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CASE STUDY

REVISED All Talk: A workshop on discourse production and counter-practices in public programming

[version 2; peer review: 2 approved with reservations]
Previously titled: "All Talk: A workshop on public programming as discourse production"

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Abstract

This case study provides an account of the key insights from the international workshop ALL TALK: Institutional Discourse, Exclusions and the Politics of Gathering held in Drugo More, Rijeka, from May 25–26th, 2025. Public programming has long served as a vehicle for cultural institutions to engage audiences through a variety of discursive formats beyond exhibitions, catalogues and more traditional research outputs. Forms of public programming range from the classically delivered speaker talks and symposia to gallery education programmes and more experimental pedagogical initiatives such as artist-led workshops, summer schools, world cafés, reading clubs, speakers marathons, citizens' assemblies, and many more. The workshop brought together fifteen participants who work on public programming in institutions, educational and cultural spaces across Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Lithuania, Palestine, and the United Kingdom. The insights from the workshop are arranged in three sections: (1) 'Both Sides Now: Liberal Paradigms of Public Discourse', which critically examines the limits and harms of mainstream forms and conceptual frameworks to organize public discourse, such as neutrality; the platform; and the debate; (2) 'From Civility to Control: Colonial Legacies and the Militarisation of Public Programming' aims to show the extent to which institutions of organized state violence have shaped what can be known, said and shared publicly and (3) 'Counter-Genealogies of Public Programming' revisits alternative histories of caring for public gathering and exchanges from the perspective of autonomous institutions, new forms of partnerships between the public sector and civil society and

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

pedagogical experimentations rooted in social movements. This Case Study will be of interest to curators, cultural programmers, educators who want to examine comparative practices and alternative forms of public programming across Europe and to critically examine the histories, contexts and limits to public programming in the current conjuncture.

Plain Language Summary
The workshop *All Talk* brought together cultural workers from several countries to look closely at how public events in galleries, museums and universities shape what can be said, who gets to speak, and what forms of collective life are made possible. Participants examined how formats that promise openness often end up reinforcing the limits of a liberal centre that claims neutrality while helping to silence dissent. Recent examples from Europe showed how the language of free speech and 'both sides' is routinely used to contain protests against racism, colonial violence and repression, turning supposedly democratic spaces into sites of control.

A second theme traced how public programming is tied to longer histories of empire and militarisation. Contributions from Palestine and the UK showed that the protocols of civility and debate grow from colonial forms of governance and are maintained today through soft power, policing of academic freedom and the normalisation of forms of military training. What is presented as dialogue often hides deep structural interests, from research partnerships with arms industries to forms of affective conditioning that make ongoing war seem normal.

Against these constrained formats, the workshop also explored other genealogies of gathering. These included the long struggle of Croatia's independent cultural scene to build collective infrastructures with public institutions, the antagonistic organising of social centres in Lithuania that refuse to wait for recognition, and translocal movement schools that build shared learning through slow, situated processes. Across these diverse practices, a common thread emerged is that public programming can be a form of militant care, creating conditions for people to think, act and stay accountable together.

The workshop concluded by asking how institutions might make more room for these grounded approaches, shifting from rapid output to deeper forms of relation. Instead of amplifying debate for its own sake, public programming could anchor collective imagination and help cultivate more liveable futures.

Keywords
Public Sphere, Public Programming, Debate, Critical Discourse, Museums, Galleries

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REVISED **Amendments from Version 1**

Following the reviewers' suggestions, we have added a fuller explanation of the workshop methodology, made clearer distinctions between participants' contributions, workshop discussions and our own analysis, and strengthened the three-part thematic structure throughout. We also expanded the theoretical discussion and provided additional context for some of the geographically distinct examples. The conclusion has been expanded to reconnect the three themes and spell out more concretely what the counter-programming practices discussed in the article might mean within cultural and educational institutions.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

Introduction

Public programming has long served as a vehicle for cultural institutions to engage audiences through a variety of discursive formats beyond exhibitions, catalogues and more traditional research outputs. Forms of public programming range from the classically delivered speaker talks and symposia to gallery education programmes and more experimental pedagogical initiatives such as artist-led workshops, summer schools, world cafés, reading clubs, speakers marathons, citizens' assemblies, and many more.

Though by now a routine dimension of curatorial practice, public programming has, since its inception, often been shaped by unacknowledged ideological struggles, political pressures and institutional constraints. In its acceleration over the last twenty-five years, the hosts of such programmes have often made claims on the one hand, to the importance of public programming as a site of public engagement around urgent contemporary questions, and, on the other, their neutrality, and role in offering platforms to express 'both sides' of debates. During this same period, cultural institutions including contemporary art organisations, universities and festivals have become increasingly funded, structured and organised in ways that entangle them deeply within the relationships, logics, conducts and injustices of corporate capitalism, exposing a much more active set of alignments with what Tariq Ali has termed the 'extreme centre'.[1] Ali defines the extreme centre as a tendency in the West in which centre-left and centre-right arguments align to define and delimit the space of political discourse in ways that preclude alternatives to capitalism, austerity and empire. In Ali's words, the extreme centre "service(s) the needs of the market and the rich, while pretending to speak for all". This simultaneous appeal to criticality and neutrality - introduced into the workshop by ourselves, as authors and hosts - reveals a deep-seated tension at the heart of public programming, between its stated democratic ambitions and the entrenched institutional conditions that sustain it. Such contradictions have opened new fault lines amongst the agents and participants of public programmes, provoking both spontaneous protest and deeply rooted attempts at structural change in a discursive landscape increasingly embroiled in the aporias of the so-called 'culture wars'.

To consider the implications of these movements, in May 2025, we invited fellow researchers, scholars, artists, practitioners, and activists to participate in All Talk - Institutional Discourse, Exclusions and the Politics of Gathering, a two-day workshop at the cultural space and gallery Drugo More[2] (Rijeka, Croatia). The aim of this workshop was to explore the structures, strategies, and stakes of public programming within and outside of cultural institutions. The workshop was the latest iteration of an ongoing research convened by Graham, Graziano and Kelly since 2016. Previous events included a gathering at Middlesex University entitled 'Public Programming? Pedagogies in a Missing Europe' (2016), a seminar at Nottingham Contemporary Gallery in 2017 entitled 'Public Programming, Social Movements and Solidarity'; and a day seminar at Goldsmiths College in 2018 entitled 'From Critical Studies to Public Programming: Public Knowledge at the Post-Democratic Impasse'. Graham, Graziano and Kelly have also co-written an article based on their ongoing research into the relationship between Public Programming and the so-called 'Educational Turn' in the art field, which was published in Performance Research Journal in 2016.[3] The gathering in Rijeka built on this work and was organised with the support of the EU COST Action Toolkit of Care. In this context, questions of care towards publics, collaborators and institutions themselves, became a crucial lens through which to examine how public programming mediates the ethics and politics of discourse production.

The workshop in Rijeka brought together fifteen participants based across Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Lithuania, Palestine, and the United Kingdom. Among them were: Davor Mišković, director of the cultural organisation Drugo more, who has been involved in public programming, research and advocacy for the independent cultural scene in Croatia for 25 years, as well as in the creation of policy documents and cultural strategies for national and local authorities. Agnė Bagdžiūnaitė, who works as a curator and cultural organiser exploring critical public programming, collective memory, and the politics of visibility in Kaunas, Lithuania. She has worked with Social Centre Emma, Kaunas Artists House and Kombinatas, a festival of leftist ideas. Toufic Haddad, who was, until recently, the Director of the Council for British Research in the Levant's Jerusalem Branch (the Kenyon Institute) and has worked in various capacities across the

Occupied Palestinian Territories as a journalist, researcher, consultant, editor, and publisher. Margareta Kern, a visual artist and researcher whose practice explores the performative apparatus of militarism in the UK, tracing discourse and silence from colonial times to the present moment of European military expansion. And Manuela Zechner, a researcher, facilitator and cultural worker, as well as a founding member of the Common Ecologies School, where she coordinates co-research processes, publications and encounters, and produces the Earthcare Fieldcast.

This report traces three principal thematic lines of inquiry emerging from our research and discussions in the workshop, each revealing a distinct consequence of the contradictions shaping contemporary public programming. First, we analyse how the hollow frameworks of "neutrality", "debate" and "free speech" are being seized upon by right-wing reactionary forces which mobilise them as cover for attacks on migrants, feminists, queers, and the poor. Second, we follow the ways the very formats of debate and civility, often celebrated as antidotes to violence, are themselves saturated with histories of colonial violence, coercion and militarization, histories that are resurfacing in the present. And third, we recognized how these dynamics relentlessly erase the memory of other genealogies and approaches to public programming, modes of gathering and producing discourse from below as forms of care, solidarity and resistance.

One line of critique offered in the workshop relates directly to the way in which political themes are often separated from communities most affected by them in contemporary practices of public programming. It was important to ourselves, as hosts and writers, that we did not replicate this problem in our own generation of a research event. To challenge this, the workshop and this written Case Study, adopted what Brazilian pedagogist Paulo Freire describes as a 'problem-posing' approach to thematic investigation. In chapter 3 of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, critiquing contexts in which research themes are generated by metropolitan elites and imposed on the rural poor, Freire outlines a method for ensuring the terms and thematics that shape a project of inquiry are relevant to impacted communities. As part of this process, Freire suggests the cyclical and interwoven practices of 'codification' and 'de-codification' to refine the themes that emerge. Codification marks a moment of synthesis, where pictures of a particular problematic are presented to a group of those invested in the problem. De-codification, on the other hand, describes a moment in which groups come together to analyse the picture that has been presented, honing in more deeply on the shape of the problem and imagining modes of action. As hosts of the All Talk workshops, we and workshop participants 'codified' the problematics of public programming, sketching vignettes of the problematics and possible modes of action. We also invoked practitioners, activists, audiences and public programming collaborators assembled over many years. In this we drew together key moments, analyses and concepts drawn from practice in specific locations. In the workshop we 'de-codified' these examples, discussing, unpacking and re-working the problems associated with public programming in this moment, taking time to share experience, identify contradictions and refine terms. Neither ourselves as the initial instigators of this research nor those who participated in the workshop were passive recipients of ready-made themes but rather agents of public programming. We deemed such a workshop process useful, given the tacit and often matter of fact way in which public programmes come to be generated and practiced, with little opportunity for analysis.

A result of this approach, this paper, a 'codification' in itself, is an attempt by the authors and participants to share back to the group and wider circles of interest, a conceptually framed description of what was discussed. In this sense it is a case study of case studies. The shape of this paper follows the general shape of the workshop, with shorter vignettes drawn from a globalised contemporary art world, introduced by ourselves, as workshop hosts, in order to sketch the problems of public programming in broader strokes, moving into deeper analyses of particular geo-specific examples introduced by workshop participants. It also follows the workshop's structure, introducing participants' contributions in relation to one of the three workshop themes. These themes are indicated throughout the text.

