

# Imagining a Geopolitics of Nature: ‘We Are Trapped in Concepts Handed Down By Europe’s Historical Trajectory’

IN CONVERSATION WITH **Philippe Descola, Olivier de France**

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# Imagining a geopolitics of nature: ‘We are trapped in concepts handed down by Europe’s historical trajectory’

**In Conversation with Philippe Descola**

*Professor Emeritus at the Collège de France and Director of Studies at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS)<sup>1</sup>*

**OLIVIER YASAR DE FRANCE – The classic genealogy of geopolitics sees space as a flat surface, which is there to be conquered and dominated. Your work brings to light non-‘Western’ perceptions of space and territory<sup>2</sup>. Would not these be a more**

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1. Niklas Hartmann (King’s College, Cambridge) and Yakoub Moghal (Saint Antony’s College, Oxford) provided scientific advice on this paper. The journal’s editor in chief and the editors of the special issue should like to thank them for their conceptual insight and semantic suggestions, but take responsibility for any remaining inaccuracies and misnomers. The present text is the updated translation of an exchange in French which took place in 2021.

2. In his work, Philippe Descola distinguishes naturalism from animism, totemism, and analogism. Modern naturalism in ‘Western’ modernity entrenches a separation between nature and culture



## interesting point of theoretical departure to conceive of a ‘geopolitics of nature’ today?

➤ PHILIPPE DESCOLA – It is an interesting idea. However, it is difficult to make a general statement on such a vast question, because there are as many ways of occupying an environment as there are humanities. In animist collectives, for example, humanity does not exist as such. What exists are human and non-human collectives, endowed with various ornaments, costumes, habitats, houses, tools and languages. These collectives differ from each other like species which must coexist in the same overarching space while occupying

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different living environments – particularly in the case of humans and animals. The idea of humanity makes little sense in a context where humans have diversified into as many ways as there are of occupying an environment.

The more important question is precisely perhaps that of the relationship between these different niches and those who occupy them. In animism, for example, each life form is endowed with physical dispositions that enable it to inhabit a certain niche. This niche may be living underwater, in the sky, in houses of a certain shape, etc. The genius of animism, however, is that it has escaped the solipsism of these separate habitats by using a form of communication between humans and non-humans. This trans-specific language manifests itself in dreams or in ritual circumstances, for instance.

How does this translate into a contemporary perspective? At COP21, representatives of the Sarayaku, an Amerindian community, came to Paris with a proposal for international recognition of their territory which featured none of the habitual justifications. The Sarayaku live in an area of the Ecuadorian Amazon to the north of where the Achuar live. Oil companies had projected to begin prospecting in the area. The Sarayaku’s proposal, however, made no reference to the idea of ‘indigenesness’. This is understandable, since groups have moved around significantly in the region over the centuries. The population is also a product

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that the other three ontologies do not share. See *Beyond Nature and Culture* (trans. Janet Lloyd), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013.

of ethnogenesis: the result of a mixture of populations of different origins who learnt Quechua, which was the language of evangelisation. The idea of indigenouness therefore has little meaning here.

Their main argument was that this territory is home to unique relationships between humans and non-humans – both material and spiritual – and that these relationships should be preserved. Yet preserving relationships is predicated on preserving the territory in which they are expressed. Territory is a term that can be used here for want of a better one, as long as we specify each time how it is used. We define it here not by its possible uses, nor by an ancestral link of occupation, but by the fact that the humans who live there have woven relations with non-humans which must be preserved. Therein might lie an animistic understanding of territory: the preservation of this complex layering of relationships between beings occupying different ecological niches within the same biome.

I examined these specific issues in my lectures on territory at the Collège de France.<sup>3</sup> I tried to highlight the differences in the way territories are conceived and used around the world, without systematically undertaking to assign them to specific ontologies. In my last book,<sup>4</sup> I looked at the question of figuration: the way in which different forms of worlding can be perceived in images that are constructed differently. The idea is also at the root of *Par-delà nature et culture* (*Beyond Nature and Culture*).<sup>5</sup> I try to explain that different forms of worlding – i.e. ways of composing worlds from the salient elements that members of a collective will detect or actualise in their surroundings – have consequences in different fields of the human experience, from the concepts of duration and spatialisation to the categories that are used to classify beings.

## **OLIVIER YASAR DE FRANCE – You distinguish, for example, between animist understandings of space and the analogist model which is one of those at work in international relations today.**

› PHILIPPE DESCOLA – I am particularly interested to see what the Chinese model yields. It may be seen as a form of analogist worlding, based on the idea that the world's singularities must be brought into resonance with each other within a sociocosmic totality. The current Chinese model embodies the expansion of what long was but a sphere of influence: the further one

3. Editor's note: Philippe Descola, « Les usages de la terre. Cosmopolitique de la territorialité », Collège de France, 2015-2016 and 2016-2017.

4. Editor's note : Philippe Descola, *Les formes du visibles*, Paris, Seuil, 2021.

5. *Op. cit.*



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moves towards the periphery, the more one encounters barbarians outside the system. The more necessary it is, therefore, either to integrate them into the sociocosmic totality – as in the policy of expansion in Tibet and the South China Sea – or to maintain negotiated relations with them for better or for worse, as in the Silk Roads paradigm.

In analogist worlding, human society is coextensive with the cosmos – or at least with the borders it practises – within a vast ensemble of humans and non-humans. They usually exist within a hierarchical organisation: in state systems (and not all of them are), the interests of all must be preserved by the wise administration of the sovereign. In my view,

the Chinese cosmopolitical model is analogist in this sense, as were the Inca empire, Pharaonic Egypt and the sacred kingdoms in Africa.

The Chinese analogist model, of course, is the antithesis of the Westphalian model of the other great world empire formed by the United States, which is based on conversion – to democracy and the laws of the market – from a central focal point. These two forms of cosmopolitics maintain a rather perilous form of mutual misunderstanding, even though there are probably people on both sides who are capable of thinking through this contradiction.

**OLIVIER YASAR DE FRANCE – Yaqing Qin, a contemporary Chinese thinker, argues that the relational importance of the bond between human beings, as well as between human beings and nature, is specific to the Chinese worldview...**

› PHILIPPE DESCOLA – This is an excellent definition of analogist worlding defined by the neo-Confucian philosophy which informs the official political thinking of China’s leaders. But it also depends on what one means by relational, which is a term that is much thrown around today and does not mean much – other than signalling an emphasis on the pre-eminence of relations over the terms they unite. But I know of no cosmopolitical system in which the terms would be exclusively the product of the relations that bind them. In the Chinese world, and in the analogist world in general, the relations between the human and non-human components of the sociocosmic totality are founded on

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“The current Chinese model embodies the expansion of what long was but a sphere of influence”

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principles of equilibrium and correspondence. They rely on links of analogy and sympathy, which is a theoretical principle found in ancient Greece, ancient Mexico, as well as much of Asia and many other regions.

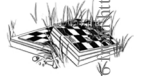
But in analogism, it is not the relation as such that counts, in the sense that I was proposing for the animist world. Instead it is the mesh of the encompassing whole and all the relations that it enables: the whole here takes precedence over the parts. Therein lies the difference between the world of analogism and that of animism. The latter is far more plural and admits all sorts of forms of internal composition, and of dyadic relationships between elements of equal status.

A good example of an analogist model for an imperial territory is that of the Incas. In the 'kingdom of the four quarters', which was the territorial scheme of the Tawantinsuyu, one of the four quarters was set aside to potentially accommodate the Amazonian populations to the east. In effect, they were never conquered, but their place was conceptually carved out of the great sociocosmic structure with which the Inca's elite represented the empire. It was less a form of Westphalian territory than a system of coordinates incorporating, in principle, the entirety of the known expanse of land – including that which was ultimately destined to become part of the system.

This may also turn out to be the problem with Chinese cosmopolitics, jihadist cosmopolitics and even with the idea that the *ummah*, the community of believers, could eventually replace local allegiances to form a transnational theologico-political community. For a long time, such systems remained relatively local, but they then tended to expand and encompass a wider area. They are very different from animist systems, which harbour no spirit of evangelisation or territorial expansion.

**OLIVIER YASAR DE FRANCE – Might it be possible, in this regard, to distinguish between a space that works *partes extra partes* and one that works *partes intra partes*?**

➤ PHILIPPE DESCOLA – The first is typical of the more or less peaceful coexistence between Westphalian states, or even of the territorial superposition of ecological niches characteristic of animist worlding. The second is typical of



how I just described analogist sociocosmic models. The differences between these two approaches to space can be illustrated through their conceptions of war. Animist wars in the Amazon were never about conquering territory. Their aim was to bring the point of view of the people who are absorbed into

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“Animist wars in the Amazon were never about conquering territory. Their aim was to bring the point of view of the people who are absorbed into the social body (with captives) and into the physical body of the killers (through trophies and cannibalism)”

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the social body (with captives) and into the physical body of the killers (through trophies and cannibalism). Such wars were not about occupying more space at the expense of others, or about subjugating conquered populations. On the contrary: in taking possession of the enemy rather than their territory, you appropriate their perspective and their identity whilst maintaining the concomitant differences – which is quite different from engaging in a war of conquest. You absorb the Other—in doing so, you absorb their position towards you rather than the space in which they reside.

Analogist warfare is more diverse. For example, the Aztec ‘flower wars’ were also based on an exchange of prisoners and dead bodies, but the basic principle was not the appropriation of another’s point of view. It was the capture of sacrificial victims. Mexico-Tenochtitlan, which was less an empire in the classic sense than a confederation with a discontinuous territorial base, allowed independent city-states (such as Tlaxcala) to subsist in its immediate vicinity—although it could have physically subdued them. These close enemies provided an opportunity for ritualised warfare, in which prisoners were taken for sacrificial purposes, because the Sun had to be fed blood to keep the sociocosmic machine running. Hence the key purpose was not to occupy a territory, but to maintain a *partes intra partes* imbrication in order to maintain the kinetic mechanism that was the

circulation of the sun, so that the world would not stop moving. This, too, is quite singular: it is a variant on the sociocosmic system of analogism. The same thing could have been achieved with slaves—indeed merchants bought slaves to sacrifice them. But the blood of enemy warriors was infinitely more valuable. Hence free and consensual confrontation with neighbouring cities had to be maintained, so that the sacrificial victims came from elsewhere.

Unlike in animist warfare, one is not looking to appropriate a point of view from elsewhere, but a substance. That substance is blood, because blood is necessary for the overall machine to function. So you have two very different forms of warfare, both of which puzzled European chroniclers when they tried to understand why Amerindians went to war. There remains, however, a terminological problem attached to describing all such phenomena. In history and anthropology, we are trapped in concepts which are handed down by Europe's historical trajectory. We routinely use notions such as nature, society, state, sovereignty or territory which are very difficult to apply unchanged to other regions of the world.

## **OLIVIER YASAR DE FRANCE – What about perception of space in totemic world-making?**

› **PHILIPPE DESCOLA** – In Australia, the totemic understanding of territory is both highly localised and attached to far broader networks. Each totemic group is made up of humans and non-humans who share a set of common qualities. It is formed by the incorporation by its members into sites that were once frequented by the totemic prototypes of the soul-children that these prototypes have left behind. Such seeds perpetuate the group's individual and collective identity through their successive incarnations in the members of the totemic group, generation after generation.

Humans, non-humans and places thus partake of a common history and essence. There is something very local, and very material, in how these principles of individuation are incorporated. At the same time, the primeval beings behind these principles moved across great distances. Hence they left totemic seeds in other places and other circumstances, which gave rise to other totemic groups. Their actions thus contributed to rooting identities in very specific places, but also to distributing them over great distances. This mechanism for generating beings and places produces a highly original relationship between the hyper-local and the network. Identity is very local, but can concomitantly be linked to primeval beings who have moved hundreds of kilometres. As a result, distant ethnic groups who speak different languages may nevertheless share a common process of ontogenesis (for the beings) and morphogenesis (for the topography of the territories), which will differentiate according to the multiple episodes that affect them. This is a segmented genesis—unlike the Christian genesis in which everyone is involved.

In this way, territories are latter-day traces of an act of creation which has also affected humans. Aborigines have brought claims before Australian courts concerning 'sacred sites' that have been destroyed or damaged by development or road construction. The expression 'sacred site' is employed here for want of a better term, because it captures the idea of sacrilege. But it only poorly describes what these sites represent for the Aborigines. They are ontological



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incubators where the seeds that individuate a totemic group were deposited. The present incarnation of such seeds are what continues to give the group and its members their singular existence. These sites are not sacred in the ordinary sense according to which people travel to them in order to worship a deity or make sacrifices. If we physically destroy the place from which a group's identity is continually derived, then we remove the source that feeds it and, consequently, the very existence of the group.

Animism, analogism and totemism: we have just examined the manifestations of three forms of worlding that embody completely different relationships between humans and territory, as well as between humans and non-humans.

### **OLIVIER YASAR DE FRANCE – Is ‘Western’ naturalism condemned to a flat, *partes extra partes* vision of space?**

► PHILIPPE DESCOLA - There are reinventions. I am particularly interested in what is happening in the ZADs (*Zones à Défendre*, i.e. zones to be defended). In Notre-Dame-des-Landes, for example, local people who are resisting destructive development projects coexist with people from elsewhere who have come

over time to lend a hand, who are generally urban activists, and who are more accustomed to political squats than to the bocage.

In the course of the battle against the projected airport and the desire to maintain a form of existence worth living in the ZAD, the occupants have found in their relations with the environment, and in particular with certain emblematic non-humans, a very singular source of local identity. But this localist identity needs to be clearly distinguished from what might at first glance appear to be the Maurrassian *patrie*, that is, the identification with landscapes, places, people, ways of speaking, animals and plants that are

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“Giving legal personality to a *milieu* of life is, in my view, a departure from individualism as it has developed in European political philosophy since the 18th century onwards”

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are multiplying. There is something fundamental in this movement: the ability of a human being to exercise a right in a place is no longer linked to his or her person, according to the definition of human rights that has dominated for two centuries. It is linked to their dependence on a place, with the place being the legal source of the legitimacy of the occupation of a space. This reversal in the theory of appropriation is interesting insofar as it no longer casts humans as appropriating the Earth, but the Earth as appropriating humans. What the people of Notre-Dame-des-Landes are saying is that ‘We are not defending nature, we are nature defending itself’.

Hence why I am also keeping a close eye on the growing number of cases in which river basins are being given legal personality: the Whanganui River in New Zealand, the Atrato River in Colombia, recent attempts on the Loire in France, and so on. It is a foundational movement that raises the question of the political representation of non-humans. It contrasts with attempts to extend individualism beyond humans alone to a very small number of animal species that have certain similarities, either cognitive or in their sensitivity, with humans. By contrast, giving legal personality to a *milieu* of life is, in my view, a departure from individualism as it has developed in European political philosophy since the 18th century onwards.

typical of a certain place. This manner of osmosis between humans and nonhumans is the basis of a reactionary politics which is resistant to change and opposed to any penetration by others.

Exactly the opposite is happening in Notre-Dame-des-Landes. There is a politics of welcoming outsiders, in which identification with the place and the beings that populate it is based on habits of observing and living with nonhumans that are acquired and learned. For the vast majority of occupants, who have no naturalist training, this way of interacting with non-humans has only very gradually become a habit. This is an interesting example of how to transcend the perspective of possessive individualism, which leads to the individual or collective appropriation of common property, or property that was common at one time.

In my view, naturalism is not condemned to continue along the same path indefinitely. Around the world, initiatives to give rights or a legal personality to living environments



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“I am not arguing for a cosmopolitics of nations that would be managed by a cosmopolitical equivalent of the United Nations, but it is clear that the question of the articulation of scale between different polities is bound to be conflictual in part”

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**OLIVIER YASAR DE FRANCE – Do you think we could apply the expression ‘polity of nature’ to this specific context? Darwin uses it in one of the editions of *The Origin of Species*.**

› PHILIPPE DESCOLA - I am surprised that we are talking about *polit * when *politie* is a term that the English borrowed from us long ago. There is no reason to give them a monopoly by translating it back into French. Rousseau was perhaps the last to use it, but it was common in French. On the one hand, the word seems interesting to me because it can be bent in a cosmopolitical sense, i.e. to designate a group of humans and non-humans sharing a territory and striving to allow for a political expression.

On the other hand, when we speak of nature, we necessarily find ourselves at the heart of the naturalistic device, and of its elemental separation between nature and social institutions. We can speak of *politie* in a purely descriptive way: to take a step to one side and avoid the semantic weight of the Eurocentric analytical concepts we use in the social sciences in general, and by derivation in everyday language.

However, there can be no ‘polity of nature’, because there can be no form of political organisation that is dictated by biological specificities. It is up to us to compose worlds using notions which differ from those we have been using for the last two centuries, whilst ensuring that these forms of world composition are compatible with each other. The question is how to avoid one of these forms becoming dominant, and steamrolling over all others within its space. This is the great difficulty: contrary to what is happening now, how do we allow ontological pluralism?

The ontological pluralism that I advocate for is awaiting new institutional forms. How can cosmopolitical pluralism be founded without it leading to generalised

conflictuality between entities of different sizes and natures (egalitarian communes, multinationals, states, mafia organisations, etc.) because of disparities in military and demographic weight? The results could be dramatic. I am not arguing for a cosmopolitics of nations that would be managed by a cosmopolitical equivalent of the United Nations, but it is clear that the question of the articulation of scale between different polities is bound to be conflictual in part.

**OLIVIER YASAR DE FRANCE – Do you think that Europe could be a crucible for this manner of geopolitical experimentation? The notions of *terroir* and territory have always been present in European thought—although they have partaken at times of the Maurrassian protection from the outside world that you mentioned earlier. At the same time, Europe has sought to export the nation state beyond its own borders. Finally, the ‘Old Continent’ also invented a semi-supranational institutional form that took the shape of the European Union...**

› PHILIPPE DESCOLA - Europe is a fascinating experiment in cosmopolitics, in which non-humans are unfortunately not yet very present. In intellectual terms, I would say that the construction of a European political space, on the one hand, and experiments like Notre-Dame-des-Landes, on the other, are currently the two most interesting developments in the effort to conceive of new political forms.

**OLIVIER YASAR DE FRANCE – When it comes to fishing rights, for example, the European Parliament has significant legislative powers,<sup>6</sup> but they only become apparent when crises arise. They involve a superposition of scales in which Breton fishermen and MEPs are entwined.**

› PHILIPPE DESCOLA - Absolutely. This question of scale is the chief difficulty when we try to conceive of a new cosmopolitical order. How do Breton

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6. See Articles 38 to 43 of the *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union*.



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“We have rather forgotten that before the Peace of Westphalia, Europe was a system of archipelagos, with the Hanseatic League, Venice, Genoa and their trading posts, monastic networks and military orders, and so on. Before the solidification of the nation-state, Venice

fishermen, Notre-Dame-des-Landes and the European Parliament fit together? Despite the work of geographers, we are relatively powerless to think about these links between scales, because until now they have been thought of in purely institutional terms, i.e. embodied in institutions. But it turns out that these different scales give rise to things that are extremely difficult to fit into the usual institutions, such as ZADs or living *milieux* that may aspire to political autonomy.

The responsibility of the people who think about all this is very important in imagining an alternative world. The conceptual tools deployed until now have been relatively ineffective, however. It is extremely difficult to come up with good way of describing and analysing a relationship to the earth that comes with specific circumstances and a specific form of worlding. The articulation of all these forms of worlding, and of the relationship to the earth in all these forms of worlding, remains extremely difficult to conceive.

**OLIVIER YASAR DE FRANCE –  
Geopolitics was initially  
driven by the idea of *espace  
vital*. Would not the notion  
of a vital *milieu* allow us  
to think of a geopolitics  
that goes against the grain  
of traditional geopolitics?  
Rather than a vital space  
to be conquered, it would**

**involve a vital *milieu* in which we cohabit at  
different scales.**

➤ PHILIPPE DESCOLA - Absolutely. For a long time I had reservations about the notion of environment, because of its anthropocentrism. In contrast, the

was a kind of multinational corporation, like Microsoft today, and the merchant cities of the North an area analogous to the first common market”

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“environment” defines a space of interaction between beings of very diverse natures, humans and non-humans. It is in this environment, which is both biotic and abiotic, natural and artificial, woven of individual interactions and structured by institutions, that humans find the conditions for their existence. Here again there is a question of scale. How do we define these “environments”? In geography, we know how to do it in a very simple way: there are coastlines, watersheds, islands and urban areas. But the proliferation of traffic and the ease with which it is channelled through transport also constitute networks. The ZADs and similar communal experiments also function as networks. At the end of the day, we have rather forgotten that before the Peace of Westphalia, Europe was a system of archipelagos, with the Hanseatic

League, Venice, Genoa and their trading posts, monastic networks and military orders, and so on. Before the solidification of the nation-state, Venice was a kind of multinational corporation, like Microsoft today, and the merchant cities of the North an area analogous to the first common market.

## **OLIVIER YASAR DE FRANCE – In medieval times, the sovereignty of the Lord, the King and the Pope overlapped like a palimpsest. Are they the equivalent of the *terroir*, the head of state and Mark Zuckerberg today?**

› PHILIPPE DESCOLA - Except that even then the situation was complicated by competition between different lords. This is the story in south-west France, for example, which was an area of contention where the borders resulting from allegiance quarrels remain apparent to this day. For centuries, and aside from periods of acute conflict with the Kingdom of France, the Kingdom of England was represented in the conflict not so much by Englishmen as by local lords who sided for or against a particular dynastic line.

In effect, the difficulty with the generalisation of the state form is that it leads us to think in simplified terms about how to conceive of a political space. In contrast, our forebears in France and Northern Italy during the 14th century were used to living in coexistence with other systems. You only had to travel a



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“Gérard de Nerval, Chateaubriand, Flaubert were inaugurating the journey to the East at a time when it had become possible as a result of the expansion of the European colonial powers. The situation is completely different today. Travelling in space is once again a different kind of political experience”

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**OLIVIER YASAR DE FRANCE –  
The question posed by  
contemporary developments  
in the world is perhaps  
whether these different experiences of politics  
are mutually compatible or mutually exclusive.**

few kilometres on horseback to find yourself in a system quite different from the one you had just left, moving from a city-state to the territory of the Pope. There were common institutions, but even the relationship with the territory was different. We have lost this habit of diversity.

It is oddly coming back today, though. Like many people of my generation, I travelled a lot when I was 18 or 19. Backpacking took me eastwards, to the Near and Middle East, in extraordinary conditions. It was the kind of journey that Nicolas Bouvier describes in *The Way of the World*, but undertaken some fifteen years later. We could travel everywhere, which would be unimaginable today. I realised much later that this was a late effect of colonisation and European domination. It was unimaginable at the time, in these countries that had become independent, to have a counter-hegemonic project or to attack representatives of the former colonial powers who were perceived as providers of foreign currency, albeit a meagre one.

We did not realise how out of the ordinary the situation was. For my part, I had been schooled by Gérard de Nerval's *Voyage en Orient* and all the great orientalist accounts of the 19th century writers, from Chateaubriand to Flaubert. To tell the truth, I felt like I was following in their footsteps. But they were inaugurating the journey to the East at a time when it had become possible as a result of the expansion of the European colonial powers. The situation is completely different today. Travelling in space is once again a different kind of political experience.

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“Catalonia, the Basque Country and Scotland are the new frontlines of the great emancipation movement of the 19th century”

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**On a European scale, at the turn of the 21st century it seemed easier to be Catalan, Spanish and European, or to be from Sheffield, to be English and to be European. These concentric political circles seem to coexist with more difficulty in the Europe of today.**

► PHILIPPE DESCOLA - Yes, and I think Brexit is a symptom of that. History is stuttering. However, it seems to me that regional independence is a long-term echo of the

great emancipation movement of the 19th century, which came to a halt along the way. Catalonia, the Basque Country and Scotland are the new frontlines of this movement of emancipation, which is ultimately quite Herderian: it is always about a language, a culture, a religion, a literary tradition. There is a local history—a history of autonomy, including of political autonomy. From that point of view, things have not changed to any great extent. ■

Cambridge  
October 2021

(Translated and updated  
December 2024)

