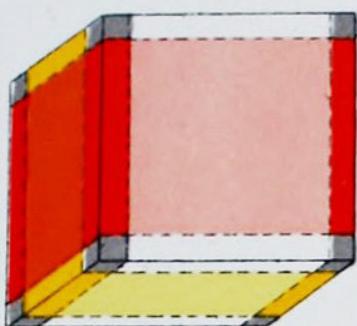
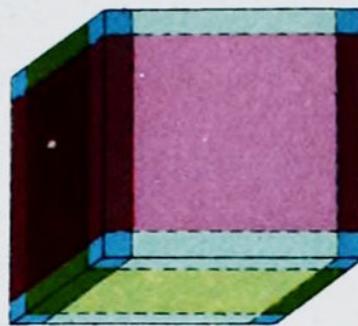


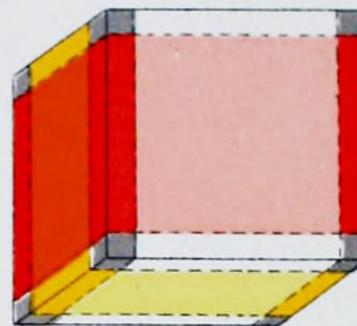
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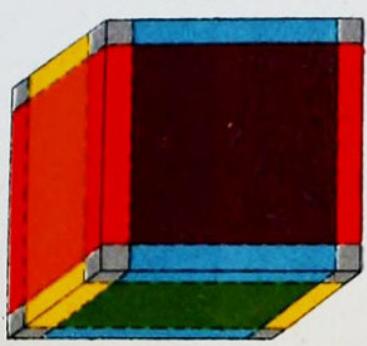
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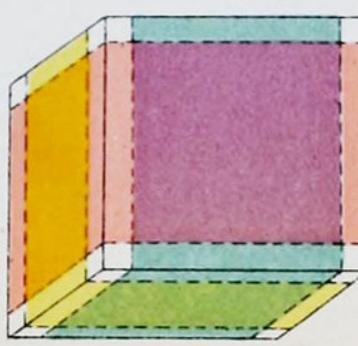
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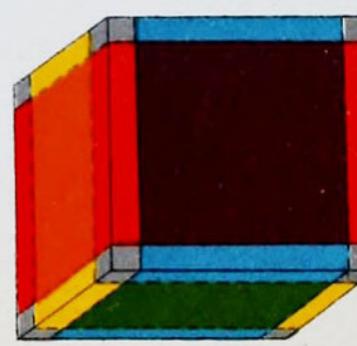
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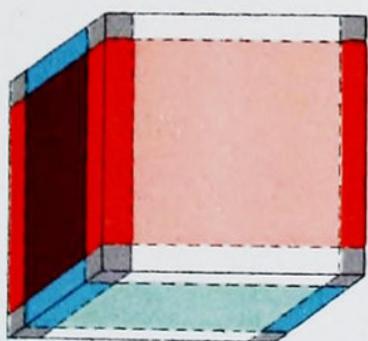
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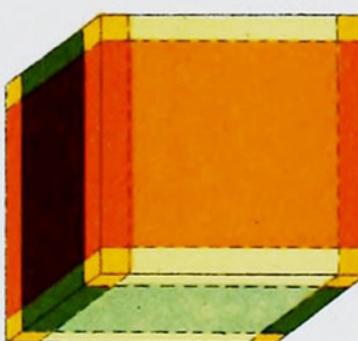
## The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Contributions from the Humanities\*

