

## Remembering together, Rebuilding together: reflections on 'The Night of Ideas' 2022

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*Vega: I'm a first-year undergraduate studying Arts and Sciences with a major in Societies and a minor in Health and Environment. Having grown up in a French-English bilingual environment in Geneva, Switzerland, going to the French Institute's Night of Ideas, felt, in some ways, like coming home. In our piece, we decided to reflect on the way that lessons from the past can aid us in the attempt (that was the subject of wide-ranging discussions throughout the evening) to 'build back together'.*

*Sara: I'm also a first-year undergraduate student at UCL studying Arts and Sciences and majoring in Societies. As a Lebanese, the idea of the importance of memory felt very close to my country and its current situation. A crisis of remembrance and commemoration has definitely played a big role in the crisis which Lebanon finds itself drowned in. The Night of Ideas was very enlightening as it made us think of our roots and pushed us to focus the piece on the importance of remembering our past and finding a balance to rebuild a better future together.*

For us, the French Institute's Night of Ideas was not only one of 'rebuilding together', as the title of the event put it, but one of 'remembering together'. The poet, Anthony Anaxagorou, opened each talk that night with a poem linked to the topic of each discussion. His words immediately grounded the discussions that followed and that looked to the future in the feelings and sentiments at the heart of the various topics at hand. These feelings, transmitted in his poetry through metaphors and tone, evoked a sense of the importance of memories. Rebuilding and innovating, it seemed, starts by re-grounding and re-rooting.



*Poet Anthony Anaxagorou (above) performs one of his poems before the last debate of the night.*

So, for example, when discussing how to creatively take apart and reconstruct the economy, Philippe Aghion touched on exactly this concept of remembrance and acknowledgement of the past: in order to rebuild effectively currently dysfunctional economies, it is crucial to comprehend the way in which they were originally built and why they look the way they do now. Despite seeming obvious, such an idea may get easily forgotten in our striving for innovation. Rather than causing stagnation, thinking about the past can accelerate the action in the present that is urgently needed to address climate change. Learning from what past actions and practices went wrong, as well as which went right, can be invaluable. We cannot undo the unfolding of climate change – as Aghion put it, we cannot plan to 'degrow' the economy – and therefore only have the option of moving forward and growing innovatively. In the same debate, UCL economist, Marianna Mazzucato, pointed out how societies have rapidly mobilised at previous moments in history. Governments have launched huge military operations within days and civil movements have rallied nation-wide support to shape police. In times of national crisis, countries have been able to put in the urgent effort needed to face an emergency.

Today, we might be tempted to view what is commonly termed the 'emergency' or 'crisis' of climate change as a new and exceptional moment in history. But economists Mazzucato and Aghion, as well as panellists speaking later, drew parallels between this 'crisis' and the 2008 financial crisis. Not so much a moment of complete surprise, the financial crisis was the result of sustained financial instability. UCL academic and chair of this session 'A Guide To

Living In An Apocalypse', Tim Beasley-Murray, drew a literary link, noting the way that the moment, when we suddenly recognise how disastrous the circumstances are in which we have long been living, is similar to the moment of *anagnorisis* in Greek tragedy. Likewise drawing on Ancient Greek thought, the Parisian philosopher, Olivier Remaud, reminded us of the way that, for the Greeks thousands of years ago, this moment of crisis and insight was essentially seen as moment of decision. Opposed to the paralysis that may often be understood as synonymous with crisis, this rediscovery of the essential meaning of crisis might offer hope.

In order to take an informed decision, we need to engage in a 'processus d'apprentissage', to use Remaud's original French words. The essence of this 'process of learning' lies in lessons from the past: remembering and making sense of the historical plot of humanity. And similar to a tragic hero in literature, humans being are - as UCL professor, Jack Stilgoe, reminded us in the same discussion - simultaneously agents of the 'crisis' of climate change and also agents of the solution to it. Nonetheless, it is easy to forget the fact that some inhabitants of the planet have both contributed less to the tragedy climate change than others, but also bear its burden more heavily. So, UCL anthropologist and Africanist H el ene Neveu Kringelbach urged us to ask: whose perspective are we discussing here? Perhaps listening to those in the Global South, who have lived more sustainably and in greater harmony and symbiosis with their environment, can provide us with the lessons we need to reshape and rebuild. To us, this is what rebuilding together really looks like. And this importance of togetherness extends to the connections between generations: connections, through rituals and traditions, for example, that are also crucial to humanity's apprenticeship and learning. Intergenerational transmission allows us to remember for the sake of the future.

Discussion of this sort of about the role of memory in building a better future characterized other sessions during the evening, for example novelist, Elif Shafak's reflections on 'what is essential'. Lessons learned from our individual or collective past are crucial to build a better future and avoid past mistakes. But, as Shafak reminded us, memory is also important in recognizing past tragedies and victims' sufferings and ensuring accountability of people who are responsible. We can give the example of unresolved historical memory about France's historical role in Algeria that leads to continuous political tension between the two societies in contrast to the historical accountability and memory in the case of the Nuremberg trials that brought Nazi war criminals to justice.

Memory plays an important role in bringing people together, by creating common ground to build on. But that does not necessarily mean it is always crucial. In some cases, forgetting can be as useful as memory, where historical memory only preserves and fixes the past, rather than helps build a future. Collective memory would in that case lead to an increase in resentment instead of reconciliation and might not be beneficial.

In sum, this is what the discussions of the Night of Ideas led us to conclude: it is important to find a balance between remembering and forgetting. On one hand, it is crucial to have some sort of common sense of our past to learn from, to have something that brings people together. However, we still need to distance ourselves from the past to be able to embrace a present that is evolving and to allow room for progress – to build back together.