

“The great worth of the people”: Models of Community in Joseph Conrad’s *Nostromo*

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ABSTRACT

In his “Author’s Note” to *Nostromo*, Joseph Conrad defines Nostromo, the character, as “a man of the People”. A particular notion of community is implicit in the denomination “the People” which I would like to explore in this article. For that purpose, I will draw on classical analyses of the novel in social and political key, as well as on recent theorizations of the concept of community. I would like to examine the way in which Conrad’s idea of “the People” is articulated in the discourse of the narrator and the main characters in the novel. *Nostromo* may be read as the story of the creation of one specific kind of community: the Occidental Republic of Sulaco, in which concepts such as Nation or Citizenship—which in turn can constitute models of community—are embedded in and contributing to its birth. I will claim, however, that the kind of community advocated by Conrad in his “Note” does not coincide with any of these institutionalized models, but proposes instead an alternative one, characterized by its evasiveness and instability.

Key Words: Community, Nationalism, Solidarity, Myth, Political discourse.

RESUMEN

En su “Nota del autor” a *Nostromo*, Joseph Conrad define a Nostromo, el personaje, como “un hombre del Pueblo”. Implícita en esa denominación, “el Pueblo”, está una idea concreta de comunidad que me gustaría explorar en este artículo. Para tal fin, recurriré a los análisis socio-políticos clásicos de la novela, así como a las teorías más recientes sobre el concepto de comunidad. Me gustaría examinar el modo en que la idea conradiana de “el Pueblo” se articula en los discursos del narrador y los principales personajes de la novela. *Nostromo* puede leerse como la historia de la creación de un tipo concreto de comunidad: la República Occidental de Sulaco, en cuyo nacimiento participan conceptos tales como Nación o Ciudadanía, que a su vez pueden considerarse modelos de comunidad. En mi opinión, sin embargo, el tipo de comunidad defendido por Conrad en su “Nota” no coincide con ninguno de estos modelos institucionalizados, sino que propone uno alternativo, definido por su carácter evasivo e inestable.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Comunidad, Nacionalismo, Solidaridad, Mito, Discurso Político.

SUMMARY: Introduction. 1. “The People”. 2. Political community. 3. Myth and solidarity as models of community. 4. Conclusion. 5. Notes. 6. References.

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to examine the models of community represented in Joseph Conrad's novel *Nostromo* (1904). The novel deals with issues in which different notions of community are at stake, and for this reason it seems to be a particularly appropriate novel to analyze in connection to the concept of community. *Nostromo* may be read as the story of the creation of one specific kind of community: the Occidental Republic of Sulaco. Concepts such as Nation, People or Citizenship—which in turn can be said to constitute models of community—can be said to be embedded in and contributing to its birth. It seems quite difficult, however, to determine exactly what kind of community is represented in *Nostromo*, even if it can be said to have things in common with those models mentioned: Nation, People, Citizenship. The difficulties of grasping a single, unified notion of community in this novel are precisely what I would like to analyze in this article. My arguments will draw, on the one hand, on classic social and political readings of the novel such as those carried out by Edward W. Said, Fredric Jameson or Cedric Watts. On the other hand, my analysis of the models of community represented by Conrad will make use of recent theorizations of community developed by Giorgio Agamben, Maurice Blanchot, Jean-Luc Nancy and Alphonso Lingis. Most of these authors take Levinas' ethics of the other as their departure point in order to propose models of community based on the notion of alterity. Their ideas point to a reconsideration of the notion of community outside institutionalized models that, in my view, can be illuminating for the interpretation of the political and social discourses represented in *Nostromo*.

The interpretation of the novel that I am proposing reads its multiple plots as offering different views on the problematic issues of the creation of a community, the integration of aliens into it or the survival mechanisms established by it. I believe Conrad explores several forms of community in the novel, firstly by playing with characters and the narrative threads he spins around each of them, and secondly, by recreating the political debates in which many of his characters are engaged, foregrounding notions of community implied in political discourse. In my view, these ideas of community can be related to the notion of "the People", introduced by Conrad in his "Author's Note". I would like to examine this concept and the way in which it is articulated in the novel. As I will try to illustrate, "the People" is an evasive, fluctuant referent used at different points in the text in ways that seem to match notions of community advocated by Blanchot and Nancy.

At a first glance, the community of Sulaco, if it exists at all, differs in many aspects from the Victorian notion of community, which can be said to stand on notions of spatial and cultural proximity. If notions such as nationality, language, religion, moral norms or institutions are taken as the bases for this kind of community, it is easy to see how the collectivity Conrad describes in *Nostromo* is far from it. In the first place, the characters share a space, but not a nationality. They all come from different territories and they do not share a common

background, apart from the fact that they have ended up living in Sulaco. The place is a cultural melting pot of languages and nationalities: Spanish, Italian, French, English or American are mixed in the streets. Political instability, in the second place, constantly threatens the institutional basis for a community. Governments succeed one another in a series of political revolts that impedes the establishment of a definite social community. Moral codes, moreover, differ from one character to another. Apparently extreme positions are confronted in the novel: Giorgio Viola, for instance, is defined as the Garibaldino who believes in humanitarian revolution, while Martin Decoud, the boulevardier, is presented as a political skeptic turned into the ideologist of the Occidental Republic. Although they are all part, in one way or another, of a nationalist revolt that will lead to the independence of the province from the Republic of Costaguana, the characters in the novel do not form a homogeneous group that could be called a community in a socio-political sense.

In what follows, I would like to examine the multi-faceted notion of community present in the novel. First, I will analyze the concept used by Conrad in his "Author's Note": "the People". As it has already been mentioned, this notion can be used as the crucible for all the models of community that will be discussed later on. My second step will be to contrast this initial articulation with the ones used by different characters in their political debates. Finally, I will introduce two notions of community that are presented in the novel as alternative to the political, institutionalized one. I will tentatively associate these two notions to the ideas of mythical discourse and solidarity among individuals, as the basic principles that give rise to each of them.

