

without which wealth becomes conceptually incoherent, a mere bundle of things; and the pursuit of them, a profoundly irrational, uneconomical Midas-like malaise of the soul. The second reason for unfolding the idea of scarcity is less related to the recovery of a way of thinking than with what we might hope to learn from it. Above all it urges us to attend to the moral foundations (broadly understood) of the economy, in the recognition that the economy is pervaded by the values of the enveloping society, values which shape how we organize the sustaining of human beings in its internal structure, as a form of regime, and which set the ends or purposes of the economy. It suggests to us, that is, the limits of a theory of the economy which seems almost to revel in its non-ethical character (43). The governing premise of this argument is that the human interchange with nature is at its root an ethical matter, one which is intimately and inextricably bound up with conceptions of the good, and with the individuals and communities in which the good is pursued. Their dismissal of the purely technical approach to the economy serves to remind us of the centrality of the economy to the way we live, and that not simply (or even primarily) in its material dimensions. It serves that is to call us back to the thought that all economies are, in their many ways, fundamentally moral economies (44).

- (43) SEN (Amartha), *On Ethics and Economics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 2ff.
 (44) An extended treatment of some of these themes can be found in my *Households. On the Moral Architecture of the Economy* (Cornell University Press, 1993).

DIEGO GAMBETTA

Godfather's gossip *

Personally, I do not like to repeat gossip. So, please, listen carefully.

Anonymous

MY ATTENTION to gossip as a notion worthy of reflection was attracted by a trivial detail: the English etymology of gossip is *god-sib*, godfather, or, generally, god parent, 'denoting—says the English Oxford Dictionary—the spiritual affinity of the baptized and their sponsor'. This intriguing origin alludes to gossip as the performing of an initiation ritual, the creation of an exclusive bond; above all, it bears an uncanny association with the mafia which happens to have been the topic of my research for sometime. I suppose I could have interpreted *god-sib* through the obvious gender bias as deriving from godmother rather than from godfather; this tallies with the Italian *comare* or the French *commère* which can also denote a gossip. But I did not think of this possibility at first. Instead, carried away by linguistic speculation, I went to check the etymology of the main Italian word for gossip, *pettegolesso*. I was not a little surprised to find that the word comes from a rather less inspiring source. It comes from *petto*, to fart. In some northern Italian dialects, venetian, piedmontese and emilian, a common expression, 'contar tutti i peti', 'to tell every fart', refers to the habit of reporting and speculating about trivial events.

The jump from godfather to fart is no joke. And yet, with some exceptions, the sociology and the anthropology of gossip seem rather unexciting subjects. It is hard to discuss both seriously and attractively something which is fun as a practice; it is like writing about humour or sex. But there is more to it than that. A fair share of the limited literature on this topic is devoted to spotting gossip's functions. The 'obsessional search for meaning' (Elster 1983a) in every phenomenon, a propensity which taunts the social sciences, reaches a frenzied climax with gossip. It is hard to find a phenomenon which has been attributed

* This paper was first presented at the seminar series on 'Unofficial knowledge', King's College, Cambridge, 24 October 1993. I am very grateful for the comments and suggestions I received from Rebecca Abrams,

Pascal Boyer, Jim Coleman, Jon Elster, Liz Frazer, Nick Humphrey, Mansur Laljee, Steven Lukes, Valeria Pizzini, Stein Ringen, James Sandham, Federico Varese, Lucia Zedner and the seminar participants.

as many functions as gossip has, individual and collective, positive and negative, mean and noble alike.

In what follows, I examine the functions which have been attributed to gossip, the conditions which distinguish gossip from other forms of communication, the motives which lead people to engage in it, and, finally, I suggest a partial explanation of its social dynamics which may develop into a testable theory of gossip.

1. *The functions*

Gossip has been held to serve instrumental purposes of many sorts: 'a cultural device used by the individual to forward his own interests' (Paine 1967: 282); a form of 'surreptitious "getting even"' in which the attacker is difficult to detect; a way to satisfy the 'desire to destroy, to disgrace' (Birch Stirling 1957). Gossip, above all, has been seen as satisfying unconscious needs: frustrated individuals 'may "let off steam" through gossip. In this case, gossip may have a therapeutic value to the gossipier'. Emotional relief can be obtained both by resorting to gossip as a substitute for the real thing—thus 'vicariously enjoying the experience while recounting it'—and 'by attributing (...) [one's] own guilt-laden acts or thoughts to others' (Birch Stirling 1957). In addition, were one to feel dejected, through gossip, one can 'enhance one's self-image and also one's social self in the eyes of others': 'being the first to impart a piece of gossip (...) gives a sense of spurious importance' (Birch Stirling 1957; also Spacks 1985). Gossip has also been described as a means of killing time (Birch Stirling 1957, Spacks 1985), establishing intimacy (Spacks 1985, Merry 1984, Sabini & Silver 1982, Zinovieff 1991), and avoiding embarrassment (gossip 'bypasses ancient problems of propriety and virtue', Spacks 1985).

