What is Ecosophy?

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The term “ecosophy” appears almost at the same time (without precise knowledge of the influence between the two schools of thought) in the work of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess and Félix Guattari:

“Ecosophie” est composé du préfixe “éco-” que l’on trouve dans “économie” et dans “écologie”, et du suffixe “-sophie” que l’on trouve dans “philosophie” [...] La sophia n’a aucune prétention scientifique spécifique, contrairement aux mots composés de logos (“biologie”, “anthropologie”, “géologie”, etc.), mais toute vue de l’esprit dite “sophique” doit être directement pertinente pour l’action [...] La sophia signifie le savoir intuitif (acquaintance) et

la compréhension, plutôt que la connaissance impersonnelle et abstraite. ["Ecosophy" is composed of the prefix "eco-" that is found in "economy" and "ecology", and of the suffix "-sophy" that is found in "philosophy" [...]. The sophia has no particular scientific claim, unlike logos compound words ("biology", "anthropology", "geology", etc.), but any "sophic" standpoint must be directly relevant to action [...]. Sophia indicates intuitive knowledge (acquaintance) and understanding, rather than impersonal and abstract knowledge.]

The prefix "eco" also refers to the Greek oïkos, which stands for house, household, habitat and, by extension, our environments. Based on the suffix sophia, Guattari then described ecosophy as a complex ethico-political articulation (one might add, as we will see, aesthetico-philosophical) "between the three ecological registers (the environment, social relations and human subjectivity)"³. In a recent book, entitled Pour une écologie de l’attention, the Swiss intellectual Yves Citton deserves credit for drawing attention to the common fundamental orientation of these two approaches to ecosophy: "the necessary concatenation of several primarily interdependent levels" and the "core understanding that individuals do not pre-exist the relations that shape them⁴", which is also a fundamental statement of the Deleuze-Guattari philosophy:

"Relationism has an ecosophical value because it dispels the belief that entities or people can be isolated from their environment. Talking about interaction between entities and their environment leads to misconceptions, because an entity is an interaction⁵.

In opposition to the standardized discourse about "sustainable development", which emphasizes (often in a sanctimonious and guilt inducing manner) the relations between "individuals" and their environment, ecosophy (especially in its Guattarian variant, which I specifically refer to here) draws our attention to the plurality of ecologies, environments, habitats, that do not "surround" us as a container would envelop its contents, but that define us and that we constantly define and reconfigure in a network of relations.

First of all, we need to emphasize the plurality of ecologies. On the one hand, there is a "managerial" ecology that aims to save our resources and

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reduce the environmental impact of our modes of production and consumption. Its purpose is to extend (in a supposedly more “durable” and “sustainable” way) the same lifestyles and modes of production adopted by the western world since the successive industrial revolutions, with the goal of spreading them to so-called “emerging” countries. In this “green capitalism” or “eco-business” we can see no questioning of the purpose and need for the market production of material or immaterial goods (such as knowledge and culture), no real environmental wisdom (sophia), but rather a last attempt (that we now know is inevitably doomed to failure) to save the economic system and the values associated with the ideals of “development” (regardless of whether they are sustainable or not), “growth”, “consumption”.

Another ecology, more radical, from which ecosophy stems, considers that “the ecological crisis refers to a more generalized social, political and existential crisis” and that it cannot be solved by ad-hoc measures to safeguard natural environments. According to Guattari, the political, social and economic issues today, elude more and more “party politics” and require the reforming of social practices that are better suited to local based and global planetary problems. This perspective is not only about transforming the context of traditional capitalist economy in a “sustainable” way, but also about developing alternative “life conditions” that allow us to escape the “not only unsustainable, but also unwanted nature of a development system that encourages the ‘fabrique de l’infélicité’ [manufacture of infelicity]”\(^7\). This project, on a global scale, implies promoting any new practices (slowing down, short cycles, pooling knowledge and creativity, downsizing, new production and consumption paradigms) that allow us to “enhance the links to each other and to our environment\(^8\)”.