2. THE PEOPLE

Conrad seemed to have an idea of the kind of community he wanted to portray in *Nostromo*. In the "Author's Note" to the novel,¹ he refers to Nostromo as "a man of the People". He had already used that expression in a letter to Cunninghame Graham written in 1904: "But truly N is nothing at all —a fiction— embodied vanity of the sailor kind —a romantic mouthpiece of 'the people' which (I mean 'the people') frequently experience the very feelings to which he gives utterance." (Karl & Davies 1988: 175). The centrality of this character in the novel

¹ Two things should be noted as a kind of warning before reading the Author's Note, as to the possibility of tracing a straight line from what Conrad wrote in his Note, and to what he expressed in the novel. First, the temporal distance between the two texts: the note was written in 1917, while the novel was published in 1904. Second, as both Edward W. Said and Robert Penn Warren have acknowledged, there often seems to be a split between the Conrad who wrote the novels, anxious, sometimes tormented in the process of writing, and the one who writes the Author's Notes, relaxed and confident in the materials he is offering to the public (Said 1975: 103-4; Penn Warren 1951: xvii).

is illustrated by the metonymic turn that leads Conrad to call it *Nostromo*, taking the character, part for whole, as incarnation of the People of Sulaco. Making a similar turn, I would like to analyze his conception of this particular kind of community through his depiction of him in that Note:

About Nostromo, the second of the two racially and socially contrasted men, both captured by the silver of the San Tome Mine, I feel bound to say something more.

I did not hesitate to make that central figure an Italian. First of all the thing is perfectly credible: Italians were swarming into the Occidental Province at the time, as anybody who will read further can see: and secondly, there was no one who could stand so well by the side of Giorgio Viola the Garibaldino, the Idealist of the old, humanitarian revolutions. For myself I needed there a man of the People as free as possible from his class-conventions and all settled modes of thinking. This is not a side snarl at conventions. My reasons were not moral but artistic. Had he been an Anglo-Saxon he would have tried to get into local politics. But Nostromo does not aspire to be a leader in a personal game. He does not want to raise himself above the mass. He is content to feel himself a power—within the People. (xliv)²

The passage begins by contrasting two characters, Charles Gould and Nostromo, in terms of race and social class—"racially and socially contrasted men". The first thing that attracts the reader's attention in this passage is Conrad's use of national categories as markers of people's personality. He says that he needed Nostromo to be an Italian, because had he been an Anglo-Saxon he would have behaved in a different way. Conrad seems to believe that features related to nationality mark a person's character, that is, that you would behave differently depending on whether you are Italian or English. This idea of national character is not determined by class—from which Nostromo is said to be free—or by "modes of thinking"—which can stand for a vague denomination of ideology. It seems to rely on national, ethnic or cultural categories, on ideas of nationalism close to what Hippolyte Taine circumscribed in terms of "race, milieu, epoch" (Taine 1879: 10); or what E.J. Hobsbawm calls "cultural communities" (Hobsbawm 1992: 58).

The second key idea that can be extracted from the passage is the fact that "local politics" and "the People" appear to be opposed entities: if Nostromo were Anglo-Saxon, he would have got into local politics; being Italian, he stands with the mass, which does not participate in political affairs. The People, then, do not go into "local politics", although they are definitely affected by it, as many characters in the novel know. However, the People do have power, which Nostromo is content to assume without raising himself above those who have bestowed it upon him. His authority,

² Joseph Conrad 1984. *Nostromo*. Oxford & New York: Oxford UP. All further quotations and references are to this edition, and will be cited parenthetically by page number.

therefore, does not raise him from the source of that power, so that we would say, as Conrad actually does say later in his Note (xlv), that Nostromo does rule, but not govern: he is not sovereign, not above the law. By separating the People from the political realm, Conrad is establishing a contrast between People and citizenship. Moreover, he is pointing towards a kind of political order in which only the rich foreigners (Anglo-Saxon) go into politics³ —“these hombres finos” (494)— that is, are real citizens, in a Roman sense. In Fredric Jameson’s words, this would be “the classic ‘Anglo’ picture of Latin ‘race’ ... to which political order and economic progress must be ‘brought’ from the outside” (Jameson 1981: 270).

If we continue reading the Note, a third key idea can be found: “for Nostromo’s lineage had to be more ancient still. He is a man with the weight of countless generations behind him and no parentage to boast of... Like the People” (xlv). We are told afterwards about “... the earth he inherits” (xlv), as implying that the People’s power comes from the earth. It should be noted that, when we are told later on about Mrs. Gould’s or Dr. Monygham’s identification with “the People”, it will be done through the same rhetoric of closeness to the land: “nearer to the soul of the land” (88); “bind indissolubly to the land of Costaguana” (375).

In this reading of Conrad’s “Note” I have emphasized the three points on which Conrad’s idea of the People seem to stand. They sketch a notion of “the People” as non-coincidental with any notion of Nation-State present in the novel. “The People” in *Nostromo* is not the result or the origin of the New Occidental Republic of Sulaco, created in the course of the novel, under any of the criteria that could be used to define that new Nation. This opposition would match the distinction that, according to Raymond Williams, took place around the nineteenth century, separating the people, as based on relationships of community, from society, based on the State (Williams 1983: 75-76). “The People” is an entity entirely separated from the kinds of collective order that constitute the State, such as citizenship or society. It would rather respond to proto-nationalist ideas that, as Hobsbawm has noted, have no historic relation to the formation of a nation state, “the crux of a modern nation” (Hobsbawm 1992: 64).

Conrad’s idea of “the People”, however, will prove to be quite unstable in the text. If we move on to the novel itself, we will discover that Conrad never uses the expression “the People”, as he does in the Note, neither does he use the word “community”. He does use the word “people”, nevertheless, many times in the text.