A Research Report

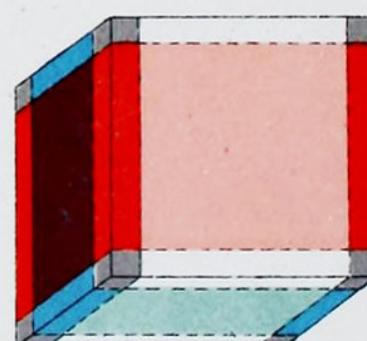
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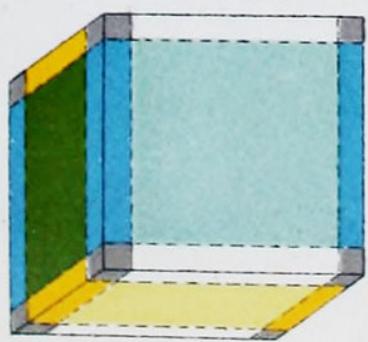
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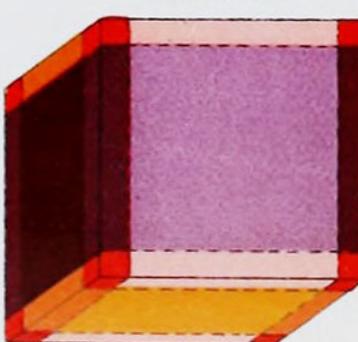
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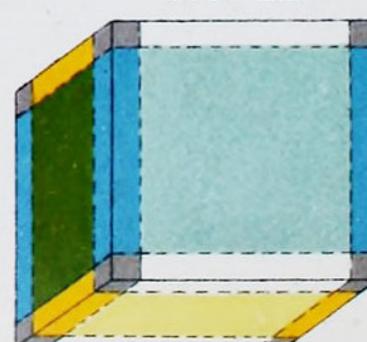
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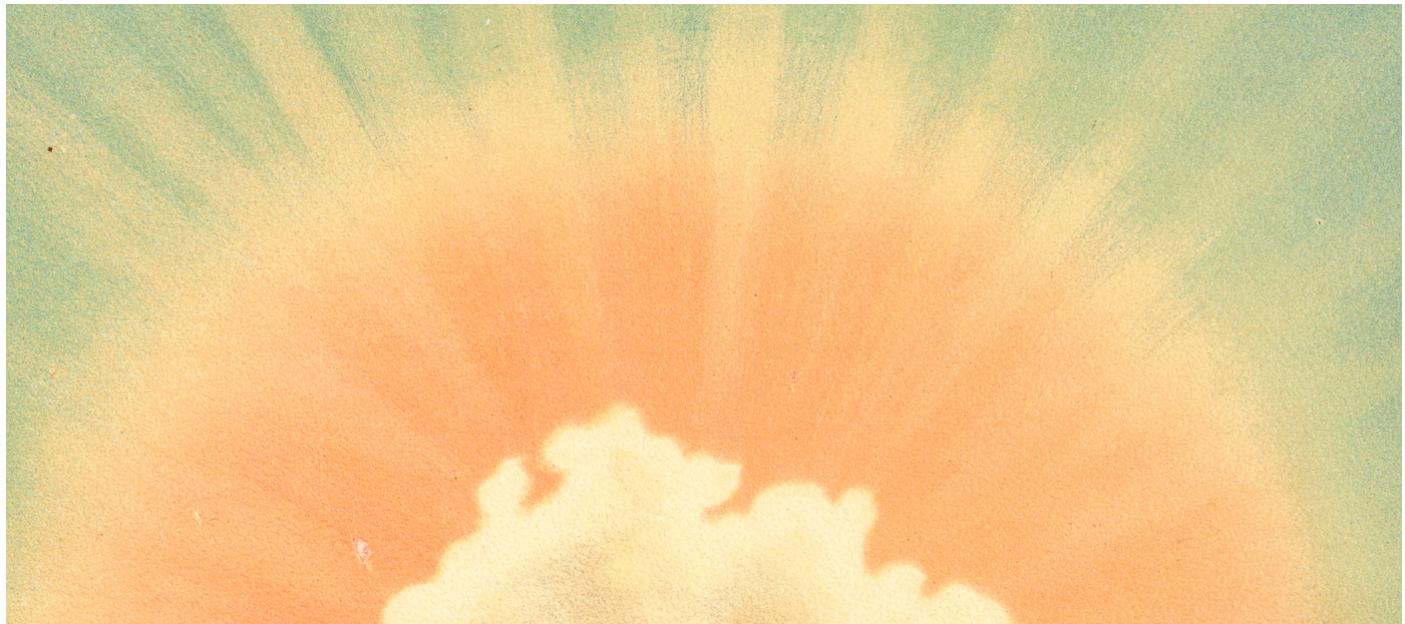


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## Introduction

The 17 SDGs have gained remarkable traction since their launch in 2015. Far more than their predecessors (the Millennium Development Goals), the SDGs have had a major impact both on policy-makers and the general public. The SDGs are discussed by grassroots organisations and schoolchildren, as well as by governments, politicians and lobbying groups. Businesses, from large corporations to start-ups, have rapidly established teams dedicated to the SDGs, aware that their own sustainability is threatened above all by the environmental and social risks the SDGs address. This crop of ideas speaks to a set of genuinely urgent problems and has transformed public debate over the last seven years.