Both sides now: Liberal paradigms of public discourse

We begin with the first of thematic of workshop's enquiry: how the detached and performative conducts of the 'extreme centre' have in recent years generated a vacuum, where claims to 'free speech' and 'debate' are increasingly mobilised by far right, neo-reactionary and neo-fascist public spheres to legitimise the policing of gender norms, attacks on migrants, on the right to protest, on workers' rights, and so on. While moves to public prominence of the far right are often narrated from the centre as a kind of high jacking or even a perversion of the liberal project, the research and first-hand experiences shared during the workshop showed how violence, coercion and exclusion are in many ways bound up in certain forms of liberalism and their colonial histories.

One example that crystallised these tensions was brought into the discussion through Janna Graham and Valeria Graziano's introductory presentation. It came from a recent scene in the cultural field, where the language of openness and neutrality collided firmly with the urgency of dissent. Graham and Graziano recalled Nan Goldin's charged intervention at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin on November 24th, 2024, during the opening of her exhibition This Will Not End Well. In this 14-minute address, Goldin asked 'Why can't I speak, Germany?', condemning the Israeli

genocide in Gaza and citing the censorship of criticism of the alliance between the German state and the Israeli military, and its conflation of criticism of Israel with anti-semitism.[4] Footage of the audience shows them responding with chants and rallying cries, releasing tension after months of being silenced on the streets and in cultural institutions. Clearly in distress at both the artists' speech and the crowd that had assembled to cheer her on, Museum Director Klaus Biesenbach takes the microphone after Goldin. Attempting to restore order, he suggests that the museum should be a space for all opinions, even 'those they disagree with'. Nearly drowned out by the crowd, the Director cries: 'why won't you listen to me?'.[4]

Graham and Graziano described this as a scene of the 'extreme centre' at its limit. Biesenbach evokes the imagined neutrality of the museum as a platform, including its conducts of public debate and its valorisation (and enforcement) of 'both sides' as an antidote to the crowd's more 'extreme' approach. Here he reveals the apparatus of public programming, not as an assumed dimension of curatorial practice but as a mechanism for maintaining and mandating particular notions of civility: for containing (unsuccessfully) speech and rhetorical dynamics deemed to be outside permissible conducts and in this case, beyond those of a militarily enforced national consensus in Germany's alliance with the Israeli state.

The scene at the Neue Nationalgalerie is part of a recurring tension in public programming. When institutions are confronted with speech or action that reveals the limits of their purported interest in themes of social justice, the language of both the public and neutrality are often erected as a shield, the call for 'all voices' or 'both sides' functioning as a vehicle of containment. Dynamics like this have surfaced repeatedly in cultural events over the past decade and more. Another striking example cited by Graham and Graziano arose in the lead-up to the 13th Istanbul Biennial in 2013, around the same time as the 'Occupy Gezi' movement in the city. Activists from the Public/Common Resistance Platform, wearing T-shirts printed with the names of forcibly gentrified neighbourhoods in Istanbul, entered an event of the Biennial's public programme, titled 'Public Alchemy,' funded, in part, by local real estate financiers. The protest, in which members of the group stood up from the crowd draped in cloth printed with the logos of related companies, highlighted the evictions of thousands of people in the city from affordable housing and public parks. The performance was brought to an abrupt end however, by the Biennial's organising team who had security roughly pick up protesters and carry them away. It was clear that the Biennial's goals to 'activate social engagement' and to host a 'public fora to generate a possibility for rethinking the concept of publicness'[5] did not include unsolicited action in relation to the event's own conditions of production. Much like the rhetoric deployed in response to recent events around Palestine, the Biennial's organizers promoted their response as a commitment to the idea of 'a real public sphere' including 'all kinds of different voices … in which people can talk without fear and without obstructing one another'.[5] Annoyed by the 'extremity' of the crowd's opinions, they stated that '…impeding such platforms only reproduces the methods that obstruct freedom of expression…'.[5]

These incidents expose the widening gap between the language of political urgency that often surrounds public programming - its engagement with critical thematics, and claims to democracy and platforms for change - and the social and institutional entanglements it conceals: labour exploitation, gentrification, urban displacement, corporate expansion, and neo-colonialism. The incidents also reveal how notions of the "public," the "platform," and "both sides" have become instruments for policing the boundaries of permissible conducts in the public sphere.

Platforming debate

These dynamics find their clearest expression in the recurrent metaphor of the platform, the emblem of curated openness through which institutions perform neutrality whilst regulating the terms of participation.

Popularised by Okwui Enwezor's Documenta11 (2002), the term platform - which referred to public discussion or "platform" events preceding the exhibition - sought to create "a global public sphere"[6] that would shift focus from colonial tropes associated with exhibition display and toward discursive forums. Enwezor's platforms addressed themes from democracy and reconciliation to postcoloniality and urbanism, and brought together an array of key theorists, activists, and historical figures to challenge Eurocentric art histories and imagine diasporic, anti-colonial public spheres. Described by some critics as the "Bandung moment of contemporary art"[7] - an homage to the 1955 Bandung Conference that brought together newly independent nations of the Global South to imagine a non-aligned, decolonial future – Enwezor's platforms, at their best, echoed radical traditions of internationalist participatory research and popular education.

In her presentation, Janna Graham describes how the figure of the platform soon drifted from its radical inspirations. Once signalling geopolitical reimaginings, disruption and emancipatory analysis, it has become shorthand for hyper-discursive events reduced to sound-bites and detached from concrete social processes. Figures like Hans Ulrich Obrist embraced the platform as "infinite conversation," as epitomised in Serpentine's '24 hour non-stop interview marathon'.[8] The platform,

once intended to disrupt and to create resistant spaces, cultures and geopolitics, now signals the anchoring of this European bourgeois public sphere to accelerated neoliberal circuits of visibility, converting publicness into commodified content. Where curators of public programming like Obrist cited political theorist Chantal Mouffe's notion of 'agonism' to underpin their commitment to new forums for debate, such practices often borrowed the form of agonistic contest while leaving aside the practices of direct democracy and long term attachments Mouffe wished to highlight in her theoretical project. Furthermore, this selective borrowing is performing what Mouffe herself diagnosed as the "post-political condition", a technocratic consensus in which so-called left and right formations converge to foreclose any genuine social conflict, closely echoing the extreme-centre dynamics named by Ali. This ambivalence of the platform increasingly recalls Pierre Bourdieu's notion of an "interest in disinterest",[9] where culture provides managed spaces to stage social problematics while at the same time buffering the contradictions of its own production. In framing itself in affirmative terms like "access" or "freedom of expression," the platform also conjures what Paolo Virno calls "publicness without a public sphere" where a proliferation of political speech becomes detached from political action.[10] With social media amplifying this tendency, Graham discussed how the liberal notion of the platform has reached new extremes in recent years, algorithmically engineering the vacuum between political feelings and consequences.

Key to this vacuum, as Graham suggested, is the recurring invocation of the value of 'both-sides' debate. Debate, while long valorised as a pillar of democracy, has become increasingly weaponised by the far right. This can be seen in invitations to 'debate-me' by the late Charlie Kirk's Turning Point organisation, or engage in combative speech by those arguing the 'values' of sexism, homophobia, etc.

Graham discussed how these most recent rhetorical forms have built on the rise of debate as a practice of managerial de-politicisation and social containment over the last decades. She offered the 1981 bestselling management book Getting to Yes,[11] as a crystallisation of this early trajectory, offering clear propositions and methods for negotiation and rhetorical adversarialism in business and governance. The initial and perhaps most important recommendation of the book is that the successful negotiator must first 'separate the people from the problem', installing from the outset conducts of debate that divorce speech and content from consequence. As in later manuals like Donald Trump's Art of Deal,[12] debate is presented as the key skill for assuaging conflict, and for diverting attention from the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism. Graham traced how the figure of debate subsequently became central to initiatives in public and NGO education programmes in the 1990s, as a kind of 'aesthetic education' delivered by an emerging neoliberal financial class.[13] The Soros' international youth debating programmes in post-socialist and post-conflict contexts, perhaps epitomised this move. The Soros programmes introduced adversarial debating techniques as markers of democracy and 'civility' staged as crucial alternatives to conflict and violence. They also cleaved neoliberal market logics to these specific conducts of democratic public speech, directly aligning free markets with free speech. Equally, citizenship pedagogy under New Labour policy in the UK in the 1990s installed debate education as a ubiquitous tool for practicing the performance of neutralisation: inviting students to arbitrarily choose topics and opposing sides on issues, always detached from lived realities, instilling individuality and separation rather than solidarity.

Graham discussed how, by promoting these dimensions of publicness, educational and cultural institutions from the 1990s onward appeared to promote the public debate of social issues, but simultaneously circumvented the capacity to name and act upon the macropolitics that produced them. The debate form adopted by managerial books and in these debate programmes divorced problems of corruption, inequality, racism, sexism, labour exploitation and so on, from the increasingly violent conditions of wealth polarisation and capitalist accumulation during this period. The enforcement of civil conducts, rhetorics of 'peaceful co-existence' and 'good intention' that underpin debate made it near impossible to name conflicts and culpabilities, distracting public culture through 'wars with words'. Untethered from the realms of everyday experience where conditions of violence and inequality are lived out, debate pedagogy and its commitments to neutrality, neutralisation and ambivalence are in many cases rendered tools to preserve dominant interests, and to block alternative modes of institution building, dreaming and protagonism.

The problem of debate culture was also read more widely by Graham and Graziano as part of a liberal framing, particularly via Jurgen Habermas', of the public sphere itself.[14] Nancy Fraser, Houston A. Baker, Stall & Stoecker, among many others, have argued that Habermas' model structurally excludes the histories of collective organising found in feminist, partisan, Black, and Indigenous community practices such as popular schools, neighbourhood assemblies, and communal kitchens.[15–17] In contrast, Habermas' ideal of the public sphere was rather modelled on the Enlightenment coffee house - incidentally also the birthplace of Lloyd's Bank and other infrastructures of colonial capitalism - where men gathered, away from the realms of labour, care, and the state, to perform civility and opinion.

Read conjuncturally, the workshop speakers proposed that the rise of debate education over the last four decades has installed liberal conducts such as parliamentary adversarialism, neutrality, and the detachment of "both sides" as

supposed guarantors of freedom, even as global capital deepens volatility, inequality, and constraint of political imagination and collective possibility. What Bandung once imagined as socialist, anti-colonial guarantees of free speech has instead given way to a model where "free market" and "free speech" advance together, producing expanding cycles of authoritarianism and militarisation.