³ The notion of the “creole” (Anderson 1991: 47-58) might be recalled here as establishing a differentiated group separated both from natives and from foreigners, regarded at the same time as “a colonial community and an upper class” (Anderson 1991: 58). Decoud or Charles Gould, for instance, are at the same time foreigners and natives. Moreover, as Edward W. Said has noted, all the principal characters in the novel have undergone a period of expatriation from Costaguana, after which they attempt to regain their citizenship (Said 1975: 111).

In the next sections, I would like to examine the different articulations of this term in the novel, in contrast with this initial conception of "the People".

3. POLITICAL COMMUNITY

Nostromo deals explicitly with the complex issues of nationalism, colonialism and capitalistic expansion. This has led many critics to read the novel in a political key, scrutinizing the social and political models it may advocate.⁴ Authors such as Norman Sherry, Avrom Fleishman or Albert J. Guerard have seen in *Nostromo* a great effectiveness as a model of real historical processes. Thus, Guerard said that "nothing in Costaguana is not credible [...] the realism of *Nostromo* is so successful that we are tempted to give it no thought" (Guerard 1958: 179), Fleishman mentions its "approach in complexity to the actual condition of historical life" (Fleishman 1981: 86) and Sherry emphasized the way in which the novel works accurately as model for reality in spite of its manifest fictional character (Sherry 1971: 352). Every attempt to read the novel as proposing a model or models of community affects the social, political or historical interpretations of it. For this reason, I would like to consider briefly the kind of political community represented in *Nostromo*, an idea of community that can be derived from the political and historical processes that take place in it.

I will argue in terms of Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined political community" as a definition for 'Nation' (Anderson 1991: 5-6) in order to claim that b the inhabitants of Sulaco a sense of community is born out of the direct attack by alien interests. Edward W. Said noted that "despite its extravagant range of national and social origins, the cast of Conrad's *Nostromo* [...] is bound together by two inner affinities" (1975: 100). One of those affinities being a common interest in the affairs of Costaguana, Said himself admits that it is "for the most part in the form of a private vision of personal advantage" (1975: 100). This idea may lead the reader to ask to what extent nationalism, and community, are defined negatively in the novel: as reaction and opposition rather than as communion and solidarity. It may be argued that there is a moment in the novel when the protagonists, inhabitants of Sulaco, do constitute a community of some sort, a community engaged in the protection of the San Tomé Mine, the source of wealth from which a notion of progress is derived. This community is built against the Monterist revolts as a way of providing an opportunity for a stable form of government in Sulaco, and against Costaguana as a way of protecting the economic interests of the area. Community, in this sense, springs negatively as a reaction against instability, in an attempt to construct something that escapes the volatility that characterizes Costaguanan politics.

⁴ For a comprehensive review of the most relevant political readings of the novel, see Hay, 1996.

The emergence of the conditions for the birth of a community is manifested in the ways the narrative voice characterizes it in terms of active/passive attitude. The narrative voice also suggests a subjected community described in explicit contrast to the kind of collectivity which really does participate in the creation of a new country. This echoes Hobsbawm's idea about the "most relatively inarticulate men and women" who will not have their say in the historical processes initiated by nationalism (Hobsbawm 1992: 78). This subjected community would exist only in political discourse as the passive recipient of political change, but not as its agent. It is the otherness to which historical change 'happens', while the change would always be brought about by another entity: "They were all alike in their folly, these *hombres finos*, that invented laws and governments and barren tasks for the people" (494). This distinction can be expressed in terms of the opposition between what Raymond Williams called "active community" and "the mutuality of the oppressed" (Williams 1973: 104). The novel, nevertheless, seems to suggest the possibility of a coming together of both parts, outside the political, virtually a new community based on solidarity among singular beings. This kind of communion, however, is only hinted at, but never fulfilled in the novel, as I will try to illustrate in the next section.

The creation of a community is presented in the political discourses of the novel as the common effort of a group of people having as their common goal the creation of that community itself,⁵ through the proper management of what in the novel is called "material interests". In other words, a sense of historical progress through the management of the economic resources of an area, aimed at the attainment of a developed form of government based on the participation of citizens in community affairs. Raymond Williams has defined the concept of "improvement" for imperialist societies as "a scale of human societies which theoretically culminates in universal industrialization" (Williams 1973: 286). Don José Avellanós may be said to represent the creation of a national community based on economic growth in the novel. He repeatedly states the conditions on which this historical progress is to be based: "It was a specific mandate to establish the prosperity of the people on the basis of firm peace at home, and to redeem the national credit by the satisfaction of all just claims abroad" (141).

The notion of "the People" as community persists, for example, in the ideological and political speeches of various characters, though it is tuned in to the conception of political community supported by these characters. Charles Gould, for instance, says in a speech marked by his defense of "material interests" as the origin of a legitimate form of government:

⁵ It is interesting to note how, in the light of this definition, the birth of the actual community seems to depend on a pre-existent idea of it. In this sense, it would fit into Anderson's notion that "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined" (Anderson 1991: 6), so in that community is presented as a project, rather than as actuality.

What is wanted here is law, good faith, order, security [...] Only let the material interests once get a firm footing, and they are bound to impose the conditions on which alone they can continue to exist. That's how your money-making is justified here in the face of lawlessness and disorder. It is justified because the security which it demands must be shared with an oppressed people. A better justice will come afterwards. (84)

In the political discourses of the novel, "people" are usually referred to in the third person, therefore excluding the speaker. In Gould's speech, "the security which it demands must be shared with an oppressed people". "Shared" indicates that the political process will bring together the artificers of this new political community and the oppressed, but it also connotes disconnection, tracing a neat distinction between the two groups. Here, the "oppressed people" are presented again as the passive victims of political maneuvers carried out by others. The idea expressed in the "Author's Note" about Anglo-Saxons ruling local politics, while natives maintain a passive attitude, must now be recalled. The victimization of the people by imperialist economic interests echoes throughout the novel. For instance, in the short dialogue between Viola and Decoud: "'But who are you for, really, in your heart?' [...] 'For the people,' declared old Viola, sternly. 'We are all for the people—in the end'. 'Yes,' muttered old Viola, savagely. 'And meantime they fight for you. Blind. Esclavos!'" (168). Viola denounces repeatedly how the people are being politically manipulated in the name of "material interests", led to fight in a secessionist revolt that will bring them no prosperity.