Yet few of these discussions are informed by the type of thinking that takes place in the humanities.<sup>1</sup> UN Reports on the SDGs advocate

technocratic, resource-management solutions, referring to human behaviour only insofar as it impedes policy implementation.<sup>2</sup> Little attention is paid to the human factors —social, political and ethical— essential to any prospect of lasting success in transforming what people can or will do. The UNESCO Hangzhou Declaration of 2013 championed culture as ‘an enabler and driver of sustainable development’,<sup>3</sup> but policy-makers rarely draw upon the vast reservoir of cultural expertise that is the Humanities. Even in universities, the role of the Humanities in cross-disciplinary research on the SDGs has been minor compared to that of other disciplinary groups, notably the Social Sciences and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics).<sup>4</sup> While there is widespread recognition that the Humanities could make a major contribution, their integration into the work is still patchy, partial and far below its true potential.

\* Report prepared by Maurice Biriotti, Mathilde Bru, Edward Christie, Helena Fallstrom, Nicola Miller, Stephanie Ng and Joel Stokes

1 By “the Humanities” we mean all fields of knowledge that study human culture, past, present and future, using primarily qualitative methods. The term refers to a variety of ways of organising knowledge, ranging from single disciplines such as History, Philosophy or English; to the interdisciplinary domains of Classics, Comparative Literature, Modern Languages and Critical Area Studies, plus Cultural/Feminist/Postcolonial/Queer Studies; and the recent configurations of Health/Medical/Environmental/Digital Humanities, which are oriented to cross-disciplinary work with Science, Technology, Engineering and Medicine (STEM). The Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) are often located together, both institutionally and intellectually, and separately from STEM subjects. AHSS is a spectrum and we have no wish to position the Humanities in holy isolation. However, in all interdisciplinary work it is important to be clear about what each subject area brings to the table. Our starting point was that in discussion most colleagues, from a wide range of disciplines, agreed that both the Social Sciences (with their quantitative methods and contemporary focus) and the Arts (with their commitment to creative practice) have been more visible than the Humanities in work directly related to the SDGs.

2 For example, a 2019 report on goal 15, Life on Land, identified the use of harmful chemicals, air pollution and human reluctance to change as the main obstacles to improvement.

3 <https://en.unesco.org/news/hangzhou-declaration-heralding-next-era-human-development-1>

4 UCL’s Beyond Boundaries conference, held online in October 2020, was a pioneering event in many ways, but, despite some attempts during planning to include researchers from Humanities, they did not feature in the final programme: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/sustainable-development-goals/beyond-boundaries-realising-un-sustainable-development-goals>

## The Research Project

In order to understand why this is the case and to propose ways of addressing it, UCL Institute of Advanced Studies, in collaboration with UCL Grand Challenges and the consultancy firm SHM, ran a short research project from May to July 2021. In a series of workshops with PhD students and discussions with academic staff at UCL, we explored three related questions:

- 1) What do we miss by not including the Humanities in the debate?
- 2) What could the Humanities already be adding to the work on SDGs?
- 3) What more should be done to include the Humanities?

## Part I. Research Findings: What the Humanities Bring to the SDGs

### 1.1 Appreciating the variety and complexity of human behaviour

The prevalent assumption in SDG research is that human behaviour is a problem to be corrected. This position relies on reductionist views of motivation and focuses on individuals to the neglect of the wider economic, political and social structures which they inhabit.

Humanities offer a set of concepts, theories and methods for understanding human behaviour, individual and collective, in its full context of:

Structural conditions of inequality: capitalism, geo-politics, patriarchy, neo-colonialism, racism and hetero-normativity;

Cultural diversity: languages, creative practices and ways of life;

Ethics and world-making: values, systems of thought, religions, beliefs, political commitments and solidarities;

Subjectivities: emotions, embodiment, imaginings and empathy.



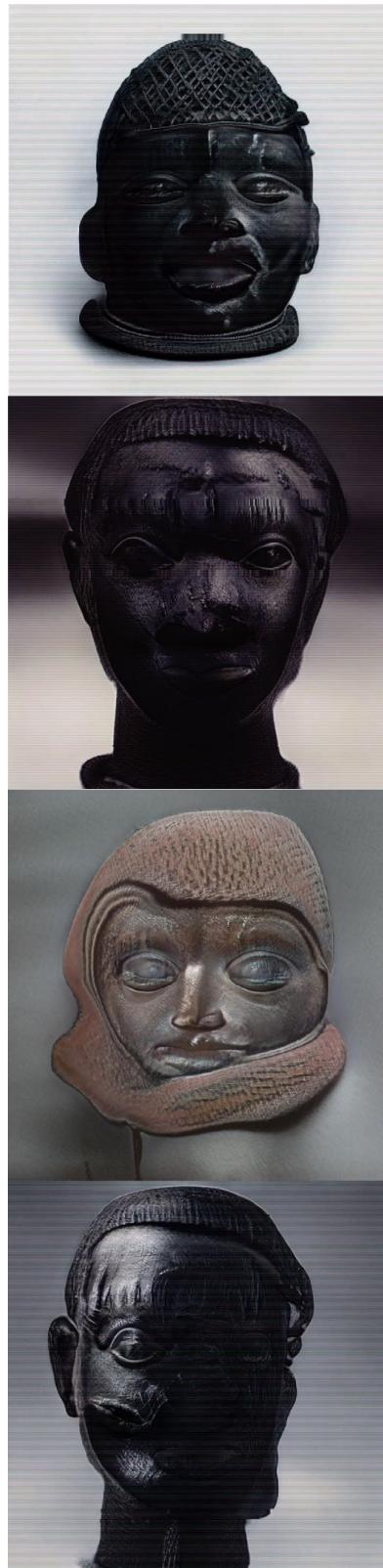
Branch Magazine. Cover Illustration: Hélène Baum  
(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

