

Yayo Herrero

We are now going to begin our next panel, where we will explore, debate and reflect on the idea of community.

I believe this is an extraordinarily complex concept at the present time.

We are living through a period that I like to describe as a time when the global economy, politics and culture are waging something close to a war against life itself.

We are facing a profound ecological, social and political crisis which, from our perspective, is often rooted in an understanding of human beings that is far removed from who we really are.

As human beings, we are part of a living planet. Plants, animals, air, soil and water all interact with one another, collectively creating the conditions that make life possible.

We are also vulnerable beings, incapable of living in isolation. Human life is, by its very nature, interdependent. We cannot fully develop as individuals on our own.

In this sense, human life is fundamentally communal.

To help us reflect on what community means, we are joined today by two people whose perspectives I consider essential. They come from different backgrounds, but their approaches are deeply complementary.

First, we have Eliane Brum, a journalist, writer and documentary filmmaker with enormous international recognition. Her investigative journalism is, in my view, profoundly educational.

She is the co-founder of Sumaúma, a platform I believe is essential to follow, and the author of an extraordinary book focused on the Amazon. It is a privilege to have you with us.

And alongside her we have Souleymane Bachir Diagne, a philosopher and university professor, Director of the Institute of African Studies at Columbia University in New York, and an internationally recognised scholar of postcolonial studies.

What I particularly value in his work is the way he brings different disciplines together to offer a much more complex and comprehensive understanding of the world we live in and of how we can exist within it.

I would like to begin by asking you both the same question:

Drawing on your experience and your respective journeys, what is a community? And what conflicts are communities facing today?

Eliane Brum

Good afternoon.

It is a great pleasure to be here.

I would like to express my full support for everyone fighting against the erosion of public education, both within and outside institutions, in the hope that we can build bridges.

I come from the Amazon rainforest, which is the home I have chosen.

And before we think about what a city or a community is, I would like to talk about a forest — or any biome, any natural space that is still able to resist — in a world that has been waging war against nature for more than five hundred years.

When most non-Indigenous people hear the words “forest” or “Amazon”, I think they imagine a place full of trees and animals.

But that is not a forest. That is a zoo.

A forest, like any other biome, is a relationship. It is a relationship between everything and everything else: a relationship of transformation, exchange, generosity, cooperation and interdependence.

When the possibility of relationship disappears, the forest disappears.

When the possibility of relationship disappears, life disappears.

So what about our cities — the cities where we are born and where we live, despite all their differences?

Our cities have become spaces where relationships are destroyed and, with them, life itself.

To understand this deadly dynamic, we need to look at the way our cities have treated the other.

What we call the peripheries are home to millions of other human beings like us, but they have fewer rights to the city and less access to the rights enjoyed by those recognised as full citizens.

This inequality is shaped by racism, gender, social class and disability.

In our cities, most people have less power to decide what kind of city they want to build, and fewer rights as citizens.

And yet, it is precisely in these peripheries that technologies of resistance have emerged, as well as the communities that make life possible.

In reality, the true centre of the city is already in the peripheries, because they are the ones sustaining and driving our cities in so many ways.

But this real centrality is ignored and displaced so that power can remain concentrated in the hands of a minority.

Without public policies that recognise this reality, and without effective mechanisms for these people to participate in decision-making, we will continue to reproduce inequality and prevent any genuine possibility of building community.

Because for a community to exist, power must be shared with those who have historically been excluded from it: in Brazil, Black people; in the United States, Black people; in Europe, migrants, refugees and many other groups.

Without sharing power, there is no community.

That means that those who hold power today must understand that they will have to give some of it up.

Everything else is simply empty talk.

But I would also like to raise another question today: what place do we give to other species?

This is fundamental when we talk about cities and community, and yet it is so often overlooked.

Our cities have expelled almost every other form of life that is not human.

We have appropriated vast areas of the planet and driven out countless other forms of life.

The only non-human beings we tend to welcome are cats and dogs: animals that are well cared for and often deeply loved, but also domesticated and turned into beings that serve our emotional needs.

Rats, mosquitoes, many birds and other animals are regarded as troublesome invaders that need to be eliminated.

In supermarkets, we find animals transformed into commodities, stripped of their individuality after a long process of violence that reduces them to “animal protein”.

