

1 By way of introduction

Questions of violence, nationhood and history

This book focuses on a moment of rupture and genocidal violence, marking the termination of one regime and the inauguration of two new ones. It seeks to investigate what that moment of rupture, and the violent founding of new states claiming the legitimacy of nation-statehood, tells us about the procedures of nationhood, history and particular forms of sociality. More specifically, it attempts to analyse the moves that are made to nationalise populations, culture and history in the context of this claim to nation-statehood and the establishment of the nation-state. In the process, it reflects also on how the local comes to be folded into the national in new kinds of ways – and the national into the local – at critical junctures of this kind.

The moment of rupture that I am concerned with has been described as a partition, although it is more adequately designated the Partition and Independence of the Indian subcontinent in 1947.¹ As a partition, it shares something with the political outcomes that accompanied decolonisation in a number of other countries in the twentieth century: Ireland, Cyprus, Palestine, Korea, Vietnam and so on. Orientalist constructions, and ruling-class interests and calculations, through the era of formal colonialism and that of the Cold War, contributed fundamentally to all of these. In addition, it may be that the liberal state has never been comfortable with plural societies where communities of various kinds continue to have a robust presence in public life alongside the post-Smithian economic individual: perhaps that is why the combination of such mixed societies with the demands of colonialism – and of decolonisation – has often been lethal.² Yet the specifics of different partitions, and of the

¹ I discuss this question of nomenclature more fully in the next section.

² Note, however, that the process of migration and ‘mixing’ was greatly increased – in the New World as well as the Old – with the growth of world capitalism and colonialism. Also, most African territories suffered a process of Balkanisation with the end of colonial rule: here, the retention of the unity of a colonial territory – as in the case of Nigeria or Kenya – was the exception rather than the rule. (I am grateful to Mahmood Mamdani for stressing this last point to me.)

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discourses surrounding each of these, require careful attention if we are to make more than a very superficial statement regarding the procedures of nationhood, history and local forms of sociality.

The next chapter outlines the particularities of the Indian partition of 1947. A few of its striking features may, however, be noted immediately. The singularly violent character of the event stands out. Several hundred thousand people were estimated to have been killed; unaccountable numbers raped and converted; and many millions uprooted and transformed into official 'refugees' as a result of what have been called the partition riots.³ Notably, it was not a once-subject, now about-to-be-liberated population that was pitted against departing colonial rulers in these riots, but Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs ranged against one another – even if, as Indian nationalists were quick to point out, a century and more of colonial politics had something to do with this denouement.

The partition of the subcontinent, and the establishment of the two independent states of India and Pakistan, occurred with remarkable suddenness and in a manner that belied most anticipations of the immediate future. There was a very short time – a mere seven years – between the first formal articulation of the demand for a separate state for the Muslims of the subcontinent and the establishment of Pakistan. The boundaries between the two new states were not officially known until two days *after* they had formally become independent. And, astonishingly, few had foreseen that this division of territories and power would be accompanied by anything like the bloodbath that actually eventuated.

The character of the violence – the killing, rape and arson – that followed was also unprecedented, both in scale and method, as we shall see below. Surprisingly, again, what all this has left behind is an extraordinary love-hate relationship: on the one hand, deep resentment and animosity, and the most militant of nationalisms – Pakistani against Indian, and Indian against Pakistani, now backed up by nuclear weapons; on the other, a considerable sense of nostalgia, frequently articulated in the view that this was a partition of siblings that should never have occurred – or, again, in the call to imagine what a united Indian-Pakistani cricket team might have achieved!

³ '... Two events, the Calcutta killing [of August 1946], and the setting up of Mr. Nehru's first Government... [in September]... signalled the start of a sixteen-months' civil war; a conflict in which the estimated total death-roll, about 500,000 people, was roughly comparable to that of the entire British Commonwealth during the six years of World War II', wrote Ian Stephens, in his *Pakistan* (New York, 1963), p. 107. I discuss this and other estimates more fully in ch. 4.