## 1.2 Taking the Long View

The SDGs are necessarily future-oriented, but that does not mean that they are unaffected by the past or that they are unique in human history. Indeed, the SDGs are novel only in name and scale: ideas about sustainability, collective responsibility and reciprocity with the natural world have existed for millennia. This long history of thinking about relationships between the land and the people who inhabit it goes beyond political and economic concerns and draws attention to the importance of understanding local religious and philosophical perspectives as crucial indicators of changing behaviours. Humanities provide us with an accumulation of knowledge from all periods of history and all parts of the world from which we can draw ideas, comparisons and examples to enrich current thinking.

Humanities scholars are constantly faced with negotiations of the past and contested histories, memories, traditions and heritage. Heritage is an area of SDG work to which Humanities scholars have already made crucial contributions (see Part II below for examples). Yet there is a far greater range of situations in which different narratives have to be carefully balanced. Here Humanities skills of interpretation could bring invaluable insight. One example is the gap between the ostensible and the actual, the understanding of which is central to resolving conflicts and disputes, which are often not presented in terms of their real cause.

The historical contextualisation of concepts such as wellbeing, society, and the natural environment brings to light their ideological and cultural contingency, thus helping to ensure that policy-making is more ethically aware.



[Minne Atairu, IGÚN, Reimagining Benin Bronzes with Generative Adversarial Networks, Columbia University](#)

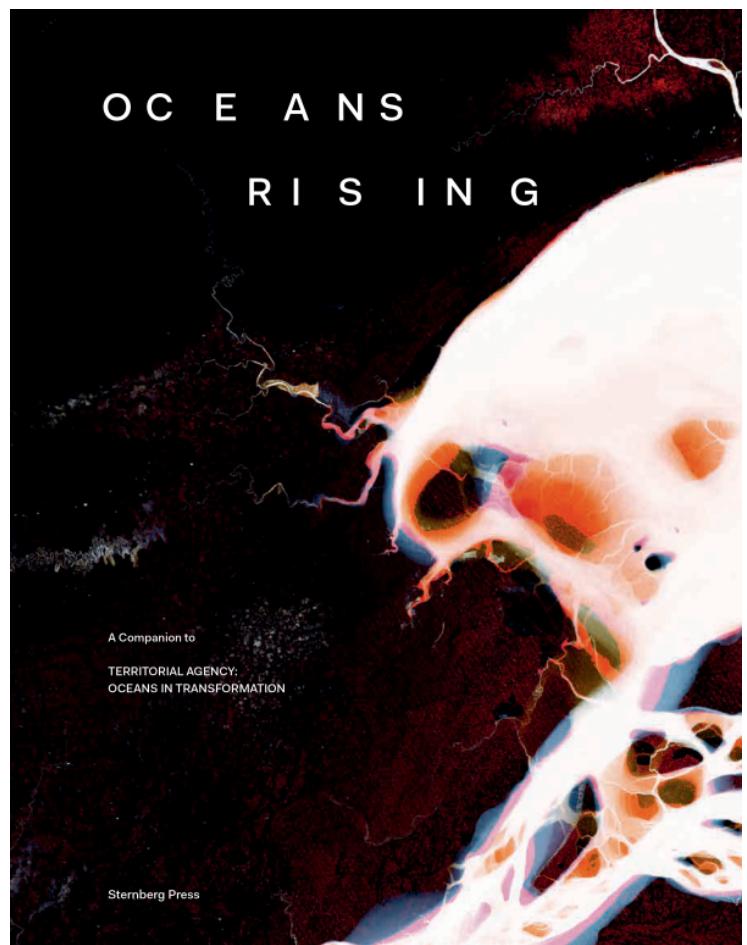
### 1.3 The Politics of Knowledge

The SDG initiative is founded on the conviction that it is both possible and desirable to identify common goals for societies all over the world. Whatever your view on that position, it is unquestionably the case that the 17 goals do command an impressively widespread international acceptance. Even so, the endeavour would benefit from critical scrutiny of claims to universal knowledge and of the underlying assumption that knowledge can be transferred intact from one context to another. Knowledge cannot be decontextualized, as the Humanities have conclusively shown over the last half century.