Nobler functions of gossip have also been stressed. People engaged in gossip 'reveal themselves as they talk of others'; gossip is a route to both self- and others' discovery, argues Patricia Meyer Spacks:

The vaguely defined 'I' of the narrative inquires of Marlow, the cryptic wise man in several Conrad's fictions, why some human beings have the capacity to understand what is happening to others (...) 'Is it', he asks, 'that we may amuse ourselves gossiping about each other's affairs? You for instance seem'. Marlow does not let him say that he, Marlow, is an incorrigible gossip. Instead Marlow shifts vocabulary: 'It would be still a very respectable provision if it were only for that end [i.e. gossiping]. But from the same provision of understanding there springs in us a compassion, charity, indignation, a sense of solidarity; and in the minds of any largeness an inclination to that indulgence which is next door to affection' (1985: 9, from Conrad's novel *Chance*).

Function-spotters grow more excited still when it comes to social rather than individual functions. Deemed to be one of the 'most important societal phenomena we are called upon to analyse' (Gluckman 1963), gossip, rather than just idle talk, has been said to allow information to circulate in societies with no alternative means; to serve the same purpose as witchcraft which releases feelings of 'hostile aggression which appear to be endemic in group living' (Birch Stirling 1957): '[t]elling stories takes possession of others' experience: a form of magic no less potent for being familiar' (Spacks 1985: 11); to reinforce dominant values against deviancy; to maintain group identity (Gluckman 1963); to instigate sanctions against breaches of norms; to spread values to younger generations and to allow people to 'learn cultural rules at a distance' (Haviland 1977: 170). 'Gossip—wrote Sabini and Silver—brings ethics home by introducing abstract morality into the mundane' (1982: 100).

As if this was not enough, gossip makes 'possible the selection of leaders without direct confrontation and embarrassment', it provides 'a way of controlling competing cliques and aspiring members' (Gluckman 1963), and is central to shaping and shifting power relations (Brisson 1993). Gossip has been regarded as a resource for the dispossessed, a means by which to take revenge on those in command: servants gossip about masters, students about teachers, women about men. 'The ferocity of several centuries' attack on derogatory conversation about others—wrote Spacks—probably reflects justifiable anxiety of the dominant about the aggressive impulses of the submissives' (1985: 30) (1). Conversely, on the strength of Jane Austen's novels, Max Gluckman wrote that 'gossip (...) is one of the chief weapons which those who consider themselves higher in status use to put those whom they consider lower in their proper place' (Gluckman 1963: 309). Coming full circle, gossip has been described also as affecting neither those at the top nor the 'shameless' at the bottom of society, but the insecure middle classes (Merry 1984: 286-7).

Such an impressive contribution to the human lot—my grandfather would have said in Piedmontese that gossip 'slonga, slarga e fa chersse la barba', it makes you grow taller, bigger and fertilizes your beard—should put gossip firmly on the list of National Health Service funded medicines. If it were costly, that is. But costly it is not. In fact, one of the few safe things we can say about gossip is that if we indulge in

(1) An extreme version of this argument the association of the devil with corporate recently claimed that 'In a world where the brandnames and logos may be understood as presence of power lies increasingly in the realm of the imaginary, such rumours [concerning

it so painstakingly it is because gossip is *pleasurable*. But the pioneers in the study of gossip, driven by an urge to stress its positive functions against the standard morals which disapprove of it, kept this elementary reality concealed. Although its negative consequences were occasionally acknowledged—gossip can destroy trust, punish innocent people, promote cliques—the detection of gossip's functions has coincided with 'a plea for gossip'. Max Gluckman went as far as to suggest, half-ironically perhaps, that 'Town planners [who] are very anxious to turn housing estates into communities (...) should develop scandal in them' (1963: 313). The result has been, especially in the crudest accounts, to forget—as Elster put it—'that there could be such a thing as sound and fury in social life, unintended and accidental events that have no meaning whatsoever. [This way of thinking] takes for given that although the tale may appear to be told by an idiot, there always exists a code that, if found, would enable us to decipher it' (1983a: 101).

