The political philosophy of Giorgio Agamben (1998) is linked to the key concept of “community” for critical communication studies. The essay discusses how community is haunted by foreignness and how communication is constituted by estrangement.

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Community—the concept and the phenomenon—bears within it an inherent weakness. As we know, for there to be community there must be some kind of boundary (symbolic and discursive and always psychic), a boundary that limits or, a limit that delimits—a mark, at any rate, that marks what is inside and outside, within and/or beyond a limit, hence included or excluded by the boundary. Accordingly, we can say that the inside of community—what sustains community as community, functioning partly as its internal coherence—is, precisely, an outside, a zone in its own right without which community could not be discerned, marked, or de-limited, to say nothing of imagined. The outside remains; hence, a weakness persists: What is most at home in community, harbored at its center, is at the same time what is most distant, strange, and perhaps alien, unwelcome to present company. Yet paradoxically, this weakness is, for better or worse, community’s strength: The outside is a constitutive inside, included via its exclusion as that through which community is defined, negotiated, and maintained.

Community appears so obvious in critical discourse today as to render it almost invisible as a key point of entry into the political, philosophical, and ethical problems over which it presides (the term “community” carries with it the cozy, innocent, even organic sense of unity, commonality, collectivity, interactivity, commemoration, and of course, fundamentally, communication). However, community persists as a site of critical inquiry precisely because of what it shows us (or allows us to see) about the unsettled and, at times, potentially uncomfortable relation between interiority
and exteriority, intimacy and strangeness that make this concept meaningful in the first place. With a view to making strange that which may have become too familiar in scholarship on community, I offer a comment on what Giorgio Agamben (1998) calls the relation of exception: The form of relation in which something is included solely through its exclusion, where interiority and exteriority are momentarily indistinguishable. An important addition to the contemporary analytic repertoire of critical communication studies, the concept of the exception puts into question some of our deepest held beliefs about the logic of community and the experience of communication, illuminating how foreignness haunts the former, and how estrangement constitutes the latter.

I begin with the intriguing passage, late in Homo Sacer, focused on “the people,” a seemingly obvious concept that, upon closer scrutiny, conceals an ambiguity that has critical implications for politics in the West. Agamben states

> It is as if what we call “people” were in reality not a unitary subject but a dialectical oscillation between two opposite poles: on the one hand, the set of the People as a whole political body, and on the other the subset of the people as a fragmentary multiplicity of needy and excluded bodies; or again, on the one hand an inclusion that claims to be total, and on the other, an exclusion that is clearly hopeless; at one extreme, the total state of integrated and sovereign citizens, and at the other, the preserve—court of miracles or camp—of the wretched, the oppressed, and the defeated. In this sense, a single and compact referent for the term “people” simply does not exist anywhere: like many fundamental political concepts [...] “people” is a polar concept that indicates a double movement and a complex relation between two extremes. [...] It is what always already is and yet must, nevertheless, be realized; it is the pure source of every identity but must, however, continually be redefined and purified through exclusion, language, blood, and land. [...] The people always contains a division more originary than that of friend-enemy, an incessant civil war that divides it more radically than every conflict and, at the same time, keeps it united and constitutes it more securely than any identity (p. 177–178).

A dazzling account, the upshot of which is that “the people” harbors a fundamental fracture that, in the context of any system, state, society, group, or community, prevents inclusion from coinciding automatically with membership. For example, in any given state there will be, on the one hand, members who are recognized by official institutions (citizens who are included by the rights and privileges of law); on the other hand, there will be members of the same state who are not recognized (“undocumented” workers, e.g., who are included solely through their exclusion from rights and privileges). Taking as our guide the etymological root of the term “exception” (ex-caperer, to take outside), we can say that the excluded people literally stand outside—they are included, but without membership, toiling, as it were, without the rights and protections offered exclusively to members only. The ethical significance of this fracture is clear: “In the modern era,” Agamben says, “misery and
exclusion are not only economic or social concepts but eminently political—even biopolitical—categories” (p. 179).

Now, perhaps what Agamben offers here is a twist on the problem of class conflict, where resolution of the antagonism that remains between small “p” people and capital “P” People could be achieved via classless society or, more radically still, via cultivation of some form of multitude without difference, an unbounded body wherein “the people,” strictly speaking, no longer exist. Agamben even states as much: “Our age,” he says, “is nothing but the implacable and methodical attempt to overcome the division dividing the people, to eliminate radically the people that is excluded. This attempt brings together, according to different modalities and horizons, Right and Left, capitalist countries and socialist countries, which are united in the project of producing a single and undivided people” (p. 179). A remarkably strange statement: For Agamben to say that the politics of our age aims to overcome the division that divides the people is a radical contradiction of the major argument developed in *Homo Sacer*. What appears to be some kind of Marxism mysteriously installed at the end of the book should be left, for our purposes at least, as a mystery, because the critical value of Agamben’s political philosophy is precisely the insight it offers into the structural dislocation inherent to “the people.”