According to Guattari, environmental awareness does not only concern natural environments, built areas or physical territories, but also the reinvention of individual or collective “existential territories”, in accordance with the intrinsic link between humanity and the biosphere, both depending on the increasingly more complex “technosphere” which surrounds them. This global shift in the purposes of human activities largely depends on the evolution of cities (where a large percentage of the global population is living), as Guattari tries to demonstrate in his essay entitled “Pratiques écosophiques et restauration de la cité subjective [Ecosophic Practices and Restoration of the Subjective City]”\(^9\).

Around the world, urban areas look more and more like an “archipelago of cities”, whose components are connected by all kinds of flows and networks, a scattering of deterritorialized world-cities. This global net-

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7 Ibid., p. 157. Yves Citton borrows the expression “fabrique de l’infélicité” from an article bearing this title by Franco Berardi (Bifo) published in issue 8 of the Multitudes periodical (March-April 2002).

8 Ibid., p. 156.

9 Ibid., p. 31-58.
working of urban areas has, on the one hand, homogenised the equip-
ment, communication and transportation means, lifestyles and mindsets
of globalised elites, on the other hand, it has exacerbated differences
between habitat areas. The old centre-suburb structure has been deeply
transformed and gave rise to a three-way segmentation between over-
equipped and over-connected urban areas, lacklustre middle-class resi-
dential areas, and increasingly more prevalent poverty belts all over the
world (Major European cities suburbs, slums or favelas in South America
and Asia, homeless people found in the streets and parks all over cities
in so-called “rich” countries). Deterritorialization of advanced capitalism
has produced, at the urban level, a generalized reterritorialization based on
polarization: rich/poor, integration/disintegration.

According to Guattari, the answer to these problems goes far beyond the
fields traditionally assigned to architecture, urban planning, economy, to
engage a large number of socio-political, ecological, ethical and aestheti-
cal practices and reflexions. Therefore we cannot separate the problems
related to physical infrastructure, communication, transportation and ser-
vices provided by “existential” functions in urban environments. The urban
phenomenon is at the heart of economic, social, ecological and cultural
issues, and, as such, cannot be reduced to the matter (though still essen-
tial) of new construction techniques and the introduction of new materials
that help combat all forms of pollution and nuisances.

Guattari then suggests that future urban renovation programs systemat-
ically involve, for the purposes of research contracts and social experi-
mentation, not only architects, urban planners, politicians, but also social
sciences researchers and more importantly future inhabitants and site
users. The goal is then to anticipate, by a collective approach, the evolution
of the built framework, but also new lifestyles (neighbourhood practices,
education, culture, sports activities, transportation, children or elderly care,
etc.):

“Ce n’est que dans un climat de liberté et d’émulation que pour-
ront être expérimentées les voies nouvelles de l’habitat, et pas
d’à coups de lois et de circulaires technocratiques10[Only in a cli-
mate of freedom and emulation can new habitat approaches be
experimented, and not through laws and technocratic bulletins].”

Architects and urban planners are thus asked to become “polysemic
and polyphonic artists”, not working in universal contexts, intended to be recon-
figured in response to so-called basic needs that are defined once and
for all (as in urbanism and modernist architecture), even if these needs
are now expanded to integrate the requirements for environment preser-
vation, “comfort”, “well-being” or inhabitants’ health. Projects that wish to
initiate an ecosophical reconversion will have to push for the development

10. Ibid., p. 52.
of new aesthetical, ecological and social living paradigms, based on singularities defined by collective procedures of analysis and dialogue.

Still within the framework of French political and philosophical ecology, André Gorz repeatedly uses the adjective "ecosophical", in his book *Misère du présent. Richesse du possible*\(^1\) referring explicitly to Félix Guattari in a chapter devoted to the necessary mutations of the city of the future and by mentioning the Guattarian proposal of "Cité subjective [subjective City]". According to Gorz\(^2\) a new urban policy is also necessary for an alternative society project to take hold: through the organization of social space and activities, landscaping, equipment, sites that can be made available to the inhabitants, "la politique de la ville appelle les auto-activités à se développer, leur en donne les moyens, les reflète à elles-mêmes comme étant non pas des improvisations éphémères ni des palliatifs subalternes adoptés faute de mieux, mais bien ce qu’une société qui demande à naître attend de tous et de chacun : projet commun proposé à tous, porteur de liens sociaux nouveaux\(^3\). [city policy calls for auto-activities to grow, gives them the means to do so, reflects them back not as ephemeral improvisations or sub-par palliatives used for lack of a better solution, but as what an emerging society expects from each and everyone: a common project for all, ready to create new social connections.]