Right-wing public discourse: Genealogies of liberal violence

While Graham and Graziano's cases illuminated the institutional mechanics of the extreme centre, Susan Kelly's contribution focussed the lens looking at how calls for free speech and debate can bring liberalism and the far right into alliance in the art world. Grounding her analysis in examples drawn from the UK's art circuits and public sphere, her talk examined how ideas of 'extremism' and 'radicalisation' are produced in these contexts.

Kelly relayed how the question of free speech in art galleries in the UK first crystallised in the saga that surrounded the shutting down of a space called LD50 by anti-fascist campaigners in 2017. LD50 gallery was billed as a project space with solo and small group exhibitions, alongside a public programme that hosted a menu of by now familiar far right topics: 'human biodiversity', the occult and mysticism, the singularity of AI, new enlightenment, great replacement theory and so on. The gallery, located in Dalston, a hipster area of London's East End, is one of the poorest wards in the city with a history of deeply racist and violent policing, but also a context of powerful anti racist activism and police monitoring groups.[18] The local community and art world responded strongly to the gallery and its agenda, and the 'Shutdown LD50' alliance was formed, leafleting and protesting the gallery extensively and eventually forcing its closure. During the largest demonstration at the gallery in February 2017, fascist 'cultural theorist' and artist Daniel or 'DC' Miller was pictured standing alone outside of LD50 holding a DIY sign that read: 'THE RIGHT TO OPENLY DISCUSS IDEAS MUST BE DEFENDED'. In images of Miller reproduced in the press, he stood as a lone heroic figure, a 'non-conformist' quietly but valiantly defending free expression against a mob of protestors and a sea of left-wing, 'woke' consensus. In what we read as a deeply problematic move, journalists such as JJ Charlesworth and Jonathan Jones from The Guardian newspaper, reinforced Miller's stance. They treated the gallery's provision of a platform for "human biodiversity" and "great replacement theory" as an expression of viewpoint diversity, dismissing how this content directly targeted the gallery's own neighborhood. They also criticised the protestors stating that no matter what happens in a gallery, no one should demand its closure. Jones's dismissal of the campaign as "pathetic"[19] shifted scrutiny away from the gallery's content, casting those who challenged it as a hypothetical threat to openness, rather than recognizing the concrete threat that those promoting these views at the gallery posed to anyone excluded by their racist conception of who belongs.

This dynamic of the far right claiming victimhood and outsider status in the cultural sector continues apace through groups such as 'Freedom in the Arts'. Their 2025 report 'Afraid to Speak Freely', addressed what they describe as a 'growing climate of fear, censorship, and ideological conformity in UK arts institutions'.[20] The organisation positions those who are 'gender critical', those who support the Israeli government and those who are 'pro-capitalist' as victims of an unnuanced, illiberal, one-sided and dogmatic art world. Freedom of expression, open debate, 'creative risk taking' and 'viewpoint diversity' are posed in opposition to censorious left dogmatism, which is increasingly framed as radical and extreme.

Valeria Graziano pointed out how this rhetorical manoeuvre by which liberal institutions in media and culture position themselves as victims of an intolerant, censorious left, rather than as complicit in the far right's expanding attacks on dissent is a striking feature of the present conjuncture. This inversion performs a sleight of hand: liberalism, long the dominant framework of cultural and institutional life, adopts the posture of marginalisation and persecution. As Stuart Hall argued in 'The Great Moving Right Show' already in 1979, this performance of victimhood can itself become a strategy of power, an attempt to recentre the dominant by presenting it as embattled and under siege.[21] This moral panic over "illiberal" progressivism obscures the reality that it is the right, not the left, that has been most actively engaged in silencing opposition, through legislative crackdowns, defunding of critical arts and education, and coordinated campaigns of harassment. At the same time, Graziano pointed out, disillusionment with the limits of liberal institutions has driven some sections of the left toward nationalist, conspiratorial, or xenophobic imaginaries, seeking belonging in forms of populist resentment that mirror the very forces they once opposed. This affective current often translates material dispossession into cultural grievance, redirecting anger at economic precarity and dispossession toward scapegoats and moral panics.

Kelly laid out a particular genealogy of free speech and right victimhood in the UK through publications such as Spiked! magazine and its predecessor Living Marxism, established by former members of the Trotskyist turned libertarian RCP (Revolutionary Communist Party). One of the organisations spawned by these groups hosts a yearly festival called 'The Battle of Ideas', with the tagline 'Free Speech Allowed!'.[22] The 'Battle', whose title already signals its commitment to militaristic enmity, is often staged in cultural institutions and runs with themes such as: 'Is white privilege real?'; 'How

can we deal with problem lifestyles?' and 'keynote debates' on topics such as 'the burqa ban', 'male loneliness', 'how queerness lost the plot' and so on.

Like the Soros young debaters introduced earlier, the 'Battle of Ideas' projects a robust and adversarial form of speech, a 'war of words' as the ultimate exercise of liberal democracy. The festival claims to be a safe space where 'normal people' who feel 'pressure to voice opinions they felt they should hold rather than those they really believed' are interpellated and 'elevated to the status of independent thinkers, revolutionaries […] through reclaiming their freedom of speech'.[22] The 'Battle of Ideas' stages participation in culture war debates as 'a means of practising the purest form of democracy'.[22] However, Kelly argued quoting performance theorist Joseph Dunne-Howrie, that in the festival the essence of liberalism is in fact 'represented by the freedom to "perform" transphobic, racist and classist arguments[23]'. This performance of democracy and intellectual freedom is an elaborate and dangerous mirage, as it is through this performance that a direct alignment of liberal and far right political positions is established. Kelly argued that, as with the endorsement of DC Miller by a Guardian journalist during the clashes around LD50, the collapsing of liberal and far right political positions creates a potent frame: one that asserts and positions an acceptable common sense centre, grounded in free speech - and pushes all other views to the margins, where they are deemed equally unacceptable, extreme and radical. This frame in turn helps to construct an equivalence between fascists and anti-fascists: between the far right, the left and allied social and environmental justice movements, who are seen to simply correspond in their deviation from centrist liberal reasonableness.

This popular equivalencing of fascists and anti-fascists stretches from Donald Trump's infamous statement that there were 'very fine people on both sides' after Charlottesville - where an antifascist demonstrator was killed - to the expanding lists of domestic extremist groups across the US, EU, and UK. In the UK, far right groups such as Britain First & the Patriotic Alliance are now listed alongside environmental movements like Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion. The tendency toward equalising left and right wing 'extremes' can also be seen in the shift by the US-based Network Contagion Research Institute (NCRI), amongst other think tanks and NGOs (see also, the CEP: Counter-Extremism Project, and Anti-Defamation League) who have moved focus from studying the far-right and fascist groups to addressing 'all forms of extremism'.[24] The NCRI, funded jointly by the Soros Open Society Foundation and the right-libertarian Koch Foundation, establishes the protection of the centre from 'extremist ideology' on 'both sides'. These organisations also increasingly frame their work around 'post-truth' politics. They now dedicate much of their resources and frame their mission around combatting misinformation and protecting 'against false narratives that create rifts of distrust that impact institutions, capital markets, public health, and safety'.[24]

In the NCRI, Kelly pointed out, we see how liberal market centrism is posed as the only force that can combat extremism and irrational cultures of post-truth and conspiracy through research, fact checking and the reassertion of a notion of public truth against the distortions of the extremists. Echoing this, art critic Ben Davis has described how for the centrists, the problem affecting public life is not the absence of principles but the excess of ideology—on all sides.[25] For Davis, while the discourse on post-truth does important work in examining the problem and sometimes deadly effects of mass disinformation, it also bolsters an idea of liberal neutrality; that a superior enlightened position outside the frey of ideology or indeed emotion, is possible. This builds a picture, he says, that makes the problem one of 'emotion and belief' trumping 'reason and facts', re-asserting the centre as an 'apolitical', neutral place, where rational people can debate facts away from the irrational passions and unreasonable demands of those 'with grievances'.[25] It also implies that the battle against injustice can be combatted in words, discourse, ideas and facts alone; that political movements or material struggle would be unnecessary and excessive.

Davis traces this centrist instinct and desire back through Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on Richard Hofstadter's influential 1964 essay, 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics'.[26,27] Written in the context of the Cold War, Hofstadter diagnoses paranoia on all sides, left and right, leaving the reader with very little except an invitation back to what Davis calls 'the warmth of a calm, understanding, and encompassing middle ground'.[25] Rather than examine how paranoia and conspiracy theories today might register a certain structure of feeling in the face of powerlessness, or look at how paranoia is diverted into culture wars and away from the billionaires who fund misinformation, liberal discourse offers moral, psychological and cognitive explanations. Post-truth critique counsels a separation from these excesses of feeling and ideology, first through subjective disinvestment akin to the 'separation of the people from their problems' introduced earlier in the example of Getting to Yes (1981), and through Bordieu's idea of 'interest in disinterest'. As described by Graham and Graziano earlier in the workshop, these separations obscure material and subjective investments and interests of all kinds, mandating particular conducts of civility which ultimately block analysis and action aimed at addressing the issues of injustice, inequality, and so on, that are ostensibly under debate.

From civility to control: colonial legacies and the militarisation of public programming

The first consequence traced in this report concerned the role of public programming as a site where the hollow frameworks of "neutrality" and "free speech" are mobilised by reactionary forces as instruments of repression and exclusion. What emerged was a portrait of the liberal centre not as a bulwark against authoritarianism but as one of its enabling instruments. Yet, as Kelly's analysis suggested, the implications of this dynamic extend further. Her closing reflections opened onto the second line of inquiry: how the very formats of debate and civility, often celebrated as antidotes to violence, are themselves saturated with - and can continue to reproduce - histories of colonial coercion and militarised governance. What is frequently framed as a counter to violence (the realm of ideas, discourse, and civility) can become, in part at least, an enabler. For the designation of certain views or political positions as "extreme" not only narrows the field of legitimate speech, but also implicates itself in the machinery of repression and war. It was along these lines that Kelly drew a connection between the discourse of extremism and the closely related idea of radicalisation, a concept tied much more directly to the militarism of the US and NATO's "war on terror".