It is particularly relevant to the evaluation and accountability of the goals to understand that when filtered through different cultures and languages the targets and indicators come to mean very different things in different places.

The Humanities have extensive expertise in translation of ideas, terms and concepts and in analysing the implications of crossing languages, cultures, disciplines and, increasingly, human and machine learning. In sum, the Humanities can help to introduce greater translatability to the SDG work, thereby enabling the best, tailored solutions for each country to most effectively fulfil the SDGs. A solution that works for one country will not necessarily be productive, or even feasible, in another.

As humankind confronts the climate emergency, it is from the Humanities that the most powerful critiques of anthropocentric perspectives have emerged, arguing against claims that humans are unique and entitled to exploit the natural world, deconstructing the demarcation between the human and the non-human, and working towards powerful new ways to think about how we inhabit the planet.



["Oceans Rising. A Companion to Territorial Agency: Oceans in Transformation"](#) ISBN 978-3-9502064-9-4, Sternberg Press, Berlin, May 2021

## 1.4. Evaluating the Endeavour as a Whole



[Irene Kopelman, On Yellows, 2019](#)

The Humanities are widely recognised for their commitment to critique (analytical evaluation). While they certainly cannot lay sole claim to the practice of critical thinking, an evaluative approach to their subject matter is intrinsic to the Humanities. It enables them to do what they do best, that is, to contextualise knowledge, to question engrained assumptions and to allow for a multiplicity of perspectives. Humanities academics are justifiably wary of reductive thinking; of complicity in upholding or condoning a status quo that is historically based on discrimination and violence; of responding to externally imposed agendas; of assumptions about what constitutes 'progress' or a universal 'good'; and of a focus on outcome rather than process. Thus, when Humanities academics read the SDGs, their immediate response is often to analyse them critically as the product of certain power relations and certain values, especially the history of the United Nations as the standard-bearer of liberal internationalism. People seeking to address the goals directly, especially given the urgency of the world's current predicament, can find this Humanities response frustrating. In our

view, the Humanities have plenty to contribute to finding solutions to specific SDGs (as illustrated in this report), but there is also value in taking a critical, reflexive approach to the project as a whole, not least because it can uncover unspoken assumptions that may impede successful policy-making.

For example, the embedded assumptions about universal values in the SDGs can make it harder to fully include the knowledges of Indigenous peoples in policy-making, even when they are given a seat at the table, because due recognition is not given to the diversity of epistemological approaches taken by the various stakeholders. Further gains from thinking about the endeavour as a whole include:

Countering the silo-ing of the goals;

Thinking about connectedness and relatedness;

Identifying tensions and conflicts between them and how advances in one might result in problems for another.

## Part II. Humanities research

### Reflections from current PhD students on how their work relates to the SDGs

*Mathilde Bru (Classics), Edward Christie (History of Art), Stephanie Ng (Comparative Literature) and Joel Stokes (Archaeology)*

#### SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing

- I co-host a research network titled 'Reforming Anatomy' which examines the human body through the lenses of contemporary art and medicine. Our current series of multimedia events brings into dialogue diverse conceptions of health to reach a more discursive understanding of wellbeing and inspire improvements in treatment and care. Among contributions, Dr. Deborah Padfield demonstrated the value of visual images and gesture as well as words to effectively communicate chronic pain. The UN's overview of SDG 3 highlights the projected deterioration of global health over the coming decades due to factors including climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. Collaborations between artists, humanities scholars, and medical professionals could inspire the innovation of vital solutions to these issues driven by interdisciplinary, critical, and creative thinking.
- The field of Classics is centred around the study of cultures, and classicists have both an awareness of where Western social, political and philosophical ideas come from, and the ability to engage cross-comparatively with other philosophies and cultures. Cross-cultural and cross-philosophical methodologies can inform conversations around SDG 3, notably concerning the fact that Western medicine and ideals of health and wellbeing should not unilaterally inform health policies. These should also be informed by other philosophies of health and wellbeing, such as traditional medicine. The study of classical philosophy encourages us to think about why we hold certain ideas, and where these come from, which prompts the realisation that SDG 3 needs to consider philosophies of health and wellbeing from a wider range of cultures.
- SDG3 – Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being – promotes a scientific, results-driven approach. Whilst important, this approach is not conducive to broader understandings of

'healthy lives' and 'well-being', including inter-human relationships and humans' relationships with phenomena e.g., heritage. Archaeology and heritage knowledge elucidate the fundamentals of such relationships. My research in Israel-Palestine indicates archaeological heritage is a significant, yet understated, factor in personal/community well-being as it informs stakeholder legitimacy and value within time and space. Nefarious applications of heritage (dispossession, dehumanisation) can therefore create ideological and physical frontiers between stakeholder groups. Without equitable heritage expression/appreciation within SDG3, true sustainability is unlikely. Critical Heritage Theory challenges this tangible-centric perception of heritage and centres the nexus between heritage and well-being.