Function-sporting raises three problems. First, the multiplicity of functions attributed to gossip is so vast that it makes us doubt whether we are dealing with an identifiable phenomenon. The weird contrast between the English and Italian etymology is a clue to the fuzziness of this notion and the diversity of its interpretations. In English the word *gossip* started to encompass an action rather than only a type of person quite late, in 1811. Previously people made so with malice, slander, indiscretion, idle curiosity, triviality, detraction or just idle talk. Some languages even lack a specific word for gossip, such as the Zinacantecos, for instance, a native Mexican people which, ironically, were the object of an extensive ethnography on gossip (Haviland 1977). A further sign that we may be playing with an evanescent behaviour is that its characterization is often parasitical on other human practices: gossip has been paired with sex, play, humour, voyeurism, fiction and magic. Illuminating as they can be, these associations by themselves leave us none the wiser about the nature of gossip. All that the overwhelming array of functions attributed to gossip comes down to is an indisputable claim that '[t]outes les relations entre les hommes reposent, cela va de soi, sur le fait qu'ils savent des choses les uns sur les autres' (Sirmel 1908). We are left wondering whether the existence of gossip may be largely a rumour.

Second, even if we dealt with a clearly circumscribable behaviour, in order to generate all those functions gossip would have to be such a basic and general disposition to deserve our attention as such rather than because of what it performs. Only multifaceted activities like sex, walking or eating realize a broad spectrum of functions *and*, at the

same time, are identifiable as distinct acts. But then how interesting is it to enumerate, for instance, that walking can take you from A to B in the absence of other means, help your digestion, massage your feet, vent your anger, allow you to climb both mountains and your lover's balcony, bring people together but, of course, also help them to escape from each other? If we did not walk as we do, war, love, hunting, migrating, most human undertakings would be different. This is, I fear, no less trite a way of looking at gossip than it is of looking at walking.

Third, functionalism, as an explanation, presents the well-known problem of separating reasons for action from by-products: the act of gossiping is not necessarily motivated by the functions of gossiping. The link between motives and functions, between individual reasons and effects is not automatic. If functions are not motives, they can explain gossip only in so far as there is a mechanism(s) whereby gossip generates a causal loop such that, by-passing unaware agents, it nonetheless makes them engage in yet more gossip (Elster 1983b). As far as I am aware no such mechanisms have been identified. Moreover, the overall understanding which stems from ethnographies is that people gossip because they enjoy it. Even when its functions vanish or become unpredictable, as in developed societies, people still delight in it (Merry 1985). Gossip seems independent of its functions whichever these may be.

Still, the temptation of functionalism must be reckoned with in the case of gossip; even James Coleman, an advocate of rational choice theory, in his major contribution *Foundations of social theory*, seems to be leaning in that direction: 'gossip—he writes—constitutes a device which both aids in establishing a norm and overcomes the second-order public-good problem of sanctioning' (1990: 284) (2). Robert Ellickson, in his *Order without law*, follows the same line; he offers evidence that some people seem conscious of the role of gossip in social control and report using it intentionally (1991: 57). However, as Elster has pointed out, a crucial distinction must be borne in mind: an interest in the spread of information that can either legitimize or itself be the sanction against a breach of norm constitutes an *interest in an outcome*. To infer from this an interest in listening to gossip and in passing on gossip is unwarranted, since the latter is an *interest in an action*. The explanation

(2) The second order public good problem is the following: why should anyone bother to sanction a breach of a norm, if the cost of inflicting the sanction exceeds the benefit to the sanctioner?

of why we engage in gossip must explain, first of all, the *fact* of gossip (3).

Suitably circumscribed, gossip may be interesting for social science, rather than just as a practice; but it has probably been addressed through the wrong questions: to resume the analogy with walking, fascinating questions in both evolutionary biology and anthropology concern the fact that we are bipeds, that we are built to walk forward rather than sideways, that people walk in different ways in different cultures; but it is by focusing on the act itself and its modalities rather than on its by-products that the study of gossip can advance. Although some valuable phenomenology of gossip exists, only a theory equipped with solid micro foundations can enable us to make non trivial predictions about its social dynamics.

2. The conditions

Intuitively, we all know what gossip is; still, how to distinguish gossip from other forms of communication is not so readily apparent. A common understanding of gossip is restricted to malicious or reproachful talk behind people's backs, but most writers on this topic seem content with broader definitions and understand gossip with few limitations, as two persons communicating about a third person or persons who happen to be absent or unaware (e.g. Haviland 1977, Spacks 1985). In the attempt to define the notion of gossip, let us review the limitations which have been put forward and some additional ones.