It is important to remember the scale and breadth of military action that took place post-September 11th 2001, after the deadly attack on the World Trade Centre in New York. NATO-aligned armies were involved in hundreds of military actions across seventy-eight countries globally, not only engaging in direct combat with groups defined as terrorist under U.S. and European legal frameworks, but also conducting intelligence, reconnaissance, and pre-emptive operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, the Philippines, Mali, and across the rest of so-called "Trans-Saharan Africa".[28] According to Arun Kundnani, before 2001, the term 'radicalisation' had been used to refer to a shift by individuals or groups towards more radical politics, but by 2004 the term had acquired a new meaning and came to indicate a psychological or theological process by which Muslims in particular, move towards extremist views.[29] The concept of radicalisation led to the construction of Muslim populations as 'suspect communities' and assisted in the rise and spread of islamophobia and related hate incidents.[30,31] Kundnani outlines how radicalisation discourse focuses on communities and social networks, moving away from older, more formal and hierarchical anti-state organisations such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) or the Red Army Faction (RAF). The 'new terrorism' understood as networked, social and diffuse, crucially shifts attention to the spread of problematic 'extremist ideas' that circulate and are said to produce these networks. Ideas are no longer thought about in this framework as abstractions or even potential arguments or positions to debate, but are rather understood as a kind of virus, powerful enough to turn people into violent radicals. As such, they must be monitored and contained to a greater degree.[29]

In this context, the designation in 2025 of Palestine Action as a fully-fledged terrorist group by the British government is as revealing as it is chilling. As a newly proscribed terrorist group, it is now not only a criminal offence to belong to the organisation but also to 'express an opinion or belief that is supportive' of that organisation (Section 12 1A).[32] This banning of Palestine Action has been criticised by many groups including Amnesty International as displaying "unprecedented legal overreach," not least because the group has only ever carried out, and intended to carry out, damage to property and not to kill or injure people.[33] The effect of shifting the designation of a group carrying out direct action primarily against the weapons industry – from an extremist to a terrorist organisation, results in the criminalisation of expression, and exposes the absolute limit of 'western liberal values' of free speech. In this context, the discourse of extremism and radicalisation becomes directly bound up in the facilitation of genocide, revealing the idea of free speech and the neutral middle ground to be a lethal lie, cynically weaponised to facilitate war crimes and war profits.

Empire's afterlives: academic freedom and the machinery of soft power

If Kelly's analysis exposed how liberal discourses of extremism and free speech are bound to militarised forms of governance, Toufic Haddad's contribution turned the analysis toward the colonial present of Palestine, asking who benefits from the silencing of conflict? What do claims of neutrality neutralise? Here, the dynamics of the second thematic traced in this essay - how public programming, far from offering an antidote to violence, is shaped by and reproduces the coercive logics of militarism and colonial power - emerge not as distant legacies but as living structures of domination.

Haddad addressed the declared and undeclared interests that can govern what is permissible to say and enact beginning with the strategic ambivalence that concepts like 'intellectual freedom' engender. Public programming within academic establishments enables, in theory, the platforming and dissemination of intellectual and creative outputs generated by academic praxes. It also enables academic and creative communities to partake in debate and peer review, whilst enhancing public knowledge and understanding: all matters deemed vital to liberal democratic society. Such public-facing activities suggested Haddad, are often positioned as an expression and sub-set of 'academic freedom', a right that is essential to see "…recognized in order to enable faculty members and students to carry on their roles …".[34]

There are, however, inherent tensions in this arrangement, says Haddad, particularly when expressions of academic freedom are deemed threatening to the interests of key power brokers and overseers in academic governance. Academic

institutions, he suggested, do not exist in vacuums but are products of distinct historical trajectories, with distinct institutional genealogies. They must address material and governance questions related to sustainability, and are regulated by trustees and states. Their funding structures introduce multiple factors and sites where constraints and pressures can impinge upon academic freedom insofar as they have the potential to generate financial dependency, create conditions that could encourage rent-seeking activity, and reveal points of possible coercion.

These tensions pronounce themselves in different ways across all institutions. Haddad reflected on their relevance in the context of his experience at the Kenyon Institute, which he directed for five years. In particular, his intervention explored how formal and informal relations and understandings between institutional actors; funding hierarchies, and; the historical legacies of institutional genealogies can shape organizational activities and priorities in uncharted and undisclosed ways. Haddad's intervention foregrounded the historical genesis of the organization he directed as well as its funders, to establish contextual and institutional latencies relevant to the controversies he encountered there - controversies which he believes ultimately contributed to his abrupt termination from the organization.

The Kenyon Institute is the Jerusalem Branch of the Council for British Research in the Levant (CBRL), which incorporates the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem (BSAJ) - an important British Mandate-era archaeological institute in Palestine. As Haddad relayed in his presentation, BSAJ and its successor CBRL, were both partly founded by the British Academy (BA), an important British funding council, which describes itself as "the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences".[35] Despite being an independent member-based charitable organization, suggests Haddad, CBRL was highly dependent on the UK government grant it received from the BA, which annually accounted for the overwhelming majority of its budget. This made the BA the de facto powerbroker of the organization, even though the BA tended to oscillate in publicly acknowledging this power. Haddad described the way in which some BA-issued material explicitly describes its decisive role and influence in CBRL's establishment and course, while in other material, the BA takes arms-length distance from the organization, emphasising CBRL's autonomous standing. Irrespective of this positioning, suggested Haddad, it is the case that many members of CBRL historically also held roles within the BA. Haddad's emphasis on the powerful role of CBRL's funders underlined an important context for his elaboration of the BA's own history and colonial entanglement.

The BA was established by Royal Charter in 1902, and would receive its government funding thanks in large part to the intervention of British imperial statesman, former British Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Lord Arthur Balfour. Balfour infamously formulated some of the UK's key imperial doctrines of the late 19th and early 20th centuries - not least his "Balfour Declaration" of 1917 calling for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people". But he also left a strong impact upon UK academia through the support he provided for the BA's application for permanent government funding, and subsequently serving as its president (1921–28). Balfour also acted as Chancellor of Edinburgh University from 1891–1930.

As Haddad outlined, Balfour's Memorandum of 1903–4[36] responded to the BA's funding appeal, which argued amongst other things, that the UK needed to compete with other imperial European states and how they deployed research assets.[37] The funding appeal also explicitly spoke of the need "for some body capable of representing the United Kingdom with respect to those studies in international conferences and for matters of international concern" and for the "need of some body capable of giving authoritative advice to public bodies and individuals desirous of carrying out work and expending funds in these departments of study".[37] Balfour, as Haddad continued, would subsequently be convinced of the need to provide UK government support to the BA, seeing in it the potential for "a great national advantage", and one that clearly would exercise a remit across the then British empire, which at that point was approaching its zenith.[36]

The BA's website today acknowledges that "Balfour's framing of the role of the British Academy resonates to this day", failing to question or disavow the imperial framing it then served (and may indeed still serve). Haddad argued that at least in regard to the historical record, the empirical-imperial trail of the BA is clear. Members of the BA celebrated the "gallant liberators of the Holy City [of Jerusalem]" upon its capture by General Allenby in 1917, while offering "profound congratulations on [his troops'] glorious achievement, the realisation of long cherished hopes fraught with the highest possibilities for the future of humanity".[38]

Haddad also recounted the way in which the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem (BSAJ) would subsequently be established in Jerusalem in 1919 directly assisting the work of the British Mandatory government through its cooperation with the Department of Antiquities. Its work and that of its members in Biblical archaeology also served Christian Zionist imaginings of the "Holy Land" which were used to undergird the British colonial presence in Palestine. Haddad noted that the British imperial government also used archaeology and archaeologists as fronts for espionage in the Middle East, as the case of Lawrence of Arabia and Gertrude Bell documents. The extent of this specific activity in relation to the BSAJ is

not specifically known, although the 'worlds' of British archaeology in this early period was also relatively small and elite.

After WWII and close to the formal end of the empire, Haddad relayed, British research institutes located across the empire, like BSAJ, could no longer sustain themselves on their endowments alone, so the UK government stepped in to support them via what became a regular grant from the Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), given to the British Academy for administration and allotment. The cluster of overseas British schools, institutes and societies abroad that receive these funds are known as the British International Research Institutes (BIRI) and in most cases, the government grant covers the overwhelming majority of these organizations' budgets.[39]

Academies like the BIRI in particular have, according to Haddad, long sustained a mode of activity and public programming distinct from that of the university, yet closely bound to institutions of higher education in the UK. Haddad argued that their function was and remains to reproduce the public discourse of elites, staging exhibitions and events that consolidate soft power and affirm Britain's cultural authority within a global apparatus of influence. Indeed the BA still openly advocates that the UK government utilise the BIRI as tools for UK "soft power". This is evident in the submission by the BA to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee's call for evidence on 'soft power as a strategy for UK success' as recent as February 2025, where 'assets' like the BIRI are cited as exercising 'cultural influence with major and emerging powers'.[40]

This legacy of soft power and influence surfaced during Haddad's tenure as the Kenyon Institute's first Palestinian Director, when he was tasked with producing events in the wake of Covid-19, which had shut down most academic activity. Haddad described his organisation of an ambitious series of public events, lectures, and podcasts on the anniversary of the Centenary of the British Mandate in Palestine, one of which was to feature a historical address by Palestinian cartographer, historian, and Nakba survivor Dr. Salman Abu Sitta on the legacy of Lord Alfred Balfour. The event was co-organized with academics at the University of Edinburgh who themselves were engaged in questioning the university's own colonial legacy. Abu Sitta's research was known to speak to Zionist and British crimes in Palestine, including ground breaking research on the use of Zionist biological weapons during the 1948 War, as well as forced labour camps after the Nakba.

Upon its public announcement, Haddad relayed, the event was quickly targeted by Zionist groups in the UK which demanded its cancellation, accusing the speaker of being antisemitic.[41] The demand for cancellation would escalate into a parliamentary question posed in the House of Lords which attempted to get the CBRL defunded for co-organizing the event.[42] The public attention and explicit threat to CBRL funding would reverberate throughout the institutional apparatuses of the CBRL and the BA. Pressure to cancel the event de facto challenged the coalition of actors who had co-sponsored and co-organized it, and the resolve of these actors to defend academic freedom which was part of their very academic remit and activities.

Haddad described the intense exogenous and endogenous scrutiny and pressure he and his partners experienced for co-organizing the event - pressures which persisted until the very day the event took place. The particularly pernicious smear of the speaker's "antisemitism" challenged those less familiar with Abu Sitta, Balfour and the historical period in question. Haddad recounted how he and his co-organizers held firm, insisting the event take place in defense of academic freedom and the academic remit of the organization he then directed. Moreover, he and his co-organizers emphasised that efforts to cancel the event were not genuinely derived from a desire to prevent hearing from a supposed antisemite, but were actually designed to prevent critical inquiry into Balfour as a colonial figure and to give a platform to a Nakba survivor and scholar of the Nakba, known for his strong anti-Zionist views. It was actually Balfour, argued Haddad, who held antisemitic credentials, with the British politician known for his racist remarks.[43] Balfour was a member of a eugenics society, and presided over the passage of the 1905 Alien's Act - to "prevent the landing of undesirable immigrants" who at the time were overwhelmingly Eastern European Jews fleeing Tsarist pogroms. This to say nothing of the violent and divisive legacy of Balfour's imperial politics in places like Ireland and Palestine.