We also have plants enslaved in monocultures, living beings reduced to mere products.

Beneath our feet, rivers are often buried under concrete.

Our roads cut through mountains, drilling into and devastating living bodies.

This violent experience of the city is often presented to us as though it were universal. But it is not.

It is rooted in a deliberate error that lies at the heart of capitalism: the separation of human beings from nature.

That separation allows us to treat nature as something outside ourselves, rather than as part of who we are.

Nature becomes a commodity-body, an object available for exploitation, destruction and the extraction of ever greater quantities of resources.

This arbitrary separation between humanity and nature has brought us to climate and biodiversity collapse, global warming, extreme weather events and, ultimately, the very real possibility of extinction.

Over the past centuries, our cities have been built and developed according to this logic of separation from nature — nature conceived as something other, something to be domesticated, controlled or even eliminated.

That is why our cities have become places where any relationship with the living planet is pushed aside or regarded as subversive, even dangerous.

The logic of capitalism is precisely to eliminate relationships and, in doing so, to prevent the construction of genuine communities. Real communities are very different from simple associations of consumers.

To build real communities, we need to understand ourselves as interdependent beings. We need to open ourselves to the other — both to other human beings and to other forms of life.

We also need to understand ourselves as relationships.

If nature, the forest and life itself are defined by relationships, so are we.

Even though we often forget it, we are not isolated individuals.

We are not simply bodies that happen to contain bacteria.

We are also bacteria.

And that idea completely changes our perspective.

Nature becomes an “other” because this way of thinking destroys the very idea of the individual on which capitalism is built.

This fiction of the self-sufficient individual has gradually led us towards the impossibility of building community.

But I want to remind you that this is only one experience of what a city can be.

Other peoples have developed very different ways of living.

Recent archaeological research in the Amazon has shown that, before the European invasion of the Americas, there were cities in the middle of the rainforest with populations of more than one million people.

These cities did not destroy the forest because they were themselves part of the forest.

They were cities rooted in nature and in the relationships that nature creates.

The ancestors of today’s Indigenous peoples of the Amazon have lived in this territory for at least thirteen thousand years. They transformed the forest through their relationships with all other living beings.

To make these places easier to understand, archaeologists have called them “garden cities”.

Scientists studying the formation of landscapes even argue that a significant part of today’s Amazon rainforest was planted and shaped by these peoples.

In both cases, we are talking about a process based on relationships.

Everything was built through relationships.

It was with the arrival of Europeans, and later of local elites who adopted the same logic of domination, that this began to be destroyed.

This way of understanding the world has already pushed some areas of the Amazon beyond the point of no return and could eventually cause the entire rainforest to cease being a rainforest in the coming years.

That would make it virtually impossible to control global warming.

So when I hear the expression “Educating Cities”, the first thing that comes to mind is the need to **unlearn**.

We need to unlearn the destructive education that has taught us to see ourselves as separate from nature.

We need to unlearn an existence mediated by consumption and rebuild relationships of interdependence among all living beings.

Our cities must be radically reimagined if they are to have any chance of becoming genuine communities.

They must open themselves to all forms of life, not just to other human beings.

That means profoundly transforming the way we eat, the way we inhabit our cities, the way we dress and, above all, the way we understand who we are and who the other is.

If we continue to think in binary terms, separating humanity from nature and placing ourselves at the centre of everything, then any action we take will be little more than an illusion.

To transform our cities and build community, we must finally break with this false separation and understand ourselves once again as part of nature — as beings constituted by relationships.

Perhaps some of you are thinking that what I am saying is unrealistic, or even excessively radical.

But I come from one of the front lines of the war against nature, and I can assure you that the real risk of extinction is precisely the consequence of this way of thinking.

Our children, our grandchildren and future generations will only have a chance of living on a less hostile planet if we radically change the way we understand ourselves and others.

Our generation, imperfect like every generation before it, probably faces the most difficult task in human history: stopping those who are devouring the world.

Stopping figures such as Donald Trump, Benjamin Netanyahu and so many others.

Stopping, too, the shareholders of the major fossil fuel, mining, meat and soy corporations.

Our task is to rebuild our relationship with life, to understand that we too are nature and that we only exist in relationship with all the other beings who share this planet.

All over the world, people are already fighting for this — for example, by uncovering buried rivers or removing dams.