Gossip requires persons as OBJECT

To qualify as gossip a piece of information must concern a person or persons (OBJECT); it cannot be information about 'disembodied' acts or events whose value is independent of OBJECT *qua* OBJECT. The information concerning, say, a new fashion design can be removed from the designer and maintain its value, whereas the information which qualifies as gossip concerns the designer as a particular person. This distinction helps to separate gossip from rumour, the latter being speculation concerning events and persons alike rather than persons

(3) Jon Elster, private correspondence. In an unpublished paper of 1985, James Coleman appears to be well aware of the problem and states that if we do not go beyond 'the easy functional explanation' that gossip serves the function of enforcing norms, and 'move down to the level of the actors who control the gossip, to see its meaning as value for *them* we have no way to give predictions about when gossip will flow and when it will not'.

alone (4). The identity of OBJECT can represent the climax of gossip as revealed by the fact that part of the story teller's ability consists of skilfully choosing the moment of disclosure so as to cause maximum effect (Haviland 1977: 52).

Gossip requires that both parties know OBJECT

If OBJECT were unknown gossip would be meaningless. This requirement has been widely acknowledged (e.g. Sabini and Silver 1982: 96). 'Known', however, should be taken to mean that OBJECT is relevant in some respect to both the transmitter and the receiver of gossip. They may not know OBJECT personally, but know, say, that they will soon meet OBJECT. We are at times interested in the lives of persons we will never know personally, but only in so far as they are friends of friends of friends. The more remote the link with OBJECT, the more speculative gossip's motives, which ultimately pale into a near-universal curiosity for human quirks (Aristotle used the word *anthropologos* to refer to a gossip, namely one who talks about men).

From the requirement that OBJECT must be known, there follow a number of predictions:

The more mutual friends [the participants] have, the more people they can discuss. Every individual is at the centre of a network he or she knows. The extent to which the members of this network know one another, independent of their relationship to ego, can be described as their 'degree of connectedness'. Gossip flourishes in close-knit, highly connected social networks but atrophies in loose-knit, unconnected ones (Merry 1984: 277).

Similarly, in hierarchical societies gossip is, *ceteris paribus*, more likely to occur than in egalitarian societies, since any random pair of individuals know in common at least the individual at the top. The fact that subordinate individuals gossip about those in authority may simply follow from this structural condition rather than represent a subversive act *per se*: take two graduate students; from the start they will both know at least one person in common, their supervisor. It also follows that those in authority, in so far as authority makes one visible, are more likely to be the object of gossip than the average person.

Gossip requires 'fresh' content

Suppose there was a law, Sören Kierkegaard wrote, that 'ordered that everything that was spoken should be treated as though it had happened fifty years ago the gossips would be done for, they would be in

(4) Bok 1981: 92; for further differences between rumour and gossip see below.

despair. On the other hand it would not really interfere with anyone who could really talk' (quoted in Spacks 1985: 18).

Gossip must be fresh, as it were, but freshness may ensue from participants' special concerns rather than be a property of OBJECT: characters who are long dead still arouse curiosity. How else could we explain the success of memoirs, volumes of correspondence and biographies? Much of Painter's biography of Proust, for instance, relies on and has the flavour of gossip. By constantly trying to match fictional with real characters, it turns Proust's art into gossip. Biography and gossip are not the same thing, but if biography concerning distant events successfully banks on a reserve of curiosity, I do not see why gossip cannot. The escapades of grandparents are fun to tell and hear about. Writers parasite on family gossip dating back generations. Unless we introduce further restrictions, even much of what parents tell their children about the family is gossip, although we feel disinclined to think of it in that way. The difference is that the more removed the events reported, the lower the sense of guilt associated with disclosing information *belonging* to others. A similar reasoning obtains with psychological distance. The more removed we are from OBJECT the more inconsequential it seems to talk about OBJECT: once gossip has travelled from mouth to mouth, gossiping becomes, if at all, a breach of confidence only of the *n*th transmitter.