Abu Sitta was eventually able to present his lecture, albeit under conditions of heightened security, and with a small group of Zionists demonstrating outside the venue. His lecture indeed spoke to many controversial aspects of Balfour's legacy, including its direct impact on the speaker's own family and life. Abu Sitta became a refugee in the Gaza Strip as a consequence of the ethnic cleansing campaign Zionist militias unleashed on Palestinians during the 1948 Nakba and which resulted in the creation of the state of Israel. The event would be warmly received by the sold out audience at the University of Edinburgh, with the video of the lecture becoming the most watched on CBRL's Youtube channel.[44]

Although nominally and publicly a success and a testament to the defense of academic freedom, the Abu Sitta lecture left invisible scars within the organization and between it and its BA funders. Haddad recounted that the experience of fighting for the event not to be cancelled engendered extreme discomfort and division within the organization with personnel within CBRL governance (and likely the BA) displeased with its organization and/or preferring the event not to have been organized at all or to be cancelled outright. The BA began imposing much more intense scrutiny over CBRL and Haddad's line manager, while requesting the organization consider adopting the controversial IHRA definition of antisemitism.[45,46] They also suggested that the CBRL 'work with local organizations' - language Haddad interpreted to mean that the BA was pressuring him and CBRL to work with Israeli Zionist organizations and universities.

Less than a year after the 'Abu Sitta affair' (November 2022), came the Hamas attacks of October 7th, 2023 on Israeli military bases and communities in the Gaza Strip envelope, followed by Israel's genocidal campaign against the territory's people, institutions and infrastructure. Haddad was a seasoned Palestine studies scholar with personal and professional experience in the Gaza Strip, including with UN bodies. His academic writings also clearly spoke to the historical, political and structural subjugation of the Palestinian people, and of the Gaza Strip in particular, including the larger historical context that preceded the October 7th attacks. While his academic expertise and contacts should have been seen as an asset to the organization in the context that emerged post-October 7th - especially for an organisation whose "core activities" were supposed to incorporate contribut [ing] to shaping debate and understanding through informed public outreach and education - Haddad alleges that CBRL's trustees quickly moved to censor him and his work and to displace him from his position as Director of the Kenyon Institute.

Trustees first called on Haddad to maintain a low profile and not talk to the media. They then gave him a 'red line' warning not to participate in an online educational event around developments in Gaza, on his own time. They also began pressuring him to look for a new job. Ultimately he would be disinvited without warning and at the last minute from attending the organization's Annual Meeting, where the Jerusalem Director traditionally spoke to the organization's membership providing his year in review and speaking to his Annual Report. A month after his last minute disinvitation from the Annual General Meeting, and right after the Christmas break, Haddad was informed of his redundancy. The organization cited a financial basis to the decision: the British Academy had defunded his position. Haddad's termination of employment is currently the subject of a legal case, and encapsulates, he argued, how colonial entanglements continue to influence the present terrain of public programming.

The call to "freedom of expression" in the context of public programming described by Haddad, operates not as a mitigation of violence but as a gatekeeping mechanism, policing which ideas, affects and solidarities may be voiced. As Milton Friedman (in his popular book and television series 'Free to Choose') and Friedrich Hayek's neoliberal doctrines make clear, this notion of freedom has always echoed colonial logics: privileging the autonomy of the individual entrepreneur over collective struggle. Haddad argued that the "free" individual is guaranteed liberty on the basis of their perceived "independence", while collectivities of resistance are cast as outliers, seduced by the supposed irrationalities of "groupthink."

Haddad described how these ideological frames are sustained by concrete interests. The CBRL's Board of Trustees which oversaw Haddad's redundancy included a former UK diplomat and banker with links to a UK military company, and listed funds active in the Middle East. It also included a former senior executive from a major media agency who chaired a company making "innovative construction and defence solutions." Citing a broader backdrop, Haddad spoke about new UK-Israel research partnerships launched in the run up to October 7th, and which continue into the present, and include innovation funds and science councils. Such partnerships extend these former colonial entanglements, revealing how academic collaboration can become the research arm of militarised redevelopment. Here, as in other cases around Palestine, the gatekeeping of academic discourse is revealed to play a direct role in facilitating the debate acts and profits of war.

Haddad ended his analysis with an invitation to perform acts of "power mapping", that is, tracing how global circuits of finance, research, and governance, can be used as a method to determine the interests that govern institutions. Asking how these in turn influence what can and cannot be said by in public forums - despite a formal adherence to 'academic freedom' – can expose key contradictions in claims to liberal and democratic approaches. This practice reveals how struggles around public programming are not often about airing "both sides," but rather aimed at restoring the structures that compel liberal civility. Movements like Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS), which engage in concretely exposing and altering the corporate networks of power that underpin the Israeli occupation of Palestine, should therefore be read not as threats to dialogue, but as diagnostic instruments, asking who benefits from the erasure of conflict, and what claims to neutrality ultimately neutralise?

Militarism, performance and (official) secrets

Haddad's account revealed how the colonial foundations of "academic freedom" remain active instruments of domination in Palestine. Following his contribution, Margareta Kern's presentation turned attention to the parallel militarisation of public life within Europe itself. The second consequence traced in this report: that is, how dominant forms of public programming, far from offering an antidote to violence, are shaped by and reproduce the coercive logics of militarism and colonial power. In Kern's presentation this found another expression, in her analysis of the normalisation of military aesthetics, training, and affect.

In her contribution, Kern delved deeper into histories of the relationship between performances of free speech and their relationship to both colonialism and contemporary militarism. Kern's current artistic practice explores colonial, maritime and military archives, contemporary militarism and the forms of training, rehearsal and 'pre-enactment' undertaken to both prepare for and enact 'perpetual war' in Britain'.

In her work, Kern often encounters concrete limits to what she can and cannot say or make visible in public. Far from scenarios of free speech and free expression imagined in the liberal public sphere of the art world, artists and researchers who critically examine subjects of war, colonialism and militarism, are often forced to contend with both formal (legal, eg. the Official Secrets Act) and informal modes of silencing. Kern's practice by necessity operates playfully between what can and cannot be said or seen in public, inhabiting and mobilising modes of performance and rehearsal prevalent in military exercises and training. In her presentation, we saw how these military performances display not so much a distinction between truth and fiction, or between rehearsal and 'reality', but rather an exposure of the slow and ongoing nature of a continuous war in the present, where these distinctions start to break down.

Kern presented research she has been undertaking for several years on two forms of military training and rehearsal. First, she spoke about the 'Thursday War', a set of weekly naval exercises off the coast of Plymouth, South West England where Kern now lives. The Royal Naval Unit who enact these exercises put out jovial tweets about 'Thursday war fun!' with the hashtag #lifewithoutlimits, framing their work as simple 'war preparedness'. In the nearby harbour however, vessels such as HMS Diamond, an air defence guided missile destroyer recently active in the Gulf of Aden, are stationed. Kern's presentation mapped the continuity between these naval exercises and deployment; between the rehearsal of violence, deterrence, and actual war.

In her second example of what Kern names 'the military-stage-complex', we heard about the artists' experience inside a military role-playing company, one of several that receive millions of pounds in contracts each year from the British Ministry of Defence, to provide 'real-world training support' for soldiers and other military personnel. In her assignment to a military base outside of London, Kern and a group of mostly migrant precarious workers, (often recruited based on their affinity to current or former conflict zones), role-played a scenario set in a 'rural middle eastern village'. The designated action, which involved explosions and the firing of rounds of plastic bullets, was repeated and rehearsed 12 times.

The role-playing company boasts that it produces fictional land-based scenarios with the atmospherics of the real world, volunteers dressed as insurgents, and props and costumes sourced from all over the world. They claim that they can rehearse 'every possible scenario', providing spaces and personnel where 'the likeness will be uncanny'. While these sites are used primarily by British and NATO forces to train in mock war, the villages can also be hired out as sets to film companies. At the end of each rehearsal of the role play scenario, Kern reported that the director declared 'get back to your normal life!'. This statement appeared to demarcate the different worlds and lives of the role players in the scene. Kern observed however, that her group of role players seemed to disproportionately comprise migrant workers, and children of migrants and refugees often from war-torn countries like Afghanistan, Syria and elsewhere referenced in the training. Kern herself moved to the UK as a refugee from Bosnia in the early 1990s and wondered why these workers are drawn to this kind of labour; if first and second generation trauma was also being reenacted here. The deep and dreadful irony of these precarious, minimum wage workers, mostly themselves displaced by war, reenacting war to train troops to perpetrate more of the same, was not lost on workshop participants. Rehearsal and reality reconnect in various ways in these scenes and in the 'normal lives' of these role players, where the circularity of cause and effect, displacement, violence and exploitative labour conditions are laid bare. Kern asked how in this context, can we tell what is a performance and what is real?

The work of the military training exercises that Kern explores in Thursday War and military role playing is multifold and ambivalent: the exercises project power whilst simultaneously claiming to practice mere preparedness. The exercises hover in a space of seemingly suspended action, between restraint and neutrality. Like all forms of training and pedagogy, however, the exercises also rehearse and drill in their subjects (in this case, soldiers and other military personnel) what

Kern called an 'affective conditioning'. This conditioning was discussed in various ways: as inoculation against trauma and violence[47]; and as a form of 'pre-enactment' that fictionalises reality in order 'to allow risk to be experienced'.[48] Kern quoted this work of Francesca Cavallo who notes that through repetition, fictional scenarios can gain the weight of reality, restructuring temporal perception whilst managing the perceptions and emotions of participants through a kind of pre-scripting of response 48. War games, Kern speculated, are forms of training to internalise fear and to rehearse this righteous reaction. As we have heard, this is not dissimilar to the ways in which public programmes often rehearse the affects of 'a political kind of speech', while at the same time regulating those deemed to fall outside of acceptable political registers.

Kern finally discussed the notion of 'liberal militarism' referring to the work of Hannah Wright.[49] Wright argues that liberal militarism 'is a system that frames the use of violence and coercion by the state as benevolent or even humanitarian'. Wright argues that this allows British society to imagine itself as peace-loving whilst remaining structurally committed to militarised security. The ways in which the performance of liberalism operates as a cover for violence, inequality and profit are by now familiar. As in the forms of public programming seen in the 'Battle of Ideas' and the Soros Debate clubs, these performances of 'pure democracy' are key to producing and rehearsing positions of disavowal and detachment. Kern's research exposes the central role of official fiction, rehearsal and role-playing in installing this disjuncture between 'reality' and officially espoused belief and aim. The drills instantiate a crucial splitting of the subject as agent of war, a subject produced through inoculation and the careful management of emotion and reaction. Kern showed us very clearly how without these drills and performances, violence would become impossible, as would the ongoing war in the present.

Haddad and Kern's sessions ended on the question of how we might we use the moments we gather to move beyond performances or role-play fantasies of a fictional liberal order, and rather return to the 'unfinished work' of the Bandung, whose own framing in the nascent politics of the liberated nation state and conventions of international diplomacy rendered it susceptible to the incursions of global militarised capital we live through today. How have moments of planning, imagining and working to liberate Gaza, to name and mobilise against contradictions in the language of public programming, and to name the continuities between the performances of liberal democracy and those of militarised training, produce other kinds of internationalism based in solidarity, in practical support and in poetic and theoretical imaginations of liberation? How can the conflicts in public programming be thought less as the instantiation of a new public sphere and more as an indication of our current, collective horizons of struggle?

Counter-genealogies of public programming

If the first consequence is that contemporary public programming is built on detachment - formats that prize civility, neutral tone and "both sides" while insulating speech from its consequences and aligning, in practice, with the interests of capital and reactionary politics - then the second shows how this neutrality hardens into force: in colonial contexts like Palestine; in Europe's remilitarisation of civic life through drills, role-play and "readiness"; and in the extreme centre's choreography that flattens every dissent into "extremism" to be managed. A third effect follows: as institutions perform criticality without committing to change, they erode and erase the counter-traditions that bind discourse to action, those infrastructures of solidarity where speaking entails obligation, risk and repair.

It is here that the question turns from diagnosis to inheritance. What forms of public programming refuse detachment and refuse the false peace of neutrality? The next four contributions spoke precisely to this question, each in its own way, refusing the terms that define dominant institutional forms of public programming. Together, they traced practices where publicness is organised as militant care, situated study, and collective responsibility.

In her presentation, Valeria Graziano argued that if the liberal public sphere falters under the weight of its own contradictions of performing pluralism while enforcing exclusions, promising neutrality while scripting out its consequences, then we must look elsewhere for counter-genealogies of public programming or, as she describes it 'making rooms'. These genealogies are not rooted in the state-sanctioned scripts of civic dialogue, nor in the competitive logics of debate, but in minor histories of encounters shaped within political struggles, social movements, and community formations, often intertwined with cultural organising and artistic practice. She refers to examples in which collective discursive production has been generative of common infrastructures, radical municipalisms, counter-publics, and popular education, we explore the possibility of public programming as militant care and a reorganisation of processes and conducts. These traditions refuse liberal protocols of conduct, cultivating formats concerned not only with speaking but with staying with the consequences of speech and the conditions that make it possible. Participants discussed these questions through three broad approaches to counter-practices of public programming. We outline them here not as a closed repertoire, but as entry points for developing a more just practice, sharper vocabularies, and more situated sensibilities in the politics of discourse production.

Negotiated autonomy & infrastructures of collective governance

A first genealogy of counter-public programming can be traced around the effort to claim one's rights to the public understood as access to public sector resources, protections, and democratic principles. This logic underpinned the entangled evolution of Croatia's independent cultural scene and its tactical engagements with the public sector, and finds echoes in other Southern European experiments such as the Fondazione per i Beni Comuni in Rome, Naples' "uso civico" practices, and the municipalist trajectories linked to Barcelona en Comú. This pathway does not emerge from a refusal of institutional entanglement but from a strategic insistence on co-determination: a long process of transforming the state's inert or exclusionary apparatuses into infrastructures available for collective use. Davor Mišković's reflections, rooted in the experience of Rijeka's cultural field and broader national networks, offer insight into how such a model came into being as a sequence of experiments in holding the state to its promises, and in building the organizational forms capable of doing so.

In the early 2000s, independent cultural organisations in Croatia - many of them forged in the crucible of 1990s anti-war, feminist, and ecological organizing - began to consolidate into a coherent scene. What had previously been a dispersed archipelago of autonomous initiatives started to recognize itself as a political actor. This recognition was facilitated by institutions such as the Multimedia Institute (MAMA), which helped to form the network Klubture in 2002. The network brought together collectives ranging from punk venues and experimental music spaces to contemporary dance companies and media labs, to collaboratively produce public programming across the country. Members proposed joint initiatives and collectively voted on and allocated pooled funding, refusing the logics of competition that dominated public cultural policy. In Mišković's account, this was a moment not just of resource-sharing but of political subjectivation: realising that cultural work could act as a form of governance from below.

It was out of this process that the public–civic partnership model emerged. Under this arrangement, local authorities provided infrastructural support, often in the form of disused buildings, while civil society organizations retained autonomy over programming. The iconic case was the transformation of a former industrial space in Zagreb (now known as Pogon, the Centre for Independent Culture and Youth) into a cultural hub co-managed by civil groups. Though never codified into law (Croatian legislation still does not distinguish between public–civic and public–private partnerships, a structural limitation that Mišković highlights), the model articulated a form of operational autonomy (a term drawn from organizational theory, notably discussed by Walter W. Powell):[62] a space in which cultural organisations could define their priorities collectively, based not on market imperatives or nationalist mandates, but on shared commitments to non-commercial value, experimentation, and care. In Mišković's view, no model is ever fully protected from risks of co-optation and clientelism, especially when interfacing with state structures, but this vulnerability does not invalidate the political necessity of the attempt. At its best, the trajectory of the Croatian independent cultural scene proposed art and culture organisations as laboratories of popular autonomy. They became hubs of prefigurative governance where speech and deed were aligned as a means of reorganising the social. The Croatian experience is a refusal of managerial neutrality, insisting instead on the political substance of infrastructural arrangements.

A consequence of this approach is that the reach of Croatia's independent cultural scene extended well beyond the arts. In the mid-2010s, it joined forces with trade unions to resist the privatization of the national highway network, mobilizing over half a million signatures to block the deal. The campaign crystallised in the rise of the municipalist party Možemo! in Zagreb, many of whose members had come through the very scene described above. Without framing the party's ascent as a direct outcome, Mišković emphasised that this transfer of organisational know-how into city governance marked a real shift: from contesting the public to co-governing it.

Možemo!'s cultural policy for Zagreb, rooted in neighborhood-scale institutions and proximity infrastructures, builds on this legacy. Rather than imposing a top-down vision of culture, it aims to distribute the means of making meaning - resources, space, coordination - at the level where people actually live and interact. It is an extension of the civic-public ethos into the realm of formal administration, one that repositions cultural programming as a tool of spatial justice and participatory democracy.

And yet, Mišković was careful to mark the fragility of this trajectory. Today, the administrative demands placed on cultural organisations, fueled by the rise of "evidence-based" cultural policy and audit culture, threaten to erode the very forms of responsiveness and trust that made civic-public initiatives viable. The weight of reporting requirements and technocratic oversight deters sustained participation, especially from younger generations who may find more intuitive or immediate platforms for expression elsewhere. Bureaucracy here does not just regulate; it disincentivizes care.

Still, what the Croatian case offers is a political approach of negotiating the public understood as a commoning of the state formation. It teaches that public programming, when rooted in shared structures of responsibility and autonomy, can

serve as a vehicle for organisational and territorial transformation. Mišković's account foregrounds that such practices are not accidental outcomes of cultural policy, but the result of long struggles to align resources with use, participation with decision-making, and content with form.

In the discussion, this approach to counter-public programming — reclaiming publics, their visibility, legitimacy and resources — was traced further back through the legacies of Bandung. The 1955 conference brought together newly decolonising states, unions, student councils and pan-African movements to stake a claim on the world stage as agents of another planetary horizon. Its insistence on self-determination resonates as a genealogy of public programming in which assembly is infrastructure, a means of producing worlds rather than staging polite disagreement. The reference felt especially vivid given that our meeting took place only a few metres from the Galeb, the ship once used by Tito as a vehicle of the Non-Aligned Movement, carrying its promises of solidarity across continents. From there, participants drew connections to the World Social Forums of the early 2000s. These were autonomously organzied horizontal gatherings in Porto Alegre, Mumbai, Nairobi where peasant unions, feminist collectives, Indigenous struggles, NGOs and anarchist networks converged to practice a politics of encounter. As Michael Hardt observed at the time, these Forums might be read as a "new Bandung",[50] staging again the possibility of a planetary commons in the teeth of empirical powers.

Antagonistic spaces

Importantly, not all counter-programming engages the state as a terrain to be co-governed or reformed. A second counter-genealogy of public programming draws instead from an openly antagonistic repertoire, one that neither seeks recognition nor awaits permission, but builds its infrastructures through refusal and endurance.

Agnė Bagdžiūnaitė's intervention offered a vivid account of this trajectory from the Lithuanian context. Disenchanted with the exhausted promises of art-world professionalization, she began organising locally, in a small group of around fifteen people. The motivation was urgent and clear: leftist politics needed to become visible again in public space.

The catalyst was the introduction of the Euro in 2014, which triggered a sudden and steep rise in prices. Unexpectedly, a pop singer went viral for ranting about the cost of cauliflower. The public outrage that followed became known, with a mix of irony and fire, as the Cauliflower Revolution. It wasn't about vegetables, of course, but about rejecting punishing costs of living at a moment when companies saw soaring profits.

At the same time, the government pushed forward sweeping neoliberal labour reforms, seeking to replace a largely dormant but still protective Soviet-era labour code with "modernised" policies: zero-hours contracts, unregulated overtime, the erosion of the 40-hour work week.

The collective of which Bagdžiūnaitė was part of responded by occupying a park in Kaunas. Five or six tents. Nothing happened. They drank beer in public (technically forbidden) screened films, stayed visible. The police arrived, looked confused, and left. Undeterred, they moved the protest to Vilnius, directly in front of parliament. This time, the state paid attention. Surveillance teams, recording equipment, special police units. Still, the camp stayed up for two weeks. Labour unions joined. Lawyers arrived. Drafts of an alternative labour code began to take shape under tarpaulins. Meanwhile, in nearby offices, the Free Market Institute recorded podcasts praising the wisdom of invisible hands.

The protest achieved partial legislative success: the zero-hours provision was scrapped, and some worker protections were preserved. Legal barriers to striking, however, remained firmly in place. Yet something had shifted. The movement had traction. People started offering unsolicited advice. "You should block the highway," a passerby told them. It was from this ferment that Social Centre Emma was born. Named after Emma Goldman, the centre is housed in a Jewish heritage building in Kaunas—a city that conspicuously fails to commemorate either its ghetto or its radical daughters. Emma is a deliberately antagonistic structure, a patchwork of functions: library, kitchen, bar, cinema, party space, and meeting hall, and more, all functions that fill the infrastructural voids left by the city governance, including the absence of even a single gay bar. It has become a vital node for international feminist organising, hosting 8th of March protests and conferences that weave together struggles from Croatia, Poland, Latvia, and Hungary.