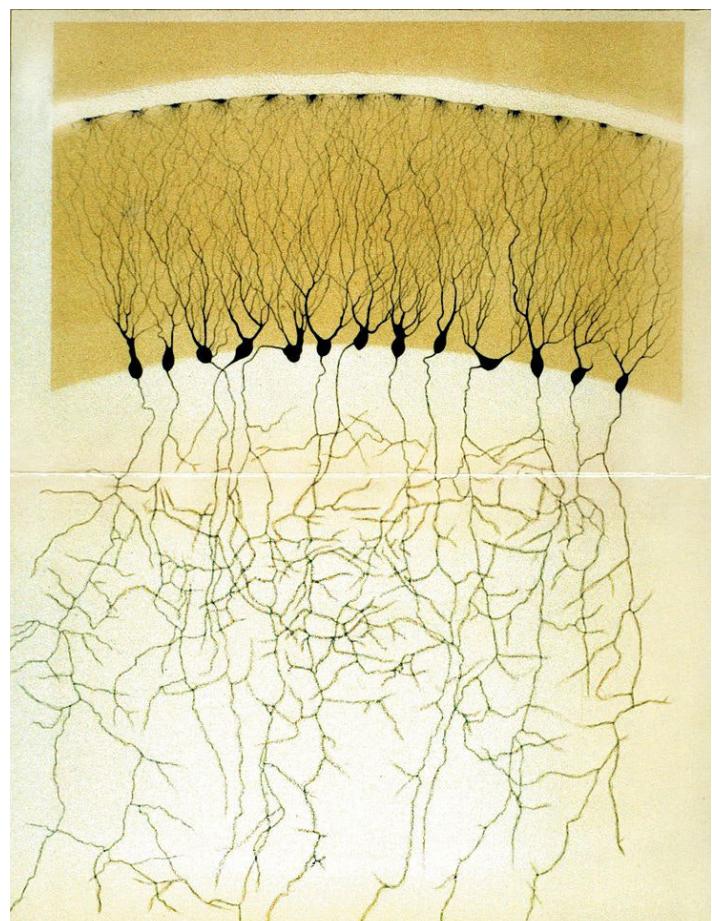


Plate XXIII from Camillo Golgi's *Sulla fina anatomia degli organi centrali del sistema nervoso* (1885)

## **SDG 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure**

My PhD explores how artists in the post-war period challenged the reliance of modern development on social inequality and environmental degradation which continues to underpin the escalation of the climate crisis. I explicate alternative ways of being which artists have promoted and assess their potential to affect contemporary politics and foster a more democratic and ecologically stable future. The focus on economic growth and industrialisation in the UN's outline of targets and indicators relating to SDG 9 reveal that the intergovernmental organisation by and large upholds a normative conception of progress. The integrity of capitalist responses to the climate crisis have been widely challenged for relying on a fundamental paradox: that the root cause of the ecological emergency might also provide its solution. Artists (and art historians) can help us to find new perspectives by producing and disseminating creative material to inspire the transcendence of dominant ideology and foster more fundamental, radical, and effective solutions to the climate crisis.

- As a classicist, I use a range of different sources (literary, documentary, visual etc.) and methodologies (historical, linguistic, archaeological etc.) to understand ancient cultures in their complexity. Holistic methodologies, which balance different factors and consider all sources and sides of a culture, are needed to implement the SDGs in different countries. This is particularly relevant when it comes to advances in industry, innovation and infrastructure, as the SDGs often neglect to consider the globalized nature of the contemporary world. For example, the economic development of one area might negatively impact another. Classicists are constantly faced with negotiations of contested histories, memories, traditions and heritage, and so are equipped with the analytical skills to find solutions for debates where different narratives need to be carefully balanced.

