

*Book Review*

**Diego Gambetta: Codes of the Underworld:  
How Criminals Communicate\***

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What do prison inmates and frogs have in common? Apart from being animals populating this planet, not much, one would say, awaiting the punch line of an apparent joke. The answer though is sobering and thought-provoking at the same time: both prison inmates and frogs (as many other species, e.g., sparrows and crustaceans; see Searcy and Nowicki 2005) engage in aggressive interactions in which they fight over status, territory, and other resources, making their solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short lives more pleasurable. However, even for the strongest individuals, fighting entails costs in terms of energy and injuries. Therefore, not fighting is preferable if the same results can be achieved by other means. This is literally easier said than done. Frogs happen to croak and the dominant frequency of their calls is correlated with body size, the main determinant of dominance in aggressive interactions. Unlike frogs, body size of prison inmates seems not to be a reliable indicator of fighting ability (Gambetta 2009, 84). Yet there are other cues that convicts observe to assess their inmates' violence potential. In chapter four, Diego Gambetta gives a systematic account of the signals and signs prisoners send and display and explains how these provide information to other inmates about their toughness.<sup>1</sup> While prisoners painfully learn which cues to watch for, the theoretical lens through which the author looks at the ethnographic evidence on prison life is one of signaling. The main theoretic idea is that certain acts entail costs that only individuals with certain qualities can afford. As these qualities are not directly observable, but pertinent to the interaction, such acts must truthfully convey information about the underlying qualities. For instance, scars from knife stabs or bullet wounds indicate that someone has been through many fights and has survived. In aggressive interactions these are credible signals of fighting ability where as a deep voice or a manly walk are not. The latter could be easily faked and would not hold out against contenders.

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\* I thank Liz David-Barrett for helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup> A sign can be anything perceptible in the environment and can be understood as a signal when deliberately displayed or pointed at to change the observer's beliefs in the context of the interaction (see definition on page XV).

Apart from sending signals indicating toughness, prison inmates can build a reputation for being tough. However, the only communicative acts able to determine somebody's rank in the prison hierarchy are fights or other vulgar displays of power. As soon as everybody's fighting ability is revealed, interactions between prison inmates can run more smoothly, albeit to the detriment of the underdogs. Based on theoretical considerations, Diego Gambetta derives testable hypotheses about the conditions under which fighting in prisons is more or less likely to occur. One particularly interesting implication is, for instance, that fighting will occur more often in prisons with a stricter regime. If encounters between prisoners are rare because inmates are not free to roam around, information is less likely to be transmitted and thus must be generated through action. Gambetta cites more than anecdotal evidence in support of his hypotheses, throughout the book. Yet it becomes apparent that there is way too little empirical research systematically exploring the social life of the underworld. The numerous cited accounts of special agent Joseph Pistone, alias Donnie Brasco, who successfully infiltrated two mafia families in New York in the late 1970s, show how difficult and dangerous unobtrusive observation can be for an FBI agent, not to mention for a social scientist.

Uncertainty in social interactions is abundant in the criminal world. Criminals cannot simply ask whether or not someone is a gangster willing to buy two pounds of heroin or use the Yellow Pages to find co-offenders. Even if they were able to (because undercover agents had not yet been invented), they could not rely on the legal system to ensure that the other party abides by the 'contract'. Mistakes, false assessments, or even gullibility or a trusting nature are things criminals can ill afford. The underworld is a sociological niche bereft of formal institutions and sympathy. Moreover, the constant threat of harsh punishment provides a strong incentive for rational thinking. Ironically, it is again criminal acts that provide the decisive means of communication allowing mobsters to signal their trustworthiness to co-offenders. In chapter one the author discusses the various ways in which criminals establish their credentials. To take a rather extreme example, an undercover agent would never commit a murder just to prove that he can be trusted, making murder a perfectly discriminating signal. In general, the graver the offense the less likely it is that a wannabe mafioso or an undercover agent can afford to commit it. The same logic applies to the length of a prison sentence. The market for criminal acts relies on crimes providing costly signals that establish trust among potential co-offenders. Moreover, the time spent in prison allows criminals to acquire the human and social capital necessary to be competitive in the criminal labor market.

After *Streetwise: How Taxi Drivers Establish Customers' Trustworthiness* (Gambetta and Hamill 2005), this is Diego Gambetta's second book to put signaling theory into action. *Codes of the Underworld* comprises two parts with five essays each. While the first part is concerned with the communicative acts which aim at credibly distinguishing the 'real' types from the 'phony' types, the second part discusses a different class of signals which the author calls conventional. Conventional signals convey information because senders and receivers

understand the same meaning from the signal. Moreover, unlike the notion from signaling theory, conventional signals as such are not causally connected to the particular qualities of the sender (Gambetta 2009, 150). Thus, a conventional signal can be anything the meaning of which is shared by at least two people. On the one hand, mere words, gestures, or objects can be agreed to have a particular meaning in secret by a group of criminals. An argot allows the members of the group to communicate with each other without being understood by outsiders. On the other hand, conventional signals can be easily misunderstood and mimicked as the author demonstrates with numerous examples in chapters six and seven. Therefore, even though conventional signals are used by criminals to communicate with one another, their meaning must be maintained and protected to make them costly to acquire by outsiders. For instance, tattoos denoting membership in a criminal organization are—apart from the pain one endures while being tattooed—purely conventional. Members of the Japanese yakuza or the Russian vory used to punish non-members who wore their insignia. The protection of conventional signals by punishment implies, however, that the criminal organizations can identify non-members by other, more reliable means.

Diego Gambetta's book opens a window on the variety of mechanisms and means of communication in social interactions, not only applicable in the underworld. It also makes apparent how multiplex communication can be and how far away formal models are from what we think is relevant for our understanding of social interactions. Costly signaling only applies under special conditions in interactions with asymmetrically informed agents. Together with other well known concepts such as repeated encounters, reputation, social norms and conventions, costly signaling is part of a broader theoretical framework which tries to pin down the conditions under which rational and self-interested agents engage in cooperation. It is not the aim of this book to advance existing formal models of communication or develop new ones. It is, however, a signpost for everyone engaged in formal modeling of social interactions.

## References

- Gambetta, D. and H. Hamill (2005), *Streetwise: How Taxi Drivers Establish Their Customers' Trustworthiness*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Searcy, W. A. and S. Nowicki (2005), *The Evolution of Animal Communication: Reliability and Deception in Signaling Systems*, Princeton/NJ: Princeton University Press.