Bagdžiūnaitė's account revealed the capacity of such spaces to foster a distinct form of political subjectivation. They are crucial environments in which those repressed or minoritised by dominant value systems, those who think and desire otherwise, can find each other and sketch out what is needed, and what might become possible. They are formats for living and acting politically together. These kinds of spaces don't aim to amplify marginal voices in a shared civic stage, nor do they try to reclaim public infrastructures in the name of dialogue or outreach. Rather than redrawing the boundaries of

public discourse, they insist on autonomy and antagonism as symptomatic of deeper forms of structural exclusion from public life.

Read against the longer arc of working-class and anarchist organising, these spaces resonate with what Valeria Graziano described borrowing from Paolo Virno as "non-exemplary examples" for instituting public programming from below: the "people's houses," squatted "social centres" and "working man' clubs" that dotted the radical landscape of the last two centuries. Like their predecessors, Emma is not set up simply as an event, but as a durable place and infrastructure people can access. When such spaces of radical conviviality last long enough to make a scene (sometimes literally), they produce their own counter-publics.

As Graziano points out, this notion of a counter-public, first formulated by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge,[51] refused the idealised image of a single, rational-critical public sphere. Instead, they insisted that the experiences and needs of those whose lives are shaped by alienation and by everyday refusal could never be fully expressed through the bourgeois grammar of civic debate. What is required therefore is the construction of a parallel publics. Later thinkers such as Nancy Fraser (1990) expanded this idea into what she called subaltern counterpublics, those informal arenas where minoritized groups forge languages and solidarities out of exclusion.[52] For Michael Warner (2021), counterpublics are not just reactive refuges, but they are worlds in the making, constituted through shared repertoires of texts and gestures, but also the sharing of risks.[53] And, as Lauren Berlant reminded us (2016), these are often also intimate publics, affective infrastructures of belonging, attachment, and longing.[54] Read through this expanded lens, Emma offers a lived commitment to what Berlant once called the scenes of optimism: imperfect, messy, provisional spaces in which political life might be rehearsed in a joyful key.[55]

From the discussions, this genealogy was also traced further back into the "people's houses" of the workers' movements at the turn of the twentieth century. Built and maintained through collective effort, these were infrastructures of assembly, mutual aid, and conviviality: libraries, theatres, kitchens, schools, and meeting halls where culture and politics intertwined in everyday life. They served not only as refuges from the exclusions of bourgeois institutions, but as laboratories for working-class self-education and self-governance. Later, in the second half of the century, squats and centri sociali across Southern Europe carried forward this inheritance by occupying disused buildings and transforming them into social, cultural, and political hubs. These spaces, often precarious and contested, cultivated new publics through concerts, workshops, migrant solidarity networks, and feminist and queer organising, insisting that access to space and resources was a collective right rather than a privilege mediated by the market or the state.

Popular pedagogy and movement schools

A third strand of counter-public programming emerges not from formal cultural infrastructures or antagonistic spaces of resistance, but from pedagogical processes embedded within movements. These formats are often framed not as events for publics imagined as passive recipients, but as infrastructures that support already active struggles in their complexity, temporality, and need for learning. This was the proposition advanced by Manuela Zechner in her presentation on Common Ecologies (https://commonecologies.net/), a translocal movement school grounded in co-research, mutual aid, and ecosocial experimentation.

Zechner's work, developed over the last decade across Vienna, Berlin, and transnational networks, draws on a genealogy of feminist and autonomist practices of collective inquiry and radical pedagogy. In one of the collective projects she was involved in, Radical Practices of Collective Care, convened sessions at the Association of Women Artists in Vienna to explore mutual aid formations such as Occupy Sandy or Spain's PAH, not as case studies to be evaluated, but as living archives of organising in crisis. These were not expert-led seminars but co-research encounters: collaborative interviews, collective writing, and audio recordings formed the modes of sharing and reflection. Crucially, Zechner and her collaborators were not looking at these initiatives for an outside audience imagined as a general public; rather they were mapping them from within, asking how knowledge circulates within struggle and how it might be made infrastructural.

In her co-authored essay with Bue Rubner Hansen, "Building Power in a Crisis of Reproduction",[56] Zechner charts a framework for understanding the fields of social reproduction in which such counter-public infrastructures operate. These include: (1) the informal and intimate: extended families, friendships, and networks; (2) the spatially inhabited: neighbourhoods, homes, and centres; (3) the compositional: associations, cooperatives, and unions; and (4) the representational: governance, law, media. The point is to understand power as distributed across these terrains and to develop practices that can traverse and connect them.

One of the most developed strands of the school, Tactics for Agroecological Transition, exemplifies this. It brought together food cooperatives, peasant movements, and migrant farmworker collectives across Europe and Latin America

into a shared learning space online. Unlike traditional educational platforms, the course did not imagine its participants as recipients of knowledge. Instead, the collectives enrolled in the course were paid to teach each other, to bring their own situated expertise into dialogue. Toolkits emerged that wove together land struggles, feminist rural organising, and anti-racist agricultural labour politics, each translated across languages and contexts. A key insight here is that agroecology cannot be meaningfully separated from questions of gender, migration, or property regimes.

Beyond the content, the formats that shape these practices of public programming matters. The learning unfolded through radio broadcasts, asynchronous podcasts, open access texts, and direct exchanges that unfold over time. Local nodes, often anchored in real meetings and sustained digitally, provide the ground from which this school grows. This distributed architecture resisted capture by event culture and it also positioned co-learning as a foundational infrastructural condition of movement work. In the process, Common Ecologies refuses the paradigms of outreach and visibility so common to public programming, focusing on those already engaged in struggles rather than cultivating a broader audience of followers. Instead, it poses "in-reach" as a guiding principle: How can programming serve those already embedded in struggle? How can it help build capacity, trust, and reflection, rather than spectacle?

Zechner's intervention brought into the workshop a sense of programming as maintenance, as companionship, as radical pedagogy. She reminded us that public discourse is a matter of building the conditions that allow people to linger and learn in common, processes that require extended timeframes and spaces held open long enough for reflection, experimentation, and relationship-building to take root.

From the discussions that followed, this pedagogical strand was connected to a wider set of counter-genealogies: worker-led popular education such as the Plebs Leagues in the UK,[57] which offered lectures in defiance of state schooling; Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed,[58] where plays became rehearsals for collective action; Third Cinema screenings held in lunch breaks, bringing revolutionary film into everyday rhythms[59]; and the freedom schools and libraries of the U.S. civil rights movement,[60] where reading itself was an act of insurgency. Participants also pointed to the proliferation of online radical reading groups, the modular pedagogy of Célestin Freinet's école moderne, and strands of institutional pedagogy that reimagine the school as a porous platform rather than a closed container.[61] Taken together, these lineages underscore how public programming can be rethought as infrastructures of collective learning, porous, insurgent, and embedded within the struggles they serve.

Conclusions: Making room

Taken together, the three thematic inquiries give a precise blueprint of the key operations underpinning mainstream contemporary public programming. Both Sides Now showed how the vocabularies of neutrality, the platform and debate have been captured by an extreme centre whose claims to even-handedness function to discipline dissent and, increasingly, to legitimise reactionary politics. From Civility to Control traced how the norms regulating legitimacy and access to public discourse emanate from institutional settings deeply tied to military violence and to ongoing imperial and colonial projects. Finally, Counter-Genealogies of Public Programming functioned as a collective inquiry into practices that, by refusing readily available paths to consensus, sought instead to sustain discourse settings anchored in concrete practices of social justice.

Building upon the three inquiries, the workshop closing conversations extended from Graziano's emphasis on the importance of 'making room', asking if the idea of room, understood not just as a physical space but as a temporal, political, and affective condition for discourse production, can help us to imagine creating space for sustained, situated engagement and turning existing institutional formats (workshops, labs, panel discussions) toward more grounded, accountable and joyful forms of public discourse. How might public programming make room not only for different voices but also for different consequences? Citing both feminist and abolitionist traditions, she argued that room is what allows discourse to root. Workshops, labs, and debates often suffer from accelerated tempos, formats that mimic productivity rather than nurture relation. Counter-programming, in this light, means reformatting time by creating rhythms where listening and languor, friction and reflection, but also social reproduction and all sorts of byproductions can co-exist.

Each of the genealogies offered in the workshop posited both theoretical and practical examples of how public programmes might become more committed to consequences of social justice. Making room here includes practices like ensuring public programmes are developed in collaboration with groups in struggle, that relationships with such groups are sustained over time, and events serve common goals articulated at the outset. They suggest that the practical and affective needs of both groups in struggle and those working in cultural institutions are considered and implemented, that publicness does not always mean spectacle, but holding space for social movement groups when they need to reflect privately as well as when they have something to share more broadly. They suggest that budgets be opened and negotiated

collectively, and that people have the opportunity to reflect and evaluate collectively when and how the events and practices of a public programme advance social justice objectives, who has been included and not. These practices of slowing down the volume of production to care more for its consequences, pose significant questions and conflicts in the current socio-political moment, particularly in contexts where cultural institutions are scrutinised by the state or where funding is reliant on volume and footfall. However, if planned, reported and measured strategically, such processes can often force institutions to name and negotiate their own contradictions in ways that clarify aims and refine exhausting cycles of production.

What binds such efforts is a political disposition to holding space that prioritizes encounter over consensus, process over polish, refusing to treat publics as demographics or audiences. Publics are conjured and practice through speech act and reflective processes that take root and return to action, to shared or negotiated stakes and against the theatricality of liberal pluralism. They teach us that public programming can be a practice of militant care, and an antidote, from the militant, movement standpoint, to the false yet widespread dichotomy between theory (bad) and practice (good). At its best, public programmes can help us figure out different futures: not polished, not perfected, but possible and surely more desirable.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval was not required for this study. The article reports on a professional workshop involving adult participants contributing in their capacity as cultural workers, researchers, and practitioners. Participants were informed that insights from the workshop could be used for a published Case Study. No personal data were collected beyond professional affiliation, and no human subjects research as defined by institutional ethics review frameworks was conducted.

Data availability

Video recordings were made of selected workshop contributions. These recordings are not publicly available because participants did not consent to the open publication of identifiable qualitative materials. No transcripts are publicly shared. Participants were informed in advance that insights from the workshop could be used for a published Case Study.

No quantitative datasets were generated or analysed during the current study, and the article does not report statistical analyses, figures, or reproducible experimental results requiring the sharing of underlying numerical data. As such, there are no openly available datasets associated with this article.

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The paper reports on key insights from an international workshop, *ALL TALK: Institutional Discourse, Exclusions and the Politics of Gathering,* held in Drugo More, Rijeka, during May 25–26th, 2025. The workshop brought together people from cultural and educational institutions (galleries, museums and universities) from Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Lithuania, Palestine, and the United Kingdom who offer public programming. The workshop aimed to explore strategies and structures of public programming, focusing on contradictions shaping contemporary public programming. These contradictions are analysed along three principal lines of argumentation:

1. How "neutrality", "debate" and "free speech" are appropriated by far right actors;
2. How (liberal) forms of debate and civility can reproduce structures of oppression;
3. How these dynamics erase other approaches to public programming (e.g. solidarity, care, resistance).