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From the 1940s to today, a great deal has been written about ‘the partition of India’ and the violence that – as we are told – ‘accompanied’ it.⁴ Given the specificities of subcontinental history, however, the ideological function of ‘partition’ historiography has been very different, say, from that of Holocaust literature. The investigation has not, in this instance, been primarily concerned with apportioning guilt on the opposing sides. In my view, its chief object has not even been to consolidate different ethnic/national identities in South Asia, though there is certainly an element of this, especially in right-wing writings. It has been aimed rather at justifying, or eliding, what is seen in the main as being an illegitimate outbreak of violence, and at making a case about how this goes against the fundamentals of Indian (or Pakistani) tradition and history: how it is, to that extent, not *our* history at all. The context has made for a somewhat unusual account of violence and of the relation between violence and community – one that is not readily available in literature on other events of this sort. This provides the opportunity for an unusual exploration of the representation and language of violence.

It is one of the central arguments of this book that – in India and Pakistan, as elsewhere – violence and community constitute one another,

⁴ See, for example, B. R. Ambedkar, *Pakistan, or the Partition of India* (Bombay, 1946); I. H. Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent, 610–1947: a Brief Historical Analysis* (The Hague, 1962); Satya M. Rai, *Partition of the Punjab* (London, 1965); Chowdhury Muhammad Ali, *The Emergence of Pakistan* (New York, 1967); Khalid bin Sayeed, *Pakistan: the Formative Phase, 1857–1948* (2nd edn, London, 1968); H. V. Hodson, *The Great Divide: Britain, India and Pakistan* (London, 1969); K. K. Aziz, *The Historical Background of Pakistan, 1857–1947: an Annotated Digest of Source Material* (Karachi, 1970); C. H. Philips and M. D. Wainright, eds., *The Partition of India. Policies and Perspectives, 1935–1947* (London, 1970). More recent works include David Page, *Prelude to Partition. Indian Muslims and the Imperial System of Control, 1920–1932* (Delhi, 1982); Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge, 1985); Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India* (Delhi, 1987); David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (London, 1988); Ian Talbot, *Provincial Politics and the Pakistan Movement: the Growth of the Muslim League in North-West and North-East India, 1937–47* (Karachi, 1988); Farzana Shaikh, *Community and Consensus in Islam: Muslim Representation in Colonial India, 1860–1947* (Cambridge, 1989); Asim Roy, ‘The High Politics of India’s Partition’, review article, *Modern Asian Studies*, 24, 2 (1990); Sarah F. D. Ansari, *Sufi Saints and State Power: the Pirs of Sind, 1843–1947* (Cambridge, 1992); Mushirul Hasan, ed., *India’s Partition. Process, Strategy and Mobilization* (Delhi, 1993); Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided. Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947* (Cambridge, 1995); and Tazeen M. Murshid, *The Sacred and the Secular: Bengal Muslim Discourses, 1871–1977* (Calcutta, 1995). Some of the more recent of these studies are rich in their accounts of the social and economic context of political mobilisation on the ground: yet they remain concerned primarily with the question of political/constitutional outcomes at the national level. An exception is Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal, 1905–1947* (Delhi, 1991), which investigates the details of the crowds and the context of violent outbreaks in Bengal from 1905 to 1947.

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but also that they do so in many different ways. It is my argument that in the history of any society, narratives of particular experiences of violence go towards making the ‘community’ – and the subject of history. The discipline of history still proceeds on the assumption of a fixed subject – society, nation, state, community, locality, whatever it might be – and a largely pre-determined course of human development or transformation. However, the agent and locus of history is hardly pre-designated. Rather, accounts of history, of shared experiences in the past, serve to constitute these, their extent and their boundaries.

In the instance at hand, I shall suggest, violence too becomes a language that constitutes – and reconstitutes – the subject. It is a language shared by Pakistanis and Indians (as by other nations and communities): one that cuts right across those two legal entities, and that, in so doing, cuts across not only the ‘historical’ but also the ‘non-historical’ subject.

‘Official’ history and its other

Official claims and denials – often supported by wider nationalist claims and denials – lie at the heart of what one scholar has described as the ‘aestheticising impulse’ of the nation-state.⁵ These claims and denials provide the setting for a large part of the investigation in the following pages. In this respect, the present study is animated by two apparently contradictory questions. First: how does ‘history’ work to produce the ‘truth’ – say, the truth of the violence of 1947 – and to deny its force at the same time; to name an event – say, the ‘partition’ – and yet deny its eventfulness?

Secondly: how can we write the moment of struggle back into history? I have in mind here Gramsci’s critique of Croce’s histories of Europe and of Italy.⁶ What I wish to derive from this, however, is not merely the historian’s exclusion of the *time*, but of the very *moment* (or aspect) of struggle. I am arguing that even when history is written as a history of struggle, it tends to exclude the dimensions of force, uncertainty, domination and disdain, loss and confusion, by normalising the struggle, evacuating

⁵ E. Valentine Daniel, *Charred Lullabies. Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence* (Princeton, N.J., 1996), p. 154. Shahid Amin describes the same process when he speaks of the drive to produce the ‘uncluttered national past’; ‘Writing Alternative Histories: a View from South Asia’ (unpublished paper).

⁶ ‘Is it possible to write (conceive of) a history of Europe in the nineteenth century without an organic treatment of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars? And is it possible to write a history of Italy in modern times without a treatment of the struggles of the Risorgimento? . . . Is it fortuitous, or is it for a tendentious motive, that Croce begins his narratives from 1815 and 1871? That is, that he excludes the moment of struggle . . .’; Antonio Gramsci, ‘Notes on Italian History’, in Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London, 1971), pp. 118–19.

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it of its messiness and making it part of a narrative of assured advance towards specified (or specifiable) resolutions. I wish to ask how one might write a history of an event involving genocidal violence, following all the rules and procedures of disciplinary, 'objective' history, and yet convey something of the impossibility of the enterprise.

It is this latter concern that has led me, throughout this book, to provide a closely detailed account of what the contemporary and later records tell us about what transpired in and around 1947. Part of my purpose is to underscore the point about how different the history of Partition appears from different perspectives. More crucially, however, I hope that what sometimes looks like a blitz of quotations, and the simply overwhelming character of many of the reports, will help to convey something of the enormity of the event.

The gravity, uncertainty and jagged edges of the violence that was Partition has, over the last few years, received the attention of a growing number of scholars and become the subject of some debate.⁷ This marks an important advance in the process of rethinking the history of Partition, of nationhood and of national politics in the subcontinent. It has been enabled in part by the passage of time, for it is now more than fifty years since the end of British colonial rule and the establishment of the new nation-states of India and Pakistan (the latter splitting up into Pakistan

⁷ Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, 'Recovery, Rupture, Resistance. Indian State and Abduction of Women During Partition', and Urvashi Butalia, 'Community, State and Gender: on Women's Agency During Partition', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 'Review of Women's Studies' (24 April 1993); Gyanendra Pandey, 'The Prose of Otherness', in *Subaltern Studies, VIII* (Delhi, 1994); Nighat Said Khan, et al., eds., *Locating the Self. Perspectives on Women and Multiple Identities* (Lahore, 1994); Mushirul Hasan, ed., *India Partitioned. The Other Face of Freedom*, 2 vols. (Delhi, 1995); Veena Das, *Critical Events: an Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (Delhi, 1995); Gyanendra Pandey, 'Community and Violence', *Economic and Political Weekly* (9 August 1997) and 'Partition and Independence in Delhi, 1947–48', *ibid.* (6 September 1997); Shail Mayaram, *Resisting Regimes. Myth, Memory and the Shaping of a Muslim Identity* (Delhi, 1997); Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices From the Partition of India* (Delhi, 1998); Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (Delhi, 1998); Ayesha Jalal, 'Nation, Reason and Religion. Punjab's Role in the Partition of India', *Economic and Political Weekly* (8 August 1998); *Seminar*, 'Partition' number (August 1994); and *South Asia*, 18, Special Issue on 'North India: Partition and Independence' (1995). For literature, Alok Bhalla, *Stories on the Partition of India*, 3 vols. (New Delhi, 1994); and Muhammad Umar Memon, ed., *An Epic Unwritten. The Penguin Book of Partition Stories* (Delhi, 1998). For some reflection of the animated debate, see Jason Francisco, 'In the Heat of the Fratricide: the Literature of India's Partition Burning Freshly', review article, *Annual of Urdu Studies* (1997), pp. 227–57; Ayesha Jalal, 'Secularists, Subalterns and the Stigma of "Communalism": Partition Historiography Revisited', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 33, 1 (January–March 1996), pp. 93–104; 'Remembering Partition', a dialogue between Javed Alam and Suresh Sharma, *Seminar*, 461 (January 1998); David Gilmartin, 'Partition, Pakistan, and South Asian History: in Search of a Narrative', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 57, 4 (November 1998).

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and Bangladesh in 1971). But the passage of time does not, of its own accord, unconsciously produce a set of new perspectives and questions. On the contrary, a set of far-reaching political and historiographical considerations lies behind the renewed thinking in this area.

In India the 1970s already saw the beginning of the end of the Nehruvian vision of a modern, secular, welfare state – leading a developing society to socialism and secularism through the gentle arts of persuasion, education and democracy. It was clear that the privileged and propertied classes were not going to be readily persuaded of the need to share the fruits of development; that the oppressed and downtrodden, but now enfranchised, were threatening more and more to take matters into their own hands and to meet upper-class violence with violence; in a word, that secularism, democracy, welfare and the right to continued rule (and re-election) were not so easily secured. One result of this was a new consolidation of a right-wing, religious-community based politics – which was in the eyes of many of India's secular intellectuals not unlike the politics of the Pakistan movement of the 1940s. This was one reason to return to a study of the history of those earlier times.

The 1980s saw the emergence of exceptionally strong Hindu (and Sikh) right-wing movements – very much in line with the rise of fundamentalist and absolutist forces all over the world. Above all, that decade saw the naked parade – and astounding acceptance – of horrifying forms of violence in our own 'civilised' suburbs. The massacre of Sikhs on the streets of Delhi and other cities and towns of northern India in 1984 was only the most widely reported example of this:⁸ and a shocked radical intelligentsia greeted this, as it greeted other instances of the kind, with the cry that it was 'like Partition all over again'. The spate of new studies of Partition and Partition-like violence is one consequence of this entry of barbarity – or should one say 'history'? – into our secure middle-class lives.

There is a historiographical imperative at work here too. For too long the violence of 1947 (and, likewise, I wish to suggest, of 1984, 1992–3 and so on) has been treated as someone else's history – or even, *not* history at all. I shall have more to say about this in the chapters that follow. But it is necessary, at this stage, to state the broad outlines of a problem that, especially after the 1980s and 1990s, Indian historiography simply has to face. Stated baldly, there is a wide chasm between the historians' apprehension of 1947 and what we might call a more popular, survivors' account of it – between history and memory, as it were. Nationalism

⁸ There was, in addition, the massacre of Muslims in a spate of so-called 'riots' (better described as pogroms) throughout the 1980s, which peaked in 1992–3. More recently there has been a series of attacks against Christians scattered in isolated communities. All this, apart from the continuing attacks against Dalits (earlier, and sometimes still, called 'Untouchables') and women of all castes and classes.

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and nationalist historiography, I shall argue, have made an all too facile separation between 'Partition' and 'violence'. This is one that survivors seldom make: for in their view, Partition *was* violence, a cataclysm, a world (or worlds) torn apart. Whereas historians' history seems to suggest that what Partition amounted to was, in the main, a new constitutional/political arrangement, which did not deeply affect the central structures of Indian society or the broad contours of its history, the survivors' account would appear to say that it amounted to a sundering, a whole new beginning and, thus, a radical reconstitution of community and history.

How shall we write this other history? To attempt an answer to this question, it will help to step back and consider the history of 'history'.

The history of 'history'

Once upon a time, as we all know, China, India and the Arab lands had civilisation and Europe did not. But that was long ago. Then came a time when Europe claimed 'civilisation' from the rest of the world: and things have never been the same since. Ever after that, Europe is supposed to have possessed many attributes that the rest of the world never had.

Europe had 'civilisation' – which meant capitalism, the industrial revolution and a new military and political power; the rest of the world did not.

Europe had 'feudalism' – now seen as a prerequisite for development to 'civilisation'; the rest of the world (with the possible exception of Japan) did not.

Europe had 'history' – the sign of self-consciousness; the rest of the world (with the possible exception of China) had only memories, myths and legends. Today, by a curious turn of events, and in the shadow of the Holocaust, that 'extremest of extreme' events as it has been characterised,⁹ Europe (now, of course, including – even being led by – the United States) has memories; the rest of the world apparently has only history.

What does all this indicate about the larger question of civilisation and the place in it of nationhood and history? First, that the plot has never been simple; and, secondly, that it has rarely seemed to work quite as it was planned. The current debate on the vexed question of memory and history, in fact, tells us more than a little about the relationship between nation and history, and history and state power. Let us stay with it for a moment.

⁹ See Dan Diner, 'Historical Understanding and Counterrationality: the Judenrat as Epistemological Vantage', in Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation. Nazism and the 'Final Solution'* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), p. 128.

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The debate has, of course, served to put both concepts, memory and history, under the sign of a question mark. To understand something historically, a historian of Holocaust memories and histories tells us, 'is to be aware of its complexity, . . . to see it from multiple perspectives, to accept the ambiguities, including moral ambiguities, of protagonists, motives and behavior'.¹⁰ Even with qualifications, this is in line with the old, established view of the objectivity and scientificity of history. By contrast, Novick goes on to say 'collective memory simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective; is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes': typically, it would be understood as expressing some eternal or essential truth about the group whose memory it is. For collective memory is, as the same author puts it in a paraphrase of Halbwachs, 'in crucial senses ahistorical, and even anti-historical'.¹¹

Yet it is necessary to stress that the relationship between memory and history has always been an unstable one – more so perhaps than historians have acknowledged. Today, according to Pierre Nora, the leading French scholar of the subject, history has 'conquered' memory. 'Modern memory is, above all, archival'; and 'We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left.' Nora speaks, indeed, of a new 'historical memory', based upon increasingly institutionalised sites of memory.¹²

There is some force in the argument. There is no such thing as 'spontaneous memory' now – if there ever was. However, the historian perhaps proclaims the triumph of 'history' – and with it of historical societies, the modern nation-state, democratisation and mass culture – too quickly. The ascendancy of capital and its concomitant forms of modern statehood and culture has not been quite so absolute. The face-to-face communities of peasant society may be in decline, although they have hardly disappeared everywhere. But other communities of shared, inherited cultures – bonded by common memories and 'irrational' rituals, themselves contested and variously interpreted – continue to have a real existence even in the most advanced capitalist societies, living in an often tense relationship with the omnipresent state, yet autonomous and even resistant to its rules in many ways.

¹⁰ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston and New York, 1999), pp. 3–4. Cf. Gabrielle Spiegel's characterisation of history as 'a discourse drafted from other discourses'; 'Memory and History: Liturgical Time and Historical Time' (unpublished paper).

¹¹ Novick, *Holocaust*, pp. 3–4. See also Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York, 1980), pp. 78–87 and *passim*.

¹² Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire', *Representations*, 26 (Spring 1989), pp. 7, 8, 13, 21; cf. his *Rethinking the French Past. Realms of Memory. Volume I: Conflicts and Divisions*, English edn (New York, 1996), 'General Introduction', *passim*.

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If, as Halbwachs suggests, there are as many memories as there are groups (or communities),¹³ then it is not to be wondered at that collective memories continue to have a vigorous existence – even if they do so in altered, and more historicised forms. Where the ruling classes and their instruments have failed to establish their hegemony through persuasion, or where historiography has failed (or refused) to address serious moments of dislocation in the history of particular societies in all their complexity and painfulness – which I believe has often been the case – it has perhaps given an additional lease of life to ‘memory’. Furthermore, the triumph of the nation-state, the long arm of the major publishing houses and modern media and the homogenisation of culture, have not only produced more history: they have also produced more archetypal myths.

Indeed, with the new reach of nationalism and of the modern state, and the new sites of memory that they have established, it is not fantastic to suggest that history itself appears in the form of memory – a national memory as it were. In other words, the world today is populated not only by the ‘historical memory’ of various groups, dependent upon museums, flags and publicly funded celebrations. It is also flooded with the mythical histories of nations and states, histories that are themselves an institutional ‘site of memory’, locked in a circular, and somewhat parasitical, relationship with other, more obvious *lieux de mémoire*. This hybrid ‘memory-history’, whose presence Nora again notes, is surely one of the distinguishing marks of our age. Pronouncements about the worldwide progress – or decline – of ‘history’ do not, however, sit very well with this complexity, one that challenges the stark separation that is sometimes made between ‘memory’ and ‘history’.

On the question of disciplinary history, one might note, parenthetically, that a slippage frequently occurs between the conception of history as an objective statement of all that is significant in the human past, and as a statement of purposive movement. For Hegel, the leading philosopher of the practice, the state is the condition of history: for the state symbolises self-consciousness and overall purpose, and thus makes for the possibility of progress – and regress. ‘We must hold that the narration of history *and* historical deeds and events appear at the same time . . . It is the State which first presents subject matter that is not only appropriate for the prose of history but creates it together with itself.’

Only in the State with the consciousness of laws are there clear actions, and is the consciousness of them clear enough to make the keeping of records possible and desired. It is striking to everyone who becomes acquainted with the treasures of Indian literature that that country, so rich in spiritual products of greatest

¹³ Cf. Nora, *Rethinking the French Past*, p. 3.

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profundity, has no history. In this it contrasts strikingly with China, which possesses such an excellent history going back to the oldest times.¹⁴

Within the academy, however, history is sometimes presented as a scientific description of anything in the human past; at other times, as an account of anticipated advance, of known directionality and accumulating progress. In order to avoid any confusion in this regard, I want to underscore Hegel's proposition about the latter aspect of the discipline, and to say that even when history becomes rather more reflexive – and adds historiography, the history of history, to its concerns – it continues to work within a context defined by modern (or shall we say, nineteenth-century) science and state. It continues to be based on the belief in the past as past, in the privilege of large and centralised socio-political formations, in objective facts and predictable futures: and it relies heavily on the power of those beliefs.

It is my argument that the writing of history – in each and every case – is implicated in a political project, whether consciously or unselfconsciously. There is a crucial need to explicate the politics of available histories. 'At one time', writes Nora, 'the Third Republic [in France] seemed to draw together and crystallize, through history and around the concept of "the nation".' 'History was holy because the nation was holy.' 'The memory-nation was . . . the incarnation of memory-history.' The crisis of the 1930s changed all that. The 'old couple', state and nation, was replaced by a new one, state and society. History was 'transformed into social self-understanding'. 'We no longer celebrate the nation, . . . we study the nation's celebrations.'¹⁵ French history, he tells us, was once 'the very model of national history in general'. Now, it seems we are being told, it is the very model of a non-national, open-ended, many-centred history. But model nonetheless.

'We live in a fragmented universe . . . We used to know whose children we were; now we are the children of no one and everyone.' 'Since the past can now be constructed out of virtually anything, and no one knows what tomorrow's past will hold, our anxious uncertainty turns everything into a trace . . .' 'With the disintegration of memory-history, . . . a new kind of historian has emerged, a historian prepared, unlike his predecessors, to avow his close, intimate, and personal ties to his subject . . . [and] entirely dependent on his subjectivity, creativity, and capacity to re-create.' 'The demise of memory-history has multiplied the number of private memories demanding their own individual histories'; everything we touch or use is

¹⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Reason in History. A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, tr. by Robert S. Hartman (Indianapolis, 1953), pp. 75–7.

¹⁵ Nora, *Rethinking the French Past*, pp. 5–7.