It is not that we have another option.

We do not.

Either we change radically, or we condemn our children and the children of everyone else to death.

Rebuilding the web of life with all living beings is not naïve.

It is an act of lucidity.

Thank you very much.

Souleymane Bachir Diagne

It is an honour and a great pleasure to share these reflections with both of you on a panel like this.

Let me begin by answering directly the question you asked about what a community is, and then I will develop that answer.

If I had to summarise it in a single sentence, I would say this:

A community is the movement of making humanity together.

And I hope that what I am about to say will explain what I mean.

First of all, we know that the question of community in the world we live in today can seem almost paradoxical.

We live in a world where community appears to have lost much of its meaning. A world characterised by fragmentation, identity politics and ethnonationalism.

So we are confronted not only with identities that divide us and prevent us from becoming a community, but also with their most violent expression: war, with all its atrocities.

Today we find ourselves asking whether the very idea of a just war, or even the notion of a law governing war, still has any meaning.

The world we live in therefore seems to turn the idea of community into a kind of utopia.

And yet.

What is this fragmented world?

It is not simply a state of affairs that we observe.

We have to recognise that there are forces of fragmentation actively at work.

The reason why the world we live in today hardly deserves to be called a world is that, in order to have a world, we need a sense of worldhood.

We need a sense of what it means to make humanity together.

We must therefore be able to identify these forces of fragmentation, and in particular the philosophy that lies behind them.

I come from Senegal — I am Senegalese by origin — and I am now also American, living in the United States, as you mentioned.

And I observe that the world I live in, particularly the United States today, is producing a number of very strange publications.

These publications seek to challenge the very idea of empathy.

We live in a world where evolutionary psychologists, as they describe themselves, have written books arguing against empathy, based on an idea that may initially sound reasonable.

The argument is that when I feel empathy, I can become overwhelmed by such an intense emotion, by such a powerful desire to put myself in another person's place, that I may eventually lose my ability to analyse things rationally and make decisions in a properly analytical way.

What is also happening is that certain political forces — particularly those on the right and the far right — have appropriated this opposition to a concept that nevertheless seems to express something profoundly human: empathy, compassion, solidarity and fraternity.

They present these qualities as weaknesses.

We have seen a billionaire, probably the richest person in the world today, describe empathy as the greatest weakness of Western civilisation.

This, too, is part of what we are confronting in our fragmented world.

The question is how we oppose it.

We cannot simply accept this fragmentation, which capitalism is perfectly comfortable with as long as financial flows continue to circulate. In the cultural sphere, meanwhile, we can become completely dispersed.

And yet, the very thing that opens us up to one another — the thing that prevents our cultures and civilisations from closing in upon themselves — is precisely what is under attack.

As the speakers on the previous panel also discussed, there is a growing tendency towards isolation.

The idea being promoted is that human cultures are islands, fundamentally incomparable, that we are inevitably different tribes and nations, and that these differences separate us.

The attack on empathy therefore follows a clear logic.

It is the logic of separatism.

And it is also the logic of supremacism.

This is the kind of fragmentation our world is experiencing today.

As you said earlier, it is about eliminating relationships.

The forces attacking us are forces that seek to eliminate relationships — to eliminate the ways in which cultures can instead open themselves to one another, in keeping with that old humanist idea that, as long as a culture is human, it cannot truly be foreign.

We manufacture difference.

We manufacture otherness.

And societies function in this way because certain forces derive real political benefit from it.

So what response can we give, returning to your question about what it means to build community?

We need to identify what stands against this position, against this veritable culture war being waged by forces on the right and far right, particularly against the very ideas of empathy and fraternity.

We must respond with fraternity.

And we must build an idea that our world desperately needs: that beyond our divisions and our cultural differences — and yes, we are different nations, different cultures, speaking different languages — there is something that transcends these differences.

That something is our common humanity, and a renewed understanding of universality that we must build together.

I know, of course, that the concept of the universal has a bad reputation.

Today, whenever we hear the word “universal”, there is a tendency to think that the universal must necessarily be colonial, that it must necessarily be imperial — that it was precisely in the name of the universal that colonialism took place, when Europe declared itself the natural bearer of universality and therefore claimed a mission to bring it to the rest of the world.

We know that decolonisation was carried out precisely against this imperial and colonial conception of the universal.