The discourse of imperialism is personified by Captain Mitchell's speech during his tour as cicerone around Sulaco after the secession, in chapter ten of the third part. This is how the narrator describes him: "Liked by the natives for his good nature and the formality of his manner, self-important and simple, known for years as a 'friend of our country', he felt himself a personality of mark in the town" (474). Many of the historical events that take place in the novel are either related by him, or seen from his perspective. The contrast between him and the detached primary narrator lends an ironic tone to everything he says, so that his discourse becomes a mockery of the imperialist discourse and its ideas of community based on nationalism. Ian Watt has noted how he constitutes "the narrator's chosen comic butt" in the novel (Watt 1988: 50). Captain Mitchell is the only character in the novel who sees the creation of the New Occidental Republic of Sulaco in a purely optimistic fashion, as Cedric Watts mentioned (Watts 1982: 149). Mitchell perceives the recent historical events in Sulaco as the birth of a new state, which after overcoming its own instabilities acquires the status of maturity. The symbolic representation of this new state follows the aesthetics of Victorian nationalism:

'The equestrian statue that used to stand on the pedestal over there has been removed. It was an anachronism,' Captain Mitchell commented, obscurely. 'There is some talk of replacing it by a marble shaft commemorative of

Separation, with angels of peace at the four corners, and bronze Justice holding an even balance, all gilt, on the top'. (481-2)

Angels of peace and bronze justice stand here as symbols of the legitimacy of the new regime —sanctified in both the religious and civil orders. Mitchell's discourse expresses an anxiety about legitimizing the separation, as if the symbols of the Nation will somehow constitute the Nation itself, thus corroborating Hobsbawm's idea that "nations are more often the consequence of setting up a state rather than they are its foundation" (Hobsbawm 1992: 78).

Only one character in *Nostromo* uses the expression "the people" in the first person plural, Martin Decoud. In his political speech, he includes himself into that group from which Gould or Mitchell are excluded: "We are a wonderful people, but it has always been our fate to be—he did not say 'robbed', but added, after a pause—'exploited'" (174). Decoud gives a new turn to the idea by highlighting how foreign economic investors have always played with the political instability of Costaguana in order to get rich:

Thieves, of course. Speculators, too. Their expeditions, each one, were the speculations of grave and reverend persons in England. That is history, as that absurd sailor Mitchell is always saying. [...] In those days this town was full of wealth. Those men came to take it. Now the whole land is like a treasure-house, and all these people are breaking into it, whilst we are cutting each other's throats. (174)

In spite of his nationalist enthusiasm, which will lead him to become the ideologist of secession, Decoud is not presented in the novel as a man of the people, but as an "idle boulevardier" (152) whose French education, together with his French name, are underlined in the novel, making him resemble a foreigner and not a native of the place. From the beginning, he is described as superficial and cynical: "This life, whose dreary superficiality is covered by the glitter of universal blague [...] induced in him a Frenchified—but most un-French—cosmopolitanism, in reality a mere barren indifferentism posing as intellectual superiority" (152). His belief in "the people" is screened through the moral judgment passed on him by the narrator and by other characters. Throughout the novel, he oscillates between idealism and skepticism, never committing fully to either.

The symbolic irony of his paradoxical status—being treated as a foreigner in spite of being actually a native of Sulaco, becoming the skeptical ideologist of a nationalist revolt—has a tragic outcome in the novel. While the revolt succeeds and Sulaco becomes independent of Costaguana, giving birth to the political community of the "Occidental Republic", Decoud is torn away from society and doomed to die in complete isolation. After robbing the silver of the San Tomé Mine in order to protect it from the Monterists, Nostromo abandons Decoud on the Great Isabel island, on the promise of coming back for him. Ten days of absolute

solitude will lead him to despair, to the questioning of his own identity when deprived of the company of others: "Solitude from mere outward condition of existence becomes very swiftly a state of soul [...] After three days of waiting for the sight of some human face, Decoud caught himself entertaining a doubt of his own individuality" (497). His suicide is commented on by the narrator in a sentence that has become one of Conrad's most celebrated: "In our activity alone do we find sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part" (497). Alone, face to face with the void and silence, Decoud's "want of faith in himself and others" (496) precipitates him into melancholy. The dangers of total skepticism are highlighted here, in an articulation that is very common in other works by Conrad, such as *The Secret Agent* (1907) or *Victory* (1915).⁶ Against "the affectations of irony and skepticism" (497), belief in oneself and in others seems to be the only way out.

4. MYTH AND SOLIDARITY AS MODELS OF COMMUNITY

The persistence of the expression "the people" in *Nostromo* invites us to consider it from several different angles. If the political community presented in the novel is not one in which the people can be said to participate, it seems necessary to re-examine this concept by attending to its workings and its mechanisms of constitution and survival outside the field of the political.

From this perspective, one more use of "the people" should be brought into consideration. The detached narrator of *Nostromo* often uses the word "people" to refer to the collective knowledge of the inhabitants of Sulaco, as a synonym for collective consciousness. Most of our knowledge about Sulaco is filtered through expressions and phrases such as: "as people expressed it", "as the common people suspected", "in the talk of common people" or "well-known to the people". Common people, common folk, and country people are expressions widely used in other parts of the novel as well, and to a certain extent they contribute to determine a socio-economic distinction separating "common people" as uneducated, poor, and with a tendency for superstition and myth-making which is established very soon in the text.⁷

⁶ A safe, superficial view of reality is preferred by those characters who fear this danger of absolute skepticism. In *The Secret Agent*, for instance, Mrs. Verloc states that "things did not stand being looked into" (Conrad 1983: 178, 241). Similarly, in *Victory*, Heyst claims that "Man on this earth is an unforeseen accident which does not stand close investigation" (Conrad 1979: 167).