Gossip requires immediate responses

We instinctively think of gossip as an oral exchange, carried out face to face, or, nowadays, phone to phone. It does not follow that people never gossip through signs: the most concise piece of gossip perhaps consists of a raised eyebrow behind somebody's back (whereas the shortest verbal gossip is perhaps a nickname referring to an abnormality of sort). Nor does it follow that people never gossip in writing; people gossip less in writing (assuming they do gossip less in this way), simply perhaps because writing is a more strenuous activity than speaking: trivia may arouse enough excitement to be voiced, but hardly enough energy to be written. There is however a further hypothesis: gossip requires the receiver's complicity (see below), and this is much harder to establish in written exchanges than in face to face ones. If immediate responses matter, people should, *ceteris paribus*, be more inclined to gossip in writing in the UK, where the post office works, than in Italy where it does not. A test of the immediacy requirement may be whether e-mail, as I suspect, is more conducive to gossip than

letter writing (5). A further sign that immediacy is more relevant than the means of communication is that we do not recoil from passing brief written notes during lectures to make fun of the speaker. The relevance of immediacy suggests that gossip is rewarding *if* it can count on shared emotional states.

Gossip requires small groups

Even if it feels right to spread a given piece of gossip to a group of receivers one by one, it hardly feels right to spread the same gossip to that group all at once. This is an odd aspect of gossip. The larger the size of a gathering the less likely that gossip develops. This is not due to the fact that larger audiences make it difficult for people to speak generally, for even those who are not shy of speaking in public may feel inhibited about gossiping in a group. This could be due to the condition just mentioned: if gossip is rewarding in so far as it generates or banks on shared emotions, the opportunity to make it rewarding increases in smaller groups in which monitoring emotions is easier than in larger ones.

The small group requirement is consistent with a further hypothesis, namely that gossip is a *positional good*: suppose a piece of gossip is a commodity owned by the transmitter which has an unconditional value for each receiver in a group R_i ; by knowing that piece of gossip each $R_{i,n}$ is better off regardless of whether the others in the group know it too. But suppose further that the value of gossip for each $R_{i,n}$ is also negatively correlated with the number of others who consume it, namely more pleasure is derived by the receiver if the exchange is exclusive. Several writers have pointed out that gossip creates a sense of intimacy between the transmitter and the receiver thanks to the exclusion of OBJECT from the exchange (Sabini and Silver 1982: 99), but the exclusion of other receivers might also be important. Thus, if we satisfy the curiosity of $R_{i,n}$ jointly we make an inefficient use of the gossip we 'own', whereas if we do so separately (6) we can multiply the effect gossip yields by exploiting its positional value. A prediction of this

(5) E-mail is an odd form of communication: its potential for eliciting immediate responses encourages spontaneity; the ease with which a written message can be passed on does not encourage extended reflections on the content of the message; but, given the greater opportunity for the receiver to escape from the obligation to reply immediately or hide his feelings, it also generates more anxiety than a

face to face exchange for the transmitter more easily feels he or she may have said the wrong thing and, in case of delay, is left wondering.

(6) Gossip, like information generally and unlike ordinary commodities, lacks 'conservation', namely it is not given away once and for all like an apple, but even after it is transmitted time and again it can be retained by the source (Coleman 1990: 33-4).

model is that the higher the value of any piece of gossip, the greater the loss and hence the reluctance to give it away to a group rather than to its individual members.

Gossip requires OBJECT's absence

OBJECT's absence (or OBJECT treated as absent, Bok 1981: 91) is widely acknowledged as a defining condition of gossip. If OBJECT were present, the actors would refrain from exchanging a particular information or information in a particular way. In so far as gossip is derogatory, the importance of OBJECT's absence is obvious. But OBJECT's absence may be desirable for another reason. The sentence 'OBJECT is getting married' can be uttered in a malicious way suggesting that the event is surprising because OBJECT is unattractive or OBJECT's spouse is unattractive and so on. In none of these meanings would such information be exchanged if OBJECT were present. But even if the news were reported innocently, it is unlikely that, were OBJECT present, we would say it. OBJECT can take care of saying that himself if he wants to. If we say it we behave tactlessly. In this case OBJECT minds not so much that the receiver is informed of the fact that he is getting married, as that it is the transmitter which divulges it. There are aspects of our life which are better revealed by us. The breach of this norm of discretion is gossip.

Conversely, there are events which even OBJECT prefers to have divulged by others. Gossip includes details which add to OBJECT's desirable reputation and that OBJECT feels embarrassed to reveal: if I boast about my achievements I will be taken as a boaster; but if the knowledge of my success spreads through a different transmitter my reputation may gain. Gossip spreads secrets in the sense of information which requires some restraint. Gossip's territory is therefore subject to the changes in the territory of discretion which is both individually and socially variable: the higher the number of topics to which discretion applies the larