensity of action, or even to capture 'states of aphasia' (Oushakine 2000) when people are left speechless in the face of uncontrollable flux.

Doubt is analytically challenging because acknowledging its role means that 'mapping the world' is insufficient in explaining why people think and act the way they do (see Crapanzano 2004). Looking for correlations – the preoccupation of much social science research – is a useful pragmatic step to generate questions, but rarely provides satisfying answers: 'belief' cannot be grasped without taking the alternative into consideration; 'action' needs to be understood in reference to the emotive forces that push it forward. Belief and action are often best seen as responses to challenges. For the researcher this means that acknowledging the role of doubt adds demands to data collection, as it implies that statements of belief cannot be taken for granted. However, it is a worthwhile investment if, as High points out (Chapter 3), by doing so we are able to 'portray more comprehensively how our informants understand the world' and are better positioned to understand their efforts to navigate a reality that is only partly knowable.

More often than not, doubt is politically inconvenient. Berger and Zijderveld (2009) are probably right in suggesting that a 'doubting approach' has the benefit of enabling better informed judgement, but political actors are generally expected

to take a stance rather than to sit on the fence. Prolonged reflection is often seen negatively as a sign of indecisiveness and wavering (or 'flip-flopping', the label that proved fatal to Senator Kerry's election bid in 2004). Most contemporary leaders certainly won't present themselves as doubters. Therefore, we tend to be shocked when learning that, for instance, Joseph Stalin was dramatically indecisive when faced with the German attack, and some of us (myself included) sardonically watched the initial indecisiveness of the self-proclaimed 'decider' George W. Bush when news of the 9/11 plane attacks reached him in an elementary school classroom in Florida. The idea of hesitating commanders, doubting terrorists or wavering revolutionaries is confounding, because it shatters confidence in our ability to see things clearly and because it forcefully impresses on us the fragility and complexity of the world.

A final reason for why doubt is a challenging topic is that it is not altogether clear what it produces. While an essential ingredient for making people disposed to act and commit, it also has the ability to detract from action and commitment. Doubt therefore appears to have unpredictable effects, and this is amplified by the instability of both the act of doubting and the object of doubt. Moreover, the overcoming, bracketing and eliminating of doubt is, and can only be, at most a temporary and partial 'solution'. Attention to doubt is essential not only to do justice to complexity, but also for better understanding how people, energized by their doubt, and compelled to overcome it, find themselves making decisions, committing to action or becoming paralysed.

Doubt is not only a challenging topic; it is also the embodiment of the challenge. To make this claim requires reflection on how doubt relates to other challenges. Of particular relevance are the connections between internal and external challenges. Doubt, as an active state of mind directed towards a questioned object, is the ultimate internal challenge. The external challenge, by contrast, is commonly understood as threat. That is, while doubt is a challenge that emerges from within, the threat is generally seen as a challenge from without. However, internal and external challenges can morph into one another due to the porosity of

the boundary between the internal and the external. Moreover, doubts and threats can both strengthen and weaken commitment, depending on the solidity of the ideological structures and the supporting social body. Above I have shown that the external challenge can serve to overcome internal doubts, as in the case of a Pentecostal church in Kyrgyzstan where interactions with a hostile social environment invigorated faith and strengthened the cohesiveness of the congregation (Pelkmans 2009a). External challenges can thus be beneficial to produce shared conviction. Or, as Buck-Morss (2000: 9) argues, 'To define the enemy is, simultaneously, to define the collective. Indeed: *defining the enemy is the act that brings the collective into being.*'

However, this is only one side of the story, because otherwise external challenges could not be genuinely seen as threats. As we saw, acts of belief form a mechanism to address the challenge, aimed at domesticating doubts and averting threats. But there is always the possibility that these acts will fail to convince, and that the external threat will morph into uncontrollable doubt which spreads through the social body.[19] This is particularly true for revolutionary movements. Stephen Kotkin (1995) refers to this as the 'enemy within' and documents how in the first decades of Soviet rule, the most imminent danger for the communist leadership was not necessarily the physical threat posed by the capitalist or the Nazi enemy (at least, before 1941) but rather the possibility that members of the Communist Party would harbour sympathies for these competing ideological systems. The 'enemy within' is so dangerous precisely because it undermines, erodes and may bring down the ideological superstructure. As Buck-Morss writes in a chapter inspired by Kotkin's work, even if the geographical boundary between the Cold War absolute enemies was partly a mere physical bulwark, it also served 'the unstated purpose of isolating the political imaginaries themselves, protecting each from being undermined by the logic of the other' (2000: 36).[20]

In ideologically defined structures – be they communist, nationalist or religious – campaigns against heretics and disbelievers tend to be particularly vicious due to their potential to

infect the social body from within, undermining its ontological structure. The problematic insider needs to be cleansed as well as expelled. Pitt-Rivers has aptly suggested that the alien and far-removed 'barbarian' tends to be less problematic than the 'stranger' who moves through the social body, potentially infecting it (1977: 94–112). This can be compared to Mary Douglas' famous statement that 'dirt is matter out of place' (1966: 36). 'Dirt', which may take the guise of ideas, people or objects that do not fit the imagined order, prompt attempts to cleanse the social body.[21] Challenges are most threatening when they come from what is near (see Blok 2001: 123). Thus when the external challenge impresses itself onto the social body, it usefully strengthens the collective and its ontological structures as long as it remains on the outside, but the challenge becomes truly threatening when it mixes with the social body, infecting it and potentially causing it to disintegrate.

To bring these opening thoughts to a close, let me revisit my original line about the early church fathers' negative attitude towards 'doubting Thomas' (Bonney 2002: 1–2, n. 1), by suggesting that they were right after all, at least from their own point of view. It may appear that the church fathers did not realize the energizing quality of doubt and its role in reaching conviction. However, even if this is the case, their admonition of the doubting (or unbelieving) apostle had its own rationale. Doubt's constructive potential is only maintained as long as it remains relatively isolated, and will ultimately be able to be sidelined. Moreover, from the perspective of church fathers who wish order rather than revolution, subdued faith may be preferred over enthusiastic but unstable conviction. That is, they may well have appreciated the revolutionary potential of doubt, and realized that it was not in their interest. To avoid chaos and to attain temporary closure, people will always attempt to curtail doubt. But this does not mean that doubt will disappear. Even in its 'absence' doubt continues to peak through from 'beyond the horizon' and exert its influence (see Crapanzano 2004: 16–17). Such hidden doubt, the 'possibility of alternative', will continue to destabilize and prohibit complacency.

Notes

1 In English these questions sound not even half as profound as in Russian, as Lenin realized when naming his famous ([1902] 1945) pamphlet *Chto delat'* (translated as *What is to be done?*) in which questions of action and truth are tightly entwined.

2 Crapanzano invokes William James' suggestion that traditional psychology has not been able to capture the 'free water of consciousness' due to its obsession with labelling and categorizing elements of thought (2004: 18).

3 The story of 'doubting Thomas' is that of the apostle who didn't believe reports about Jesus' resurrection and was only able to 'overcome his doubts' when Jesus provided the requested sensory proof during a subsequent appearance. Intriguingly, Thomas was never really *in doubt*, he was never 'of two minds', but switched over from disbelief to belief. This is reflected in some languages like Dutch in which he is called 'disbelieving Thomas', which also underlines his negative status. As the 'avatar of disbelief', Thomas has served as a warning that it is 'wrong to require supernatural evidence as a basis of one's faith' (Bonney 2002: 1–2).

4 There are other precursors to the *cogito, ergo sum*. Socrates and Aristotle, for example, are often cited as making statements that essentially convey the same idea.