⁷ This would correspond to one of the meanings of the word "people", as "the commons or common people, as distinguished from those of rank" (Williams 1983: 75). We will see, however, how the concept of rank as marker of belonging to one group or the other will turn out to be problematic in the novel.

This is the peninsula of the Azuera, a wild chaos of sharp rocks and stony levels cut about by vertical ravines [...] The poor, associating by an obscure instinct of consolation the ideas of evil and wealth, will tell you that it is deadly because of its forbidden treasures. The common folk of the neighbourhood, peons of the estancias, vaqueros of the seaboard plains, tame Indians coming miles to market with a bundle of sugar-cane or a basket of maize worth about threepence, are well aware that heaps of shining gold lie in the gloom of the deep precipices cleaving the stony levels of Azuera. Tradition has it that many adventurers of olden time had perished in the search. The story goes also that within men's memory two wandering sailors—Americanos, perhaps, but gringos of some sort for certain...(4)

This passage serves as the crucible for all the criteria that participate in the creation of "the people" in the sense in which the narrative voice refers to it. The first distinguishing feature is an economic one: "the poor". But it serves also as moral marker, because we are told that, according to the poor, evil and wealth are obscurely associated. Poverty, therefore, is not only an indication of economic situation in life, but also the condition for a moral standard, in which the poor would be equal to the virtuous.

The second feature is one of spatial proximity, as these people belong to the same "neighbourhood". The noun is post-modified in the text by a sequence of nominal clauses in apposition, helping to refine this spatial notion of "neighbourhood" with a socio-economic characterization. We are told that this "common folk of the neighbourhood" are "peons", "vaqueros" and "tame Indians".

The next sentence begins "tradition has it", so that tradition, as subject of the sentence, stands in the same position as "the poor" and "the common folk" in the previous sentences. Tradition in this text is presented as the recipient for common knowledge transmitted in oral form, as collective and public as the nouns "the poor" or "the common folk" are. Again, the next sentence begins "the story goes", characterizing the mode in which the previously referred-to tradition takes shape. The ideas of collectivity, memory and oral transmission are present in this short fragment as defining features of that "tradition". The repetition of the pattern subject + verb of cognition/communication + "that" clause creates a syntactic parallelism in the fragment: "the poor ... will tell you that ..."; "the common folk of the neighbourhood ... are well aware that ..."; "tradition has it that ..."; "the story goes also that ...". The ideas of poor, common folk, tradition and story are brought together so that what is told, that is to say the legend about the hidden gold in the Peninsula of the Azuera, is filtered through the collective consciousness of that community from which the legend itself springs.

Finally, we are told that the protagonists of the story were "Americanos, perhaps, but gringos of some sort for certain ...", thus introducing an ethnic distinction between the people and the gringos, about whom stories are told.

Nevertheless, this ethnic division proves to be an invalid one, in the sense that it is not an essential feature for belonging to this community: some characters in the novel, such as the Avellanoes, do not belong to the community sketched in the above quoted passage, although they are not gringos themselves.

In the opening passage of the novel, the topographical overview of Sulaco will play a crucial role in establishing the setting in which narrative events are going to take place. It is introduced before any character or event in the novel. This brings back the idea that community, in the Victorian sense especially, tends to be based on spatial proximity. The community is founded on shared land, on a spatial dimension. The importance of spatial detail contrasts with the absence of temporal linearity in the novel. Ian Watt has noted the incredible amount of scholarly work which has been devoted to fixing a chronology for what happens in the novel, in order to account for its extremely complex time pattern. The vagueness of temporal references given in legends and rumor—"within men's memory"—, contribute to a sense of Arcadian isolation that permeates the novel, and that is expressed by some characters: "But I had no notion that a place on a sea-coast could remain so isolated from the world. If it had been a thousand miles inland now—most remarkable! Has anything ever happened here for a hundred years before today?" (36).

This Arcadian isolation, however, is menaced by capitalist interests, represented by the O.S.N. Company that threatens "to violate the sanctuary of peace sheltering the calm existence of Sulaco" (9). The idea of alien intrusion into "the people's" lives permeates the novel. Sulaco is viewed from the outside as a paradise of innocent isolation being disrupted by economic interests: " 'We have disturbed a good many snakes in that Paradise, Charley, haven't we?' [...] 'It is no longer a Paradise of snakes. We have brought mankind into it, and we cannot turn our backs upon them and begin a new life elsewhere' " (209).

There is one more way in which the passage characterizes the community of the "common folk", which is spatial too, but does not indicate physical proximity: in this passage, it is the peninsula of the Azuera itself which serves as the focal point from which the community is woven, through the stories shared about it. In many other passages in the novel the geography of Costaguana is said to inspire innumerable legends and rumors, which constitute the invisible threads that keep this community united. In this sense, the San Tomé Mine plays the decisive role of being not only the material source from which all the political, economical and historical plots spring, but also the ideological crucible of the community, the foundation of the notions of pride, attachment, security, confidence, belief, protection and virtue: "They were proud of, and attached to, the mine. It had secured their confidence and belief. They invested it with a protecting and invincible virtue as though it were a fetish made by their own hands" (398).

The notion of a community being born out of the flow of information, of rumors, storytelling and legends weaving a net among its members, connects with Jean Luc Nancy's ideas in *The Inoperative Community* (1991). According to Nancy, communities are rendered visible in the act of telling the story of their own origins

as communities. According to him, this myth of origin will constitute the foundational act for any community, and it will be recreated every time the story is told again. He refers to this verbal act of creation as the primal scene of the foundation of community in myth: "They were not assembled like this before the story; the recitation has gathered them together. Before, they were dispersed... shoulder to shoulder, working with and confronting one another without recognizing one another" (Nancy 1991: 43). In *Nostromo*, the only condition for inclusion into the community constituted by "the People" seems to be the participation in the creation of the communitarian myth. In the novel, much of the information presented to the reader is filtered through a climate of rumor and myth-making: "He preferred the unceremonious gatherings of men where he could tell jaguar-hunt stories, boast of his powers with the lasso [...] relate tales of extraordinary night rides, encounters with wild bulls, struggles with crocodiles, adventures in the great forests, crossings of swollen rivers" (161).