Strangely enough, most current urban conversion projects seem to ignore or underestimate the importance of the collective demand for a new “urban nature” which is expressed in practices as diverse as the proliferation of public parks and shared vegetable gardens, guerilla gardening, permaculture or urban culture, the function of landscape, artistry, research on urban biodiversity\(^4\). The introduction of living organisms is generally limited to plants, more for their aesthetical function than for their ethical, social and political importance, whereas the presence of animals in the city\(^5\) is rarely taken into account.

In many works, the geographer Nathalie Blanc emphasized on several occasions the need to rethink urban and rural, city and nature categories in regards to their role in the built and non-built environment, in our social and political performances and to renounce the ingrained environmental notion of "rural", "virgin" or "untamed" nature, when our lives are ever more rooted in cities:

*C’est là qu’il y a besoin d’un réaménagement des catégories. [this is where categories need to be redesigned]. Ce qui ne veut

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2. Ibid., p. 161-165.
3. Ibid. , p. 162.
pas dire faire l’impasse sur la “nature rurale” ou la “nature sauvage”, bien sûr, mais repenser leur place en l’articulant avec celle de “nature urbaine”[…] Et c’est là un vrai enjeu intellectuel. Il faut l’affirmer avec force. [Which, of course, does not mean overlooking “rural nature” or “untamed nature”, but to rethink their place together with “urban nature”[…] That is the true intellectual issue. It needs to be strongly stated].

Calls for “urban nature” and real “landscaping projects”, a search for new common spaces, participatory approaches, based on dialogue and appropriation (not reducible to the concept of “property”) now emerge as some of many leads to an “ecosophical” city and the assertion of the need for a sharing of the sensitive, where environmental criteria are taken into account as part of a political and wider aesthetical project.

Topics

The section Écosophies of the *European Journal of Creative Practices in cities and Landscapes*, looks for contributions that challenge the speculative and practical dichotomy, approaching the issue of the city, its environment and the mental life of its inhabitant as a "nomad science". A nomad science does not proceed through universal assumptions, nor through practical bureaucratic or policy-oriented prescriptions. Rather, Ecosophy follows an ethico-aesthetic paradigm, based on a sensitive dimension, operating by affects and singularities.

The section calls for contributions in the following topics

**Non-managerial practices and alternative life conditions.** Beyond the paradigm of the "sustainable development" that wishes to salvage the existing model of production and consumption, what are the practices that truly challenge it? Beyond the universally valid concepts of "innovative", "sustainable" or "participative", can we think of practices that produce alternative forms of organisation and territorialisation?

**Culture and the aesthetic paradigm.** Ecosophy calls for what Félix Guattari has defined an 'aesthetic paradigm'. In this case, 'aesthetic' should not be understood as the specific field of art, reserved to a select few, but more generally in the etymological sense of aesthesis, sensitivity, sensitive dimension, operating by affects and singularities, a basis for any "minor" science. In a broader sense, is it possible to understand culture as a set of aesthetic practices through which we express individual and collective subjectivities?

**Technologies for the subjective city.** Félix Guattari opposed the utopia of the "Celestial Jerusalem" with the possibilities of the "subjective City", in which the sad deterritorialisation of life under capitalism, and its false antidotes in nationalism and religious fundamentalism are challenged by an existential nomadism in which we reappropriate different lines of "machinic, communicational and aesthetic deterritorialisations." What are the tools to activate these processes of subjectivation? How does the role of professional figures—architects, urbanists, psychologists, sociologists, etc.—change vis-à-vis the challenges posed by the subjective city?

**Écosophies, power and knowledge.** Guattari’s *Three ecologies* was published posthumous in 1995. Today, some of the radical ideas contained in it such as participation, urban nature, common space, gender inclusiveness, etc., have become—at least formally—integral part of many cities’ policy guidelines, and incorporated in research project and university courses. What is the relation between Ecosophy and the other "royal sciences"? What are the power relations involved in the capture of Ecosophy by the apparatuses of city government?
References


