

## Cambridge Festival 2025: tackling crisis, controversy, and change

The Cambridge Festival 2025 will take place from March 19 to April 4, bringing together experts, activists, and thought leaders to engage in critical discussions and workshops on some of the most pressing political and societal issues of our time.

The Festival offers a dynamic programme tackling global challenges, from regulating controversial markets like surrogacy and combating fascism, to keeping journalists safe in war zones and improving interfaith communication – all focused on finding actionable solutions.

### Key Highlights:

#### **The Baron de Lancey Lecture 2025: Repugnant Transactions and Taboo Trades** (20 March)

Amid ongoing debates around the regulation of controversial markets, Professor Kimberly D. Krawiec from the University of Virginia will explore morally contested markets such as surrogacy, sex work, and the sale of organs, eggs, and sperm. With the recent media attention on the ethics of surrogacy and the growing global black market for organs, this compelling lecture will examine societal decisions on market boundaries and ethical limits, comparing cultural and legal approaches to these divisive issues.

#### **What is Fascism?** (20 March)

In a highly anticipated talk, historian Professor Martin A. Ruehl will confront the disturbing resurgence of fascism in today's political landscape. Drawing on his expertise in German thought, Ruehl will unravel the origins, ideologies, and myths that continue to fuel the appeal of fascism. This timely and provocative talk will explore how these dangerous ideologies have evolved, from the 20th century to the present day, and their growing influence on contemporary politics and culture.

Speaking ahead of his event, Professor Ruehl said: "It has become commonplace to view fascism as essentially anti-democratic. This is a dangerous misconception, because it ignores both fascism's populist legitimization – its claim to be 'of the people' and 'for the people' – and the enormous popular appeal of its promise to bring about comprehensive national renewal. It also overlooks fascism's actual aim, which is to undo the liberal, universalist and ultimately Christian belief in the sanctity of the individual and the brotherhood of men.

"We will continue to underestimate fascism's truly radical nature if we use the term primarily to denounce political figures (eg the 47th president of the United States) and ideologies (eg chauvinism, racism, xenophobia) outside our understanding of what democracy is or should be. We need a less inflationary and more historically informed definition of fascism to appreciate the extreme threat it has posed and still poses to the moral and religious foundations of Western politics."

#### **The Ideological Brain: Unpacking the Science of Vulnerable Minds** (1 April)

Building on the themes explored in Professor Ruehl's talk, Dr Leor Zmigrod, a leading expert in political neuroscience, will unpack the cognitive, emotional, and neurobiological factors that make people more prone to extreme ideologies. Based on her book *The Ideological Brain*, she

will explore what it means to have a free, open mind—and how to stay flexible in the face of extremism.

### **Dialogue in Times of Distress: Interfaith** (2 April)

In the aftermath of recent geopolitical tensions, **Dr James Sunderland** from the Woolf Institute will address the obstacles to interfaith dialogue and offer strategies to facilitate communication between different religious groups. This powerful session will explore how events like the Gaza conflict and the 7 October incidents in Israel have impacted Muslim-Jewish relations in the UK.

“One of the most worrying challenges both Muslim and Jewish communities face at the moment is the threat from an emboldened far-right,” Dr Sunderland notes. “The riots last summer as well as the alarming rise in antisemitism and islamophobia over the past year and a half have been fed in part by, and in turn encouraged, the far-right. Both Muslims and Jews are targets for such groups. Whilst Israel-Palestine divides the two faith communities, it’s extremely hard for them to work together in a unified way to address the threat from racist, violent groups.

“It will take time and plenty of dialogue before tensions surrounding October 7<sup>th</sup> 2023 and the war in Gaza begin to settle, but it’s important that all communities can feel their voice is being heard and appreciated so that interfaith communities can begin to rebuild trust and work together to tackle the major issues that face all communities.”

### **Ideas That Could Change the World** (21 March)

Amid growing concerns over government surveillance and corporate power, human rights lawyer Jennifer Gibson will unveil [Psst](#), a pioneering non-profit that allows individuals to anonymously share public interest information without the risks of whistleblowing during a panel event showcasing some of the latest research from Gates Scholars. As privacy rights are increasingly threatened, Psst offers a crucial way for citizens to safely expose wrongdoing and hold the powerful accountable—just when we need it most.