According to Nancy's reasoning, it is precisely in the "unceremonious gatherings" that a community can be said to be born, and this is what he calls "the scene of myth":

Mythic speech is communitarian in its essence [...] Myth arises only from a community and for it: they engender one another, infinitely and immediately. Nothing is more common, nothing is more absolutely more common than myth [...] myth is the unique speech of the many, who come thereby to recognize one another, who communicate and commune in myth [...] Myth communicates the common, the being-common of what it reveals or what it recites. (Nancy 1991: 50)

In this context, the character Nostromo himself can be said to represent the workings of this community. He stands as product and link for the community, through his identification with "the People". This is underlined in Conrad's description of him as "romantic mouthpiece of the people" in the abovementioned letter to Cunninghame Graham. His whole life seems made up of stories, just as Jim will become Jim-myth in Patusan in *Lord Jim* (1900).⁸ Similarly, Nostromo is presented as a distillation of the community itself. Every time he is mentioned in the novel, his name is preceded by some topical remark that suggests popular characterizations of the man: "the lordly Capataz de Cargadores, the indispensable man, the tried and trusty Nostromo, the Mediterranean sailor come ashore casually to try his luck in Costaguana" (130).

⁸ Everything said about Jim in Patusan is filtered through the same kind of popular knowledge, the folklore, as Nostromo's life: "I heard most of this amazing Jim-myth" (Conrad 1994: 212); "Already the legend had gifted him with supernatural powers" (1994: 201), "the popular story has it that Jim..." (1994: 204).

His very name, usually paraphrased as "il nostro uomo", from the Italian,⁹ points to the fact that, to some extent, he is owned by the people who keep on telling stories about him. Captain Mitchell, who is usually separated from native Costaguanans, participates in this tendency each time he refers to him as "that fellow of mine, Nostromo" (130). He is presented in the novel as the extraordinary embodiment of a series of values deposited in him by the inhabitants of Sulaco: "He carried all our lives in his pocket. Devotion, courage, fidelity, intelligence were not enough. Of course, he was perfectly fearless and incorruptible. But a man was wanted that would know how to succeed. He was that man, sir" (482-483). In connection to this, it should be mentioned that his real name in the novel, Gian' Battista Fianza—*fiduccia*, fidelity, again from the Italian—, also highlights the values he represents.

Martin Decoud describes Nostromo in the following terms: "That man seems to have a particular talent for being on the spot whenever there is something picturesque to be done" (224). Everything he does is surrounded by this "picturesque" aura, as if all his deeds were already part of popular legend. The feeling that his life is dictated by the desires of a fascinated audience is highlighted many times in the novel. His love life, for instance, takes place under the eyes of the crowd. In his encounter with the Morenita in chapter eight of the first part, for instance, his movements, and hers too, are directed by a strong sense of spectacle: "He turned his horse slowly, and paced on between the booths, checking the mare almost to a standstill now and then for children, for the groups of people from the distant Campo, who stared after him with admiration" (126). The whole scene is punctuated by the audience's reactions to it: "The Capataz laughed a little in response to the grins of the crowd" (128); "Laughs were heard at her anger, at her retort" (129); "The dreaded Capataz de Cargadores, magnificent and carelessly public in his amours, flung his arms round her neck and kissed her spluttering lips. A murmur went round" (129).

The Nos- in Nostromo, indicating "us", emphasizes his condition of belonging to the community, not as part of it but as its creation, the rest delivered in a continuous process of communication of rumors and legends. As a creation of the community, he resembles the Golem in the Jewish tradition, in that he seems to have been created by the people to protect them. He is the community's fetish as much as the Mine itself. This is precisely what conditions his tragic destiny. He ceases to embody the community's desires when he chooses one of Viola's daughters instead of the other, the one initially intended to become his wife. At this point he can be said to disrupt the narrative in which he was the main character, the picturesque "Capataz de Cargadores", interrupting the legendary yarn spun by the community. Critics have often claimed that Nostromo dies precisely when trying to "take control" of his life, contradicting the wishes of the people who had

⁹ Ian Watt has underlined the irony existing in the understanding of Nostromo as "our man" instead of "boatswain", which would be a literal translation from Italian (Watt 1988: 6).

encumbered him. The will of the community here would be represented by Viola accidentally killing his own creation, his own son, as he calls him repeatedly in the novel. Even the moment of his death will be immersed in legend: "The rumour of some accident—an accident to Captain Fianza—had been spreading along the new quays [...] A knot of night prowlers—the poorest of the poor—hung about the door of the first-aid hospital whispering in the moonlight of the empty street" (562).

Nostromo ends by being eaten up by the community that gave birth to him as a hero. His denomination as "a man of the People" should be re-assessed, considering the possessive sense of the expression rather than the idea of belonging. Apart from Nostromo himself, moreover, none of the main characters in the novel is initially said to belong to this community. The separation is established in the "Author's Note", where Conrad writes about his characters: "As to their own histories I have tried to set them down, Aristocracy and People, men and women, Latin and Anglo-Saxon, bandit and politician, with as cool a hand as was possible in the heat and clash of my own conflicting emotions" (xliii). Social, sexual, ethnic and moral barriers are said to divide the characters in different groups even before the novel itself has started. These barriers, however, fluctuate, so that it is very difficult to determine the reasons why the different characters are being included in or excluded from "the People". As I have tried to illustrate, the notion of "the People" introduced by Conrad in his "Note" works as a centripetal articulation, used to exclude from it all those characters who, for one reason or other, cannot be considered part of it. It is quite difficult to define it as a community by using the common features of social and political discourse.