The paper discusses a number of empirical examples: Berlin (Palestine issue), Istanbul (housing/city planning), UK art galleries (right-wing free speech), management literature and debate pedagogy/culture (separating the people from the problem), 'academic freedom' in Palestine, and militarism in the UK. The analysis shows how programming formats, supposedly promising openness, often end up reinforcing a centrist status quo that silences alternative voices, for example critiquing the violence and killing in Palestine. More specifically, the paper finds that public programming (in cultural and educational institutions) does not per se offer conditions for democratic and inclusive participation, but instead, under present conditions relating to the 'extreme centre' and the current capitalist hegemony, can reinforce structural injustices and inequalities and even reproduce logics of militarism and oppression. The empirical examples collectively lead up to question: "*How can the conflicts in public programming be thought less as the instantiation of a new public sphere and more as an indication of our current, collective horizons of struggle?*"

In the following, I will first point out two issues/opportunities to consider: one theoretical connection that could be made to strengthen your analysis, and an issue concerning the framing

of some of the empirical examples. Additionally, a few observations and questions will be offered that I hope can be useful when you revise the paper.

The argumentation connects to previous research on the problem of public programming without a public sphere – where (traditionally) democratic institutions arguably appear as empty vessels in a capitalist system increasingly irreconcilable with democracy, where publicness becomes commodified content. In the first theme, when the influence of 'the extreme centre' is discussed and related to the growing influence and fierceness of the far-right, besides Ali, I believe you should also discuss the related notion of the post-political condition conceptualised by Chantal Mouffe. This notion is arguably very closely related to the 'extreme centre' described by Ali, framing the technocratic and ideologically arid landscapes of neoliberal societies. To not mention Mouffe in this context seems to me like a theoretical omission, and I believe that her theoretical framing could both support and enrich your argumentation (also in relation to the critique you present concerning the Habermasian notion of the public sphere).

Several illustrative examples from different countries are offered, providing compelling cases for the theoretically driven account of how e.g. 'neutrality' and the 'platform' are employed, while political debate is increasingly separated from political passions and lived experiences. The diverse examples are both a strength, and a potential weakness, for the analysis (as the reader at times may find it difficult to follow the main lines of argumentation). The analysis would be strengthened if the diverse political and historical conditions were better acknowledged in some of the examples (e.g., the relation between Germany and Israel as rooted in certain historical factors that should not be ignored, and the autocratic state in Turkey is quite different compared to other countries discussed). At the same time, other empirical cases are somewhat more contextualised, and for balance and clarity, some of the longer accounts could be shortened.

The example of the 'controversial' programming event at the CBRL in Palestine offers a slightly more detailed and rich account of the background and the events than in previous examples, likely due to the personal account provided by Haddad, and how he personally was affected when his position at CBRL was terminated. The analysis provided by Haddad points to how freedom of speech, in the neoliberal paradigm, echoes colonial logics and the privileging of individual entrepreneurism as opposed to collective resistance. The discussion of current interests governing CBRL and similar institutions, and the limits of what can and cannot be expressed despite 'academic freedom', points to an interesting research agenda, asking questions such as: *who benefits from the silencing of conflict? What do claims of neutrality neutralise?*

The last sections of the article focus on workshop contributions speaking to the question: "*What forms of public programming refuse detachment and refuse the false peace of neutrality?"* Examples include operational and popular autonomy in the Croatian independent cultural sector, organised protests in Lithuania and the creation of environments for repressed/minoritised groups. The examples highlight the importance of autonomy for an independent cultural sector with diverse actors and agendas, and the need for organisation from below. The theoretical discussion using the notion of (subaltern) counterpublics, and scenes of optimism, is interesting, but a reader might ask: how can these ideas inform and contribute to public programming in cultural and educational institutions? A brief concluding discussion on this note is offered, but I would encourage the authors to offer some additional thoughts on how counter-programming practices can be utilised within institutional settings, for example when you prioritize *"encounter over consensus, process over polish, refusing to treat publics as demographics or audiences"*. What could this

entail in practice, both in terms of opportunities and challenges (given institutional settings and current sociopolitical conditions)?

Given the interesting topic of these last sections, the subtitle of the article could be slightly revised to: *"A workshop on discourse production and counter-practices in public programming".*

Some minor issues
Page 12: "Movements like BDS…" – this abbreviation has not been introduced previously.

Minor language issues – the abstract and the summary need some checking, and some issues should be checked in the main text (e.g. on p. 9, fourth para, last sentence, and on p. 12, second para, third sentence).

References should be added when specific theories/theorists are mentioned (e.g. on p. 14 when Powell is discussed, or on p. 6 when you refer to the pedagogy of Célestin Freinet).

Is the background of the case's history and progression described in sufficient detail?
Yes

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full access and reuse by other researchers?
No source data required

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data and analysis?
Yes

Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for teaching or other practitioners?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Public libraries, cultural policy, democracy

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 25 March 2026

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Summary

The case study presents the key insights from the international workshop *ALL TALK: Institutional Discourse, Exclusions and the Politics of Gathering*, held at Drugo More, Rijeka, in May 2025. The workshop brought together fifteen participants from Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Lithuania, Palestine, and the United Kingdom to explore the structures, strategies, and stakes of public programming both within and beyond cultural institutions. The case study identifies three principal themes emerging from the participants' research and presentations: *first*, how the ostensibly hollow frameworks of "neutrality," "debate," and "free speech" are co-opted by right-wing and reactionary forces to justify attacks on migrants, feminists, queer communities, and the poor; *second*, how the very formats of debate and civility – often celebrated as antidotes to violence – are themselves embedded with histories of colonial violence, coercion, and militarisation that continue to resurface in the present; and *third*, how these dynamics systematically erase the memory of alternative genealogies and approaches to public programming, including modes of gathering and producing discourse from below as forms of care, solidarity, and resistance. The case study concludes that public programming can be understood as a practice of militant care, offering, from a movement-oriented perspective, an antidote to the false yet pervasive dichotomy between theory and practice.

Overall assessment

The case study has several strengths, foremost among them its provision of clear examples alongside informed and critical reflections on the tensions within, and limitations of, public programming. It thus provides information and insights that are valuable to cultural sector practitioners, researchers, university students, and policymakers alike.

I do, however, have some concerns regarding the clarity of the text. In particular, it is not always clear whether statements reflect the authors' own views or report the workshop participants' accounts. It is also sometimes difficult to distinguish between what was said during the workshop and what represents the authors' theoretical analysis or historical and contextual information. One reason for this lack of clarity is that the authors have not outlined the methodology used to produce the case study. Providing an initial methodological description would make it clearer how the authors approached their work and what decisions they made during the process. The clarity of the text could be further enhanced if the authors incorporated explanatory text. See the comments below for suggestions on more concrete revisions.

Major Suggestions

(1) As mentioned, it is not always clear whether statements reflect the authors' own views or report the workshop participants' accounts. Clarifying this is particularly important given that the subject matter of the case study concerns political and current events, as well as the participants' own experiences. For example, on page 7 it is stated: "In a deeply problematic move, journalists

such as JJ Charlesworth and Jonathan Jones from *The Guardian* newspaper, reinforced Miller's stance, criticising the protestors and stating that no matter what happens in a gallery, no one should demand its closure." It is unclear who considers this move "deeply problematic" – is it Kelly specifically, or all of the authors? Another example appears on page 9: "In this context, the designation in 2025 of Palestine Action as a fully-fledged terrorist group by the British government is as revealing as it is chilling." Here, it is unclear according to whom this is considered "chilling." When evaluative terms of this kind are used, it is essential to clarify who is making the assessment.

(2) As mentioned, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between what was said during the workshop and what represents the authors' theoretical analysis. This evident in the discussion of Tariq Ali's term the "extreme centre." While it is clear that Graziano draws on this concept, it remains unclear whether it was introduced during the workshop presentation or incorporated later in the writing of the case study.

(3) As mentioned, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between what was said during the workshop and what represents the authors' historical and contextual information. This is, for example, the case regarding the historical information about the British Academy on pages 9–10. As with the points discussed above, this could be clarified using explanatory text.

(4) Given the length of the text and the richness of examples, it is not always clear which of the three themes is being addressed. If the authors made this clearer throughout the text (and and through clearer headings) their arguments would be much easier to follow. This could also be made clearer if the authors, in the conclusion, summarised the three themes and more explicitly linked them to the findings already presented in the final conclusions.

Minor Suggestions
(1) The examples presented in the case study are strong and effective, though the situations and institutions they describe vary in terms of actors, initiators, and funding. For instance, is there a meaningful distinction between a protest led by an artist-activist like Nan Goldin at a state-run museum and one organised by activists at a corporate-sponsored biennale? If no such distinction exists, this could also be highlighted.

(2) In the second paragraph of the first page, the text states: "During this same period, cultural institutions including contemporary art organisations, universities and festivals have become increasingly funded, structured and organised in ways that entangle them deeply within the relationships, logics, conducts and injustices of corporate capitalism, exposing a much more active set of alignments with what Tariq Ali has termed the 'extreme centre'." However, the exact time period being referred to is unclear and would benefit from clarification.

(3) Overall, the text is well-written and clear, but there are some minor errors that could be corrected: the authors' use of hyphens versus em dashes to mark subordinate clauses is inconsistent; in the first sentence under the heading 'Platforming Debates' on page 5, it would be helpful to clarify which dynamics are being referred to; on page 6, paragraph 2, "etc" should be written out as "etcetera"; on page 6, paragraph 5, "&" is used instead of "and" in the citation of authors; and on page 6, "focussed" should be corrected to "focused"; it is not necessary to spell out "British Academy" in parentheses in paragraph 7 on page 9, as the meaning of the abbreviation "BA" has already been clarified in the preceding paragraph.

(4) There could be benefits to making the text, and especially the examples, more concise. While the text currently contains a wealth of interesting information, as noted, it can sometimes be difficult to navigate. If the authors wish to retain its full length, the suggestions outlined above should help enhance clarity and ensure that the examples are showcased to their full effect.

Final remarks
As noted, the case study has several strengths and presents numerous interesting examples and lines of reasoning. Revising the text to enhance clarity would make it easier for readers to navigate and allow its content to reach and benefit a wider audience. I am grateful for the opportunity to read and provide feedback on this work.

Is the background of the case's history and progression described in sufficient detail?
Yes

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full access and reuse by other researchers?
No source data required

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data and analysis?
Partly

Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for teaching or other practitioners?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: My areas of expertise include Museum Studies, Art History, the History of Ideas, public debate, and cultural funding

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.