

THINKING SUSTAINABILITY RESEARCH



Barbara Cassin © Getty Images

BARBARA CASSIN of the Académie française

Philologist and philosopher

France – Europe

Does Cosmos refer to a greek ecology?

Translation in English

Ecology has led to the invention of many new words in several languages, sometimes easy to understand and translate, sometimes not. Starting with “ecology”: Ökologie is a fairly young German word coined by biologist Ernst Haeckel in 1866, who specialised in sponges and jellyfish, because he felt that “biology” was too restrictive; he was a Darwinian and no doubt thought that biology alone risked producing a Darwinism that was too narrow.

Oikosis Greek for house. Where you feel at home. Ecology is therefore the science of the home. Today it is obviously a political science. After all, “home” has always been a political issue. Where does “home” begin and end? How, when and under what conditions are we “at home”? Can we avoid feeling like an “idiot” at home? *Idios*, in Greek, means “one’s own”, “private”, that which belongs to one person alone, and is opposed to *koinos*, “common”, that which is shared, that which can form a community, that which is therefore truly political, like a *polis*, a “city”.

So where is home for ecology? That’s the whole point.

Our modern attitude follows the evidence of a sentence by Descartes, in the *Discourse on Method* but has forgotten what it opposed: dying scholasticism. “Instead of this speculative philosophy that is taught in schools, we can have a practical one. Knowing the force and actions of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies that surround us, as distinctly as we know the various trades of our craftsmen, we could use them in the same way for all the uses to which they are suited...” most importantly forgetting the *as if*: “... and thus be as *if* masters and possessors of the natural world”. Since then, mathematical physics has been the language the world speaks when it serves our purpose.

But ecology seeks to reflect on the world in a different language, and to rethink ourselves in a different “nature”, using different “as ifs”, linked to different expectations.

Listening to the Greek language is perhaps not to fall back into the old Sorbonne habit of “speculative philosophy” as Descartes did in his day - which has no doubt become too difficult for us... The Greek word that avoids the obvious trap of mastery and possession is *kosmos*. Of obscure etymological roots according to Chantraine (“derived from *-mos* or *-smos*, but from what?”), it expresses the notion of order, of good order, in every “material or moral” sense. It belongs just as well to the vocabulary of “cosmology” as it does to “cosmetics”. The word is an invitation to travel; you can hear it in Baudelaire: “order and beauty” that rightly lead to “luxury, calm and pleasure”¹. For a pagan, it is the order of the world, when not God but gods are the ideal reflection of reality. Sophist Gorgias’s first sentence in his *Praise of Helen* describes the whole of this organisation:

“Order [*kosmos*] for the city represents excellence for the body of its men, beauty for the soul, wisdom for the things we make and value for speech and truth. Their opposite is disorder [*akosmia*]².” There are landscapes and paths (I’ve walked some on the Greek islands and in Corsica) where the world reorganises itself at every turn into a new perfection that the existence of the word *kosmos* invites us to perceive.

I can think of no better illustration of the *kosmos* than the “Bird-catcher’s Cup”, which blooms like an ornament in the cosmic calm, curving branches, birds in the cage of the world, with the patient skill of the birdwatcher at the centre, all the kingdoms conspiring, plant, animal, human, to give order to the world: a home with no owner won over by the same beauty that generates space and movement. Why don’t we say: cruel bird-catcher who captures innocent birds to subdue them and sell them? No doubt because immanence reigns, everything is on the same level and everything has its place.

My conclusion would be this: perhaps home has to be beautiful to be shared by all?



Bird-catcher's Cup, circa 550 BC, Musée du Louvre, © 1993 Grand Palais Rmn (musée du Louvre) / Hervé Lewandowski

1 : *An invitation to a journey*

2 : 82 B 11 DK (II, 288)