And, as you mentioned earlier, my work is situated within what we now call postcolonial studies.

But I have always been wary of what we call in French *jeter le bébé avec l'eau du bain* — throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

In other words, we should not abandon the very idea of the universal simply because it has been claimed by an imperial and dominating European universalism.

I believe that what is unacceptable today, and what has now reached its end, is **vertical universalism**.

The idea that one region of the world, one set of cultures, one civilisation — to use a word that has become fashionable — can present itself as a beacon for the world, placing everyone else on its periphery and naturally positioning itself at the centre.

It is this vertical universalism that is coming to an end through the processes of decolonisation, both political and epistemological.

Instead, we need the idea that different and equally valid cultures, existing alongside one another on the same plane, can come together and, so to speak, forge a universal for our time.

A universal that is no longer vertical, but what I call, following the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a **lateral universal**, or a **horizontal universal**.

Thinking together.

But that is a difficult task.

This universal is not an object that can simply be displayed.

It is a practice that we have to carry out together.

The idea that we need a practice of universalisation is what I defend in my latest book, which is probably one of the reasons I was invited here. I gave it the French title *Universaliser*, deliberately emphasising the verb “to universalise” rather than turning “universal” into a noun.

Because the universal is a practice.

And it is a common practice.

Imagine a world in which we make universality a political project.

Imagine making fraternity a political project.

We would then oppose these forces of fragmentation, these identity-based forces that exist in both the Global North and the Global South.

From this perspective, populism is unfortunately one of the most widely shared phenomena in the world today.

We find populism in the North — built on the dehumanisation of others, the denunciation and rejection of foreigners, the stigmatisation of migrants.

But we also find this kind of populism in the South, where xenophobic movements and populist forces are increasingly holding societies hostage.

Against these populisms, we must make fraternity a political project.

The world I have described, the fragmentation I have been talking about, shows us that we live in a world of widespread apartheid.

We are confined within our different cultures, and these forces seek to imprison us within our different identities.

It is reminiscent of South Africa under apartheid, when official policy maintained that human cultures could not and should not mix; that each should remain in its own lane and develop independently, without meeting the others.

This is the widespread apartheid we are experiencing today.

And the response must be the same response that Mandela and Desmond Tutu gave to the apartheid regime.

It is captured in that magnificent word from the Bantu languages: **Ubuntu**.

Ubuntu was reclaimed by Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela as part of their effort to build, on the ruins of apartheid, a rainbow nation.

I translate Ubuntu as **making humanity together**.

The profound philosophical meaning of this concept, rooted in the humanism of the Bantu languages, contains two fundamental ideas.

The first is that being human is a task and a responsibility.

Being human, being a person, is not a finished state.

It is an invitation to become what we ought to be.

We always have a responsibility to fulfil our humanity.

And the second idea is that this fulfilment of our humanity can only take place through reciprocity and relationship.

It cannot happen in individual isolation.

It is not the fulfilment of oneself in the sense of Descartes' famous statement, "I think, therefore I am."

The idea here is that I receive my humanity from the humanity of others, through my relationship with them.

That is precisely what this concept contains.

And that is why I think the best answer to your question about community is this:

Community is the movement of making humanity together — of realising our humanity through relationship, reciprocity and hospitality.

Thank you.

Yayo Herrero

Because of the challenges of time management, which are always complicated, we have had to reduce this panel to 20 minutes. It was originally planned to last around half an hour.

I chose not to cut the contributions I had asked the speakers to develop at greater length. I did so because, as you have heard, both speakers are offering perspectives that are not often heard — perspectives and voices that are not always sufficiently present — and I felt they deserved the time to develop them.

We now have only five or six minutes left, so I will give each of you three minutes to conclude.

Eliane, you have spoken about a concept of community that embraces human beings and goes beyond humanity itself, extending the idea of community to the living planet.

For this Congress of Educating Cities, where there will be so many spaces and opportunities for encounter, I would like to ask you for one or two key ideas that you believe are particularly important at this moment.

We already have a sense of your contribution, but if you could summarise it.

And I would also like to ask you about something you mentioned in your work: this different understanding of the universal.

You have also spoken about the vital impulse in relation to Africa.

And you have spoken about Ubuntu.

Is it the same idea?