As it has already been mentioned, the ethnic distinction is an invalid one in this sense. Several characters in the novel, like the Avellanoes, Don Jose and Antonia, as well as Martin Decoud, are natives of Sulaco without really belonging to the people. Although the three of them participate actively in the secession of Sulaco, they do not seem to be included into the aforementioned community.

The economic factor, moreover, will prove to be inconsistent as well. Even if poverty seems to be the one feature that identifies "the people", we cannot talk about a neat distinction between the commons and the aristocracy in *Nostromo*. Characters such as old Viola can hardly be said to belong to either of the groups, even if he declares himself to be "for the people" (168). Similarly, Dr. Monygham himself cannot be said to belong to the aristocracy, or to be rich himself, but neither is he part of "the people".

Linguistic factors, finally, seem to be out of the question as criteria for community. Linguistic isolation is never posited in the novel as barrier for communication among characters; on the contrary, the multilingual context is reinforced by the fact that almost every character in the novel seems to be bilingual or multilingual—in different combinations of Spanish, Italian, English and French—and by the way in which Italian and Spanish expressions are often inserted in the characters' speeches in English. This connects with Hobsbawm's notion that language can hardly constitute a criterion for community in proto-

nationalism, or popular nationalism (Hobsbawm 1992: 51-56), to which Conrad's "People" can be related.

Conrad's ideal community coincides with Maurice Blanchot's formulation of the "unavowable community" (Blanchot 1988: 11). Blanchot opposes the notion of "people" to those of "society" or "state": "the community is not the restricted form of a society [...] it differs from a social cell in that it does not allow itself to create a work and has no production value as aim" (Blanchot 1988: 11). Similarly, Raymond Williams points to the distinction between community and society in *Keywords* (1983). A distinction which emerged in the seventeenth century, separating the notion of community from those of society or state, in terms of immediacy: "The contrast, increasingly expressed in C19, between the more direct, more total and therefore more significant relationships of community and the more formal, more abstract and more instrumental relationships of state, or of society" (Williams 1983: 76).

Only two characters in the novel can be said to come close to the people, through a process that can be better understood through Alphonso Lingis' notion of "the community of those who have nothing in common" (1994). In the book of the same title, Lingis proposes a model of community that is defined in opposition to what he calls "rational communities" (1994: 8), close to Agamben's theorization in *La comunità che viene* (1990). While rational communities, Lingis claims, are based on the production of common knowledge, the kind of community he and Agamben advocate is born precisely out of the acceptance of the other's absolute alterity (Lingis 1994: 27; Agamben 1990: 44). According to Lingis: "community [vs. rational community] is created out of one's exposing to the other" (1994: 12). Sympathy toward those with whom one has nothing in common is the only requisite for inclusion into the kind of community described by Lingis. In *Nostramo*, this idea can serve to illustrate the workings of the community constituted by "the People". Unlike Charles Gould or Captain Mitchell, Mrs. Gould and Dr. Monygham are able to feel a real "solidarity" toward the "common people". At those moments, they are described in terms of their becoming natives to the place, a return to the idea that the essence of this community springs from the earth itself.

For Dr. Monygham, "naturalization" derives from the extreme experience of torture under Guzman Bento's dictatorship. Becoming a victim in the political process undergone in Costaguana, he becomes one of the oppressed:

In such conditions of manner and attire did Dr. Monygham go forth to take possession of his liberty. And these conditions seemed to bind him indissolubly to the land of Costaguana like an awful procedure of naturalization, involving him deep in the national life, far deeper than any amount of success and honour could have done. They did away with his Europeanism. (375)

The humiliating way in which he is liberated, in "such conditions of manner and attire", is precisely what binds him to Costaguana, so that in this exaltation of martyrdom he resembles a Christ-like figure, coming closer to the land. Following Lingis, it could be claimed that in being deprived of his "Europeanism", that is, dispossessed of "the multiplicity of codes that make him up" (Lingis 1994: 25), he is in a position from which he would be able to truly face the other.

Mrs. Gould, on the other hand, is described in the novel as an authentic "Costaguanera":

And Mrs. Gould, with each day's journey, seemed to come nearer to the soul of the land in the tremendous disclosure of this interior unaffected by the slight European veneer of the coast towns, a great land of plain and mountain and people, suffering and mute, waiting for the future in a pathetic immobility of patience [...] Mrs. Gould was indeed becoming a Costaguanera. Having acquired in Southern Europe a knowledge of the peasantry, she was able to appreciate the great worth of the people. She saw the man under the silent, sad-eyed beast of burden. (87-89)

Through this denomination, "Costaguanera", she is described as the only character able to cross the apparently unbridgeable barrier that separates the Europeans from the natives in Sulaco. She perceives "the great worth of the people", which she considers superior to the "material interests" that obsess her husband; she partakes of their hospitality and listens to their "weary desire for peace" (88). She comes close to the "soul of the land", and in fact, the closest descriptions of the people in the novel are introduced from her point of view. During her travels through Sulaco, she is said to "have seen the land with a deeper glance than a trueborn Costaguanera could have done" (86), and she is defined as "too intelligently sympathetic not to share that feeling" (86).

In her final dialogue with Nostromo, this quality is again emphasized, when she is defined as "the woman with the genius of sympathetic intuition" (560). This notion of "sympathy" suggests a formulation of community based on solidarity that is constant in Conrad's work. It can be found, for instance, in his description of the romantic nationalism of his childhood memories in *A Personal Record* (1912):

An impartial view of humanity in all its degrees of splendour and misery together with a special regard for the rights of the unprivileged of this earth, not on any mystic ground but on the ground of simple fellowship and honourable reciprocity of services, was the dominant characteristic of the mental and moral atmosphere of the houses which sheltered my hazardous childhood. (Conrad 1925: ix)

In Conrad's writing, an unexpected form of community springs from a feeling of solidarity among individual beings at those moments where private interest gives way to genuine charity, outside the limits imposed by institutionalized social

communities. This formulation of community escapes social, racial or class determinations, bringing together officers and crew on board a ship, natives and Westerners in a distant colonial setting or, in this case, "the first lady of Sulaco" and the "common people". This articulation is also close to that displayed in the famous Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897), where Conrad talks about "the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts" (Conrad 1984: xl).