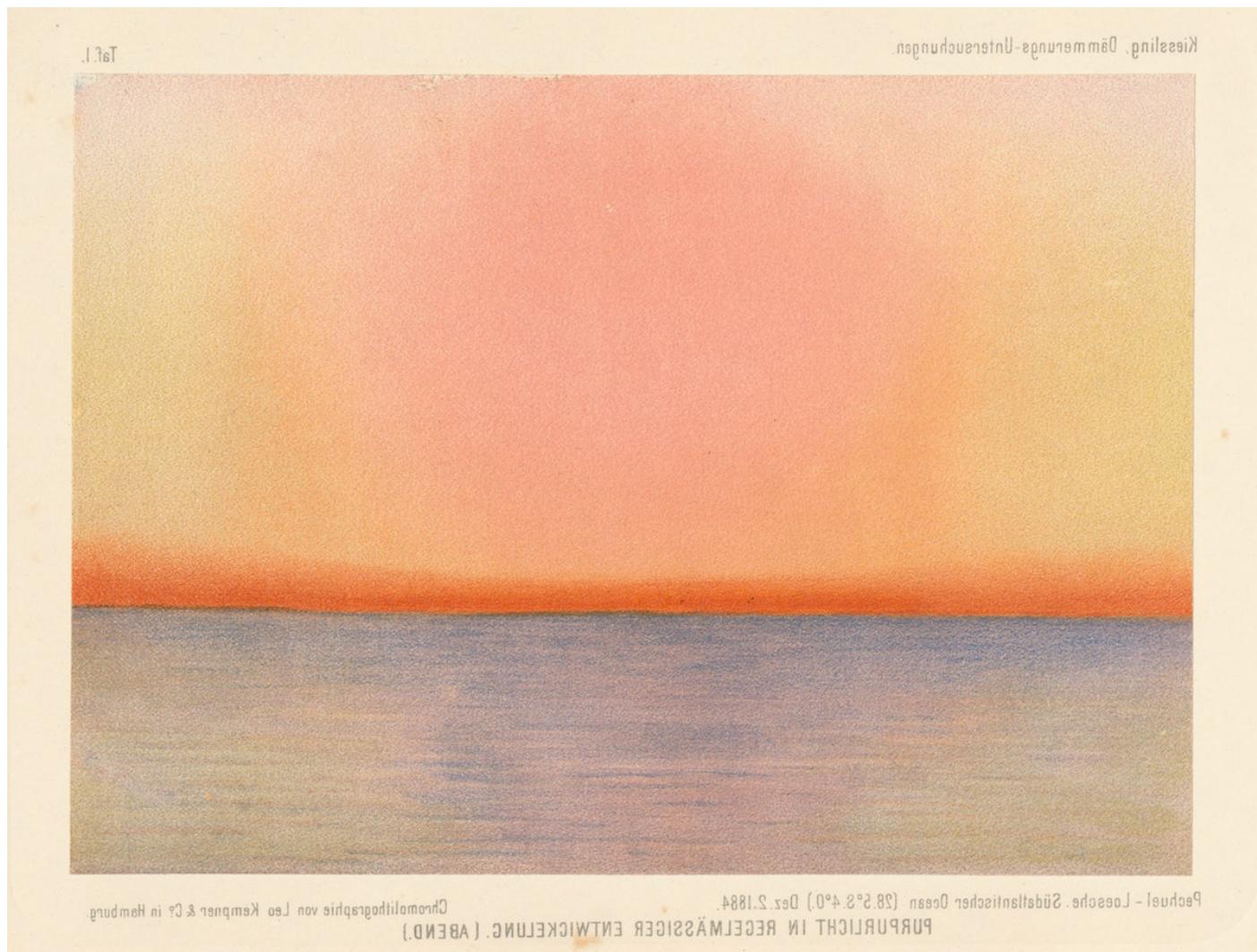
- The field of Comparative Literature urges us to expand what can be considered industry, innovation, and infrastructure. Drawing on postcolonial criticism, critical race theory, and sociological analysis, the Comparative perspective emphasizes the heterogeneity of interests, resources, and values local to communities located outside the Global North -- factors that significantly influence possible "innovation." Adopting a Marxist lens, furthermore, Comparative Literature

problematizes the link between economic freedom and personal fulfilment, arguing that the imperative of capitalist accumulation is, simultaneously, the source of much social malaise and its temporary alleviation. It interrogates the definition of "industry," asking (a) whether industrialization is inherently beneficial to human and ecological wellbeing and (b) what qualifies as industry? Incorporating feminist critique, Comparative Literature spotlights the essential yet disavowed care work of women, encouraging the redefinition "industry" to include intangible infrastructure. In addition, it employs contributions from queer studies, exploring alternative forms of care that might expand what we deem necessary for social flourishing.