### **Keeping the Storytellers Safe in War** (3 April)

Photographer and filmmaker **Paul Conroy** will recount his personal experiences covering war zones, sharing insights into the risks journalists face and exploring ways to safeguard those on the frontlines. He was injured in Syria during the early stages of the war, when the media centre he was in was targeted by an airstrike. His colleague Marie Colvin was killed. The discussion will also include **Tim Singleton**, Head of International News at Sky News, **Dr Mark Grant**, Head of Security at Associated Press, and **Mark Smith**, Chair of the International Broadcasting Convention.

### **Social Class and Inequality: What Can Be Done?** (29 March)

As the cost-of-living crisis deepens, Dr Nigel Kettley will tackle the growing issue of class inequality in the UK. In this timely discussion, Kettley will explore how social class shapes life chances, highlighting the heightened awareness of class inequality. He will critically examine the effectiveness of past and present government policies, exploring what can and should be done to reduce inequality. The talk will also address the stark inequalities in Cambridge, currently the most unequal city in the UK, offering new insights into the ongoing push for social equity and mobility.

**Delivering Education in Armed Conflict and Telling the Story (4 April)**

Following the screening of the BBC Panorama *Saving Syria's Children*, which captured an airstrike on a school, a panel including Ian Pannell, ABC Chief Foreign Correspondent; Dr Saleyha Ahsan, filmmaker and doctor; and Professor Pauline Rose, Professor of International Education and Director of the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) will address the dangers students face in war zones and discuss innovative ways to ensure education continues in conflict settings.

**The Festival also showcases creative and interactive approaches to contemporary issues:****The Price of Mahogany: Performing Activism – Re-making History" (22 March)**

Sean Lang's powerful new drama delves into the historical ties between the 18th-century slave trade, English law, and racial injustice. The event will feature a staged reading and interactive discussions, examining the relevance of this history in today's activism.

**While We Were Sleeping (19-24 March)** Artist **Idit Nathan** and Unruly Co-founder and COO **Sarah Wood** will engage in a unique 10-day project that challenges how media shapes modern spectatorship. Each day, they will react to a news story told in 10 different ways, offering a creative commentary and artistic response on media narratives.

**Tearing Up Money: Turning Currency into Collective Art (22 March – 4 April)** Venezuelan ARTivist Katherine Hasegawa will lead a series of provocative workshops transforming worthless Venezuelan banknotes into art, demonstrating how creativity can reclaim value in response to crisis and corruption.

**How Do You Make Voting Decisions? (26 March)** The Cambridge Political Psychology Lab will explore the psychology of politics through an innovative study simulating 'elections' in different environments. The aim is to understand the complexities of voting decisions, what factors affect them, and how people engage with different political parties.

**Tackling Harmful Online Speech: Speak Back (31 March)** Dr Stefanie Ullmann from the Minderoo Centre for Technology and Democracy will lead a practical workshop on creating counterspeech to tackle online harassment and promote positive online communication. The session will provide tools for using facts, humour, and empathy to combat harmful online discourse.

**The Trials of Democracy: Who Gives a XXXX? (5 April)** Menagerie Theatre Company and artist Hilary Cox Condrón will explore the meaning of democracy in this public art project, questioning who gets to participate, why or why not, and where democracy's fault lines lie today.

"The Cambridge Festival 2025 isn't just another event—it's a rallying cry for tackling the toughest issues of our time head-on," said David Cain, Festival Manager. "From confronting the rise of dangerous ideologies to protecting those on the frontlines of conflict, we're creating a space where big ideas and bold solutions come together. This is about sparking real change, fostering understanding, and pushing the boundaries of what's possible when we come together to confront global challenges with urgency and creativity."

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### **About the Cambridge Festival**

The Cambridge Festival is an annual multidisciplinary event that highlights the University of Cambridge's research, innovation, and creativity. It provides a platform for people of all ages to explore groundbreaking ideas, engage with experts, and discuss solutions to global challenges through lectures, performances, workshops, and interactive activities. Themes cover health, society, environment and discovery. For more information, please visit:

<https://www.festival.cam.ac.uk/>

### **About the University of Cambridge**

Founded in 1209, the University of Cambridge is one of the world's leading educational and research institutions. With 31 Colleges and over 100 departments, it attracts a diverse and dynamic community of students and scholars from around the globe. Cambridge is committed to addressing global challenges through interdisciplinary research and innovation, with a major impact on the UK and global economies. For more information on the University of Cambridge, visit: [www.cam.ac.uk](http://www.cam.ac.uk)

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