5 The idea of a 'history of doubt' appears to be a contradiction in terms, because doubt is neither an object nor an idea traceable through history, but rather a relational and temporal aspect of ideas and actions. It is therefore unsurprising that Hecht's book is not really about doubt or doubting, but rather a history of critical stances towards the 'doubtful' idea of God, and would have been more aptly titled *(A)theism: A History*.

6 This entertained doubt has been criticized by, amongst others, Peirce, who writes: 'Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts' (Peirce 1868: 141).

7 Some passages in *The Meditations* give a different impression, for example: 'The Meditation of yesterday has filled my mind with so many doubts, that it is no longer in my power to forget them. Nor do I see … any principle on which they can be resolved' (1996: II, 1). But this is a practical doubt, similar to frustration with being stuck in a (logical) puzzle or not knowing which direction to take when coming to a fork in a road.

8 It can be argued that anthropological doubt is rarely 'radical' and is better described as 'wonder', in the sense of opening oneself up to a range of possible truths, a process of moving back and forth between different worlds, without necessarily aiming to resolve their epistemological status.

9 This ideal is tied up with the concept of participant observation. Although sometimes seen as an oxymoron – complete participation and systematic observation exclude each other – an ethnographic approach recognizes the tension, but sees it as analytically productive in the sense that deeper insight is gained by moving back and forth between detached observation and intimate participation (see Tedlock 1991 for a useful discussion on the topic).

10 Crapanzano highlights the limitations of expertise: 'its narrow purview, its frequent failure to critically evaluate the way in which it frames and categorizes its subject matter, the blinkers it imposes' (2004: 5).

11 The 'Cartesian Circle' refers to the problem that, following Descartes' logic, it appears that one can only be certain of the validity of one's perception if God's existence has been established, but one can only be certain of God's existence after having established that what one perceives is true. This interesting tension has been hotly debated by generations of philosophers (see van Cleve 1979).

12 Such reflections can be lifted to the level of society. As Berger and Zijderveld point out, a society in which every issue is 'a matter of individual choice' and thus a matter of doubt 'would lapse into chaos' (2009: 14).

13 Another related term is 'ambivalence'. Like doubt, ambivalence is located in the actor, but it connotes a more disinterested stance than doubt. That is, doubt forces itself onto its object more than ambivalence does.

14 In the words of Hoffman, a philosopher of doubt influenced by Heidegger: 'When taken out of this ordinary setting, the concepts of doubt and ignorance lose all their meaning to the man of common sense' (1986: 20).

15 '*Den Unbedenklichen, die niemals zweifeln / Begegnen die Bedenklichen, die niemals handeln*' (Brecht 1979).

16 Talking about different issues but similar mechanisms, Slavoj Žižek speaks of the vital importance of 'the obstacle', which on the one hand prevents the full deployment of productive forces but is 'simultaneously its "condition of possibility"' because a complete realization

(of love, for example) would remove the mystery and thereby deflate interest (Žižek 2001: 18).

17 Typical phrases are 'there is no doubt', 'without any (shadow of) doubt' and 'doubtlessly'. Likewise, the term 'unwavering' is more frequently used than 'wavering' in discussions of terrorists and revolutionaries.

18 I am indebted to Anton Blok for drawing my attention to this text of Kafka's.

19 It is important to note that the traffic between external and internal is lopsided. The question 'can the external threat become internal doubt?' may be answered affirmatively; by contrast, internal doubt is unlikely to act as a bulwark against the external challenge, and is even less likely to cause the external threat to erode.

20 'It is the absolute political enemy that threatens the existence of the collective not only (and perhaps not mainly) in a physical sense but, rather, in an ontological sense, because it challenges the very notion by which the identity of the collective has been formed' (Buck-Morss 2000: 36).

21 Douglas' metaphor of dirt has been frequently used to illuminate the horrendous logic of genocidal regimes, obsessed as they may become with their ideal of homogeneity, setting in motion destructive acts of purification (see Appadurai 2006: 44; Hayden 1996: 784; Wolf 1999: 246).

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