Far from a deficiency to be transcended, this dislocation is, in fact, a necessary and productive structural flaw. In the impossibility it presents of ever being fully overcome (through more effective communication or closer community ties, for instance), the lack of correspondence within the people resembles what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) call antagonism, a negativity within the social that keeps society open. The lack that prevents a unified people also resembles what Jean-Luc Nancy (2000) calls the irreducible difference of being that makes each person unique in his or her plurality. The alternative to preserving the outside (antagonism, difference, dislocation) in its role of maintaining system openness and social diversity would be to eradicate it—to characterize it as a threat to the internal coherence of the system that must therefore be destroyed. To pursue a program of isolating the outside and carving out its most disturbing features—those that appear alien, foreign, and strange—is where things can get ugly (it is well known that the alien, foreigner, and stranger are typically figures of suspicion, discrimination, and even scapegoating, whereas the other is a figure of alterity worthy of hospitality).

Of course, Agamben does not advocate eradication of a disturbing, alien outside. Any attempt to do so, he admits, is “futile” (p. 179). The fracture remains; and the inequalities justified in its name, whatever they may be, are, to be clear, unjustifiable. That being said, the importance of a concept that unveils an outside that disturbs the inside—an exceptional relation that disables the internal coherence of the people—is that it helps us to better understand the logic by which the unity of community and the commonality of communication are structured and experienced.

Like “the people,” a simple and single referent for the term “community” does not exist anywhere. It is banal to say simply that community is a group or network of people who share a common bond. Beyond this, we must say that community is *of the*
people. The two terms are related. The People, and people, fund community: They are its content. In its being of the people, community inherits the always already of what is “the people” (the event of its being) as well as what must be realized about it (its unfolding). The people is always fractured—every one, together. Hence, community can be only in repair (inoperable, as Nancy (1991) says.) There is community; however, if there is community, then there is no need for community. Therefore, community is always open, a promise of what is already and what has yet to come, of the people.

In her analysis of immigration politics in France, Kristeva (1991) makes a provocative argument in this regard about the emergence of what she calls a paradoxical community, one that is “made up of foreigners who are reconciled with themselves to the extent that they recognize themselves as foreigners” (p. 195). Her discussion of immigration, citizenship, and foreignness is no liberal humanist call to brotherhood. Instead, Kristeva offers the philosophically more significant argument that the foreigner and foreignness do not exist outside of one’s self, at the edge of a self-affirmed and fully resolved identity. Rather, the foreigner lives intimately within the self: “The foreigner is within me,” Kristeva says, “hence we are all foreigners” (p. 192).

For instance, we are all foreigners to the extent that we have ancestors, people that have origins elsewhere; and one can say, philosophically, that we are all foreigners because there are no origins to begin with (it is in this sense that the famous phrase from the Wizard of Oz should be taken literally—“there’s no place like home” means that home, a no-place, does not exist); and psychically as well, we are all foreigners because our waking lives are divided by the unconscious (where, sometimes, our most intimate and guarded secrets slip from memory, appearing later in an uncanny return.)

A community of foreigners cannot be anything but paradoxical because foreignness blocks any identity from ever becoming fully affirmed. As a political identity, community can only be incomplete, always open, unfolding. Perhaps that is its ultimate appeal: “Our community has no membership.” At the same time, it is not as though being foreign is a pure category: Because of the foreignness within, the foreigner itself can never become fully affirmed. “If I am a foreigner,” Kristeva says, “there are no foreigners” (p. 192). The identity of the outside is always contingent on an inside, an inside that, when seen from the perspective of the outside, appears in reverse form, as outside, other. Self and other, inside and outside, intimacy and strangeness, each term is always lacking, incomplete, and speaks of at least two and never just one.

The logic of exception, as it is revealed both in the dislocation of the people and by the foreignness within, bears significantly on many of our core assumptions about the contents, contexts, and goals of communication, particularly its role in the maintenance of community. To be sure, communication is typically understood as meaningful interaction among people: Everyone is different, separate from others. Hence, communication is the translation of difference into the same (we “get through” to one another in communication). However, communication can also be understood as meaningful interaction within the self, a self that psychoanalysis tells us is different from and divided within itself (split in its recourse to a language that is never one’s own). In order for there to be communication, the self must learn to
recognize itself as others see it—as an other. For this to happen, the self must make an exception. It must take leave of itself, take itself outside (*ex-caperer.*) Divided from itself, the self puts itself into communication, into communication, that is, with itself (one must “get through” to oneself). The exception is thereby the rule of communication: There must be an inclusion (or acceptance) of an exclusion as the condition of possibility for communication.

From this perspective, we can see how communication offers a means to overcome the fundamental fracture inherent not only to the people, but also to the self. That there is communication testifies to the critical importance of this ever-present fracture: Communication lives off of the failure to fully overcome the differences within the self that succeed every attempt to overcome the differences with others.

In principal, if there were no foreigners or strangers (to say nothing of neighbors), and if people were identical to rather than divided from one another (as well as divided within), then we would not need to communicate. Hence, there would be no community. Or, community would be characterized by singularity, a kind of mass wherein everyone thinks in the same way, there are no differences, and no decisions need to be made because everyone already agrees. A dream, of complete boundedness. Or a nightmare. But, self-identity is always undermined by self-difference, and because of this there can be no strangers quite like the strangers we are already to ourselves. More important still, since the people is fractured irrevocably, constituted in difference, we recognize that whatever fears and fascinations one may have about the other, the foreigner, and the community are precisely what terrify and/or fascinate us about ourselves—a foreignness at home, a self-estrangement inclusively excluded within every one.

References