5. CONCLUSION

The idea of community implicit in the expression "the People" is not the one encompassed in the political discourse of the protagonists, who cannot themselves constitute a community in the sense sketched above, in that they are all moved by personal interest. The mark that distinguishes the people from those who do not belong to it is multiform and fluctuating: economic—"the poor", "aristocrats"—, ethnic or nationalist—"the natives", "the Europeans"—, or social—"the common folk", "hombres finos". There is not one single concept, a pivot around which a dialectics could be organized in the novel to oppose two separated groups, tracing a neat dividing line between them. That lack has led some critics to use vague denominations to refer to two separate groups. Fredric Jameson, for instance, talks about "English-speaking or at least foreign characters foregrounded against an indeterminate background of the Latin American 'substance' (to use the Hegelian term)" (Jameson 1981: 269). The dialectic between "common people" and "fine people" as expressed by Nostromo in his deathbed (559) becomes spectral as soon as one tries to pin down the line on which that distinction is based: that dialectic is not one of imperialist vs. indigenous (Hay 1996: 83); nor is it one of colonial vs. native (Said 1975: 101), rich vs. poor (Watts 1982: 150), capitalism vs. populism (Jameson 1981: 273), humanity vs. mob (Kettle 1953: 77). But then, what would be "the great worth of the people"?

The conclusion as to whether we can really talk of a stable community existing or being created in *Nostromo* depends on whether we really consider that the gap between the main characters and "the People" is filled in the new Occidental Republic of Sulaco. A great body of academic writing on *Nostromo* has developed around this particular topic: some authors claiming that Sulaco is really the fulfillment of a communitarian dream, while others state that the people will continue being the victims of foreign interests. The discussion, however, tends to focus on whether the kind of solution the novel arrives at in the end expresses a quantitative or qualitative advance in relation to the situation portrayed at the beginning. The sense of social progress relies on what we could call the evolution of the community towards betterment as sanctioned by an ideal external to it. Robert Penn Warren, in his introduction to the Modern Library edition of *Nostromo*, stated: "we must admit that the society at the end of the book is

preferable to that at the beginning" (Penn Warren, ed. 1951: xxix). Ian Watt, on the contrary, mentions the epigraph chosen by Conrad to state that the revolution portrayed in the novel might not be the ultimate storm that should clear the sky (Watt 1988: 70).¹⁰ Arnold Kettle argues, in his *Introduction to the English Novel*, quoting Engels, that there is no sense of real historical progress in the novel, but that history is made up of the conflicts among many individual wills (Kettle 1953: 75). This opinion is echoed by Norman Sherry (1971: 171) and Albert J. Guerard (1958: 191, 177). For all of them the history of Costaguana is "the sum of its inhabitants' follies" (Guerard 1958:177). Cedric Watts's pessimistic conclusion points to Conrad's portrait of the disillusioned Mrs. Gould at the end of the novel to support his view that history in *Nostromo* is cyclical and not teleological, and that, therefore, no idea of progress can be contemplated in the novel (Watts 1982: 150-152). This idea seems to be also present in Sherry's statement that the novel works as the demonstration of a "historical pattern of successive exploitations, of successive attempts at progress contending with rebellion and revolution" (Sherry 1971: 353).

By way of conclusion, I would like to advocate that against the community that political or imperialist discourses try to create in Sulaco, another community stands, a community formed by the collective, the mass. The resonance of this construction in the novel was highlighted by Avrom Fleishman: "Permeating the novel, densely filling the interstices between characters, providing motive and meaning to their actions, are the people. Costaguana is the most palpable presence in *Nostromo* by virtue of the gross human fact of popular suffering" (Fleishman 1981: 97). Arnold Kettle reproached Conrad for his inability to look at the mass in terms of humanity, a critique shared by Edward Said (1988: 70): "... his inadequate attitude towards 'the mob' who never come to life as human beings" (Kettle 1953: 77). In my view, it is precisely that lack of a sense of individuality that, Jean-Luc Nancy could argue, makes Conrad's "People" a community: "Community is made of the interruption of singularities, or of the suspension that singular beings are. Community is not the work of singular beings, nor can it claim them as its works" (Nancy 1991: 31).

In one of the above quoted passages, the community formed by the common people is described as "suffering and mute, waiting for the future in a pathetic immobility of patience" (88). This immobility of patience, a lack of purpose that contrasts with the political activity of the group formed by Avellanos, Gould, Decoud and so on, coincides with Blanchot's idea of "people":

It has to be understood not as the totality of social forces, ready to make particular decisions, but as their instinctive refusal to accept any power, their absolute mistrust in identifying with a power to which they would delegate themselves, thus mistrust in their declaration of impotence. (Blanchot 1988: 31)

¹⁰ "So foul a sky clears not without a storm" (William Shakespeare, *King John* IV, ii. 108).

Blanchot's depiction of this community emphasizes its precarious status as a communitarian formation: "Inert, immobile, less a gathering than the always imminent dispersal of a presence momentarily occupying the whole space and nevertheless without a place (utopia), a kind of messianism announcing nothing but its autonomy and its unworking" (Blanchot 1988: 33). This recalls the scene of Nostromo's encounter with the Morenita in front of the crowd, first gathering around them— "the people aware of this scene were calling out urgently to others in the crowd. The circle round the silver-grey mare narrowed slowly" (129)— just to dissolve in a few minutes without leaving a trace, "the circle had broken out" (130). This image of the "imminent dispersal" of the community corresponds to what I have described in this paper as failed attempts to delimit the community in *Nostromo*. Invisible, purposelessness, always about to disappear, "the People" remain, in the novel, the constant murmur that gives birth to the legend of the Capataz de Cargadores, the living force that nurtures the mythical "soul of the land".

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