## **SDG 15: Life on Land**

- I recently hosted a seminar series at UCL Anthropocene titled 'Cultural Ecology: Galvanising Climate Action Across the Arts' which united activist-academics working across the arts to interrogate the following question: 'How might cultural researchers galvanise more urgent and effective responses to the climate crisis to remedy the severe inadequacy of the actions currently being set into motion by governments and corporations?'. This central purpose challenged the shortcomings of SDG discourse (which is at the core of the mainstream sustainability movement) by demanding more urgent and substantial change. Arts and humanities academics are ideally positioned to stimulate more effective responses to the climate crisis by promoting holistic solutions which involve micropolitical (or cultural) as well as macropolitical (or governmental and legal) transformation.

- The SDGs are a language insomuch as they consist of a common framework for all countries, a key aimed to be comprehensive across languages and cultures. Yet, as all languages, they can be decoded and interpreted in different ways by different cultures. Classicists have developed methodologies to decipher languages and understand cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication. These methodologies can contribute to SDG 15, as, if we understand how different cultures talk about their environment, we can understand how they think about it. This can inform the best strategies for environmental protection, as there are many localized cultural, social, religious and philosophical perspectives on the relationship between land and its inhabitants, and so there needs to be tailored, localised strategies to maximise the effect of the strategies.



- At first glance, there few archaeological contributions to SDG15. Archaeology is inherently destructive, and its practice threatens ecosystems in return for knowledge of the past. However, three archaeological contributions to SDG15 have not yet been considered within.

1. Archaeology reveals traditional farming methods that are environmentally sustainable for (see Palestinian ‘terracing’). Recycling such techniques affirms legitimacy on the land/‘heritagescape’ and lessens human impact on the land.

2. Archaeology shows that most humans, for most of history, have lived in coastal regions. The study of these ancient communities indicates how humans can reinvent, or return to, a more sustainable relationship with the sea and land.

3. New satellite imaging initiatives work to limit the destruction needed during scientific studies upon the land.

- Bringing into dialogue cultural analysis and literary studies, Comparative Literature can shed light on the neoliberalization of the natural world, problematizing lacklustre, commercial solutions while advocating a new conception of what it means to live. Green capitalism recasts the climate problem in terms of numbers; unique ecosystems are made fungible, compensable, and deferable. Calling for slow living is the default response and one that finds ready support in the work of American Naturalists, but what complications arise when environmental wellbeing is framed as lifestyle choice – a problem that individuals can solve if they just recycle often enough? Social criticism and political theory are instrumental in exposing the pitfalls of individualizing rhetoric; affect theory attends to feelings of impasse that circulate within intensely atomized societies; critical theory, namely necropolitics and posthumanism, pushes us to espouse an interrelational understanding of life.

## Part III. Recommendations and Tools for Fostering Future Involvement

In order for the Humanities to increase their involvement in SDG work and to influence the course of debate, there needs to be a change in attitudes towards the Humanities across all subject areas.

Colleagues in other fields, especially STEM, could start to work on the basis that any good interdisciplinary research project will include skills, capabilities and resources from humanities departments from the outset. In other words, Humanities perspectives are not a desirable add-on to ensure effective communication of research outcomes, but essential to the conception and design of successful projects on the SDGs. The Humanities offer a vast reservoir of parallels and examples of human behaviour, across time and space, which can help us to think about probable outcomes and to imagine new possibilities. They offer critical perspectives and well-honed methods for analysing the complexity, contingency and uncertainty inherent in formulating sustainable policies under emergency conditions. Over the course of this short project, it became clear that much of the research that was most helpful for

thinking about SDGs had been done long before they were invented.

In turn, Humanities scholars could do more to communicate their work to other disciplines and to engage explicitly with the SDGs. As experts in language, Humanities scholars are well-placed to take a lead in developing the vocabulary to ease cross-disciplinary collaboration. There's also scope for more dialogue between academic and applied Humanities, in awareness that all intellectual work has some kind of effect on the world and it's a question of when—at what stage of the work—impact becomes a priority.

On the international level, there has been relatively little collaboration among humanities scholars on how to address the SDGs, in contrast to a significant number of international initiatives from the scientific fields. It would be valuable to establish mechanisms to orchestrate rapid-response international collaboration, perhaps in the form of an international coordinating committee of institutes or centres for humanities research, which could work online.

To encourage and support recognition of the potential contribution of the Humanities, the IAS is hosting a website to showcase existing work alongside this report and SHM has designed an app-based tool to capture humanities thinking as it develops in relation to the SDGs. Here is the link: [www.sdg-h.org](http://www.sdg-h.org)



Antoni Jaźwiński's Tableau Muet, based on the original "Polish System" for charting historical information, later revised in France and the United States, 1834