

A report on participation

European Alliance of Academies & Homerton College Student Conference: *On Freedom of Artistic Expression in Literature in the 21st Century*
Saturday 26 and Sunday 27 August 2023, Homerton College, Cambridge University | UK

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The first day of the conference started with leisure activities: a walk through Cambridge and punting. I then followed the other peoples' sessions.

Panel Discussion 'How does self-censorship work for a writer?'

In the panel discussion addressing the question 'How does self-censorship work for a writer?' moderated by poet Daljit Nagra, British author Marina Warner expressed her concern surrounding moral judgements and inhibitions regarding political correctness, particularly the existence of sensitivity readers. Czech author Bianca Bellová, as the only one at the table to have grown up under a communist regime, added that anything that hints at 'being allowed or not being allowed to say something' fills her with terror, stemming from experiences in her youth. Kenan Malik, writer of the book *Not so Black and White*, in which he attempts to argue against excessive identitarian thinking based on historical evidence, expressed his standpoint from the auditorium. In the audience, a postdoctoral student opposed vehemently going against identification with one group, considering that groups such as the Roma are only now being given a voice, in literature too, and a supportive group can help with that, if we look at how black American authors and movements are tackling it.

During this debate, Hungarian authors Réka Borda and Ferenc Czinki pointed out that vastly different dynamics are at work within Europe. While in the West, the only concern seems to be one of excessive political correctness, censorship of authors in Orban's Hungary is more direct. People abroad often ask them whether they are allowed to write anything they want: in principle, yes, but as an author, you die an economic death if your opinion is not aligned to the dominant one. Orban's regime owns all media and publishers of any economic significance, after all, so you do not stand a chance if you hold contrary opinions. Fortunately, an active countermovement still exists, supported by small publishing companies and media, and public appearances. LGBTQ+ authors flee Hungary as they are no longer safe there. All literary associations have an 'official' (loyal to Orban) and a 'free' version.

Workshop 'Looking at yourself'

On the Sunday, I gave a workshop entitled 'Looking at yourself', during which I engaged the students in a discussion, asking questions on subjects regarding 'Whose voice is heard': writing in a language other than English, the freedom of form and genre, the position of female authors, writing about racism as a white person, and writing from a non-human perspective. I chose the title of my workshop because I wanted to base it on my own experiences as a writer and reader, and on the insight that preconceptions and assumptions applied to me too. Time was limited (45 mins), but the students – were fully engrossed. My main aim was to increase their awareness of the external control behind their reading behaviour, and I think I succeeded.

Debate 'Who has the right to speak? Whose voice is heard?'

Next, I took part in the debate 'Who has the right to speak? Whose voice is heard?' led by David Whitley, with Kenan Malik and Cécile Wajsbrot. Once again, Kenan Malik addressed identitarian ideology and read an extract from his book. I totally agree with him that identitarian thinking, or all too far-reaching political correctness, can degenerate into a minefield. And it is certainly true that a group of 'women' or 'people of colour' or 'Muslims' has a heterogenous composition and that there is something amiss with painting the entire 'group' – which isn't actually a group – with the same brush. It made me want to read his book seeing as I also contemplate these issues. But I also think it is possible to keep the debate alive within a group and to belong to different action groups at the same time while defending the various interests. I myself went to the feministic authors collective Fixdit because I began to understand the need for a safe space, and because I came to see how detrimental

it is to the mental health of so many to encounter forms of gaslighting on such a large scale when they share their specific experiences. This elicited much agreement from those in the auditorium, and Cécile Wajsbrot added her own examples, including the account of the persecution of her own Jewish family members. I read from my historic short story 'Pionier' (from *Veronderstellingen*, 2012 / *Assumptions*, 2015), about the Hungarian doctor Ignaz Semmelweis who discovered the importance of handwashing to combat bacteria but who, despite all the evidence, was dismissed because people couldn't stand him. It is a tragic tale of the consequences of belonging to a lower status in the prevailing balance of power. The extract was extremely well received and some of those present watched the highly critically acclaimed theatre performance *Semmelweis* that was travelling through the US at the time.