Could you give us one or two ideas that might open up debates and new perspectives in the workshops and in the work of Educating Cities, and help move the association's work forward?

Eliane Brum

I will focus on one or two ideas.

I will simply mention ideas that could each be developed in their own right.

We advocate a **recentring of the world**.

The idea is that the true, legitimate centres of the world are the places where nature is still resisting — not the political and economic centres where nature is being destroyed, including ourselves.

The legitimate centres of the world are the oceans, the Amazon, the other tropical rainforests, all the biomes that make our lives possible.

Not Washington, Madrid, Beijing, London and so on.

Within a city, the legitimate centres are the peripheries — the communities of resistance where the majority creates technologies of resistance and solutions for living — not the wealthy neighbourhoods where the minority lives.

This recentring of the world is how we have worked to build community.

We do not believe community can be built without such a recentring.

But there is another thing we need to learn:

We need to learn how to lose.

Community cannot be built unless we learn how to lose.

To build community, we have to be willing to give up our privileges.

And that is very difficult.

Everyone wants to build community, but nobody wants to lose.

We have to be willing to lose.

We also need to know who our enemies are, because we can no longer continue fighting on the same ground.

We are losing this war.

And we are losing it badly.

So we cannot continue losing on the same ground.

In the limited time we have, it is not enough simply to do what we already know how to do.

We also have to do what we do not know how to do.

We have to create things that do not yet exist.

And we must remember that everyone feels they are doing too little, that they can do too little.

But doing little is not the same as doing nothing.

We cannot do nothing.

We must do whatever little we can.

And we have to keep fighting, even when we know we may lose.

Because we are not fighting to win.

We are fighting to live.

Thank you.

Souleymane Bachir Diagne

Since we have very little time, I will focus only on education.

We are educators here.

And I would like to reflect on what we can do as educators to contribute to this first universal: humanity itself.

I have had to switch from French to English for this.

I wish I could speak Spanish.

A few days ago was Pentecost, but the miracle did not happen.

So the Holy Spirit did not add Spanish to the languages I speak.

But what we do as educators is extremely important when it comes to the way people understand this first universal: humanity.

We teach different languages.

They may be human languages, or they may be the languages of science.

That is, fundamentally, what we do as educators.

Teaching languages means overcoming, if we can put it that way, the fragmentation between tribes and nations, in order to build and convey a sense of shared humanity.

Because when you are bilingual or multilingual, when you speak another language, you are not simply adding another skill to your CV.

You are experiencing **decentring**.

You are learning to listen to yourself and to your own language from the perspective of another language.

In fact, one of the best ways to hear your own language is to hear another language.

That is when you realise just how much your particular language is your own.

This experience of decentring means stepping outside ourselves in order to encounter the other in their difference — and, through that encounter, to understand our own identity more deeply.

In other words, **education for humanity is education for decentring and for encounter**.

It is the encounter that Philippe Meirieu spoke about in the previous panel.

And this is extremely important because it teaches us something fundamental.

I would like to end with a sentence from the thinker Léopold Sédar Senghor.

What it teaches us is that, of course, we should be proud of being different. We should be proud of our differences.

But that pride in our differences should never make us forget the happiness of being together.

And our task, our responsibility as educators, is precisely to educate humanity in the singular — and, most of the time, through the plural humanity that we teach.

Thank you very much.

Yayo Herrero

We are going to close this panel with a notion of community that, at least for me, is much more complex than the one we usually work with.

A community that includes the rest of the living world.

A community among human beings, grounded in an awareness of our interdependence and of the impossibility of living in isolation.

I am also taking away the idea that we should not fight to win.

We fight to sustain life.

And that is why we must keep fighting, even when we think we may lose.

I am also taking away this final idea of translation — the possibility that arises when we work across different languages and recognise our differences, of seeking out what connects us as human beings.

And, above all, I am taking away one idea:

Building community at a time when life itself is under attack is not an easy task.

This plague of conflicts is deeply contradictory.

And I think that yesterday, during the opening ceremony, we had a powerful experience of what it means to build community in contexts that, at first sight, may seem completely opposed to one another, yet are remarkably close in some of their central objectives.

When it comes to building community, as Eliane has said, the possibility of meeting one another and of universalising is absolutely crucial.

I want to thank the two people we have listened to throughout this panel, and I also want to thank everyone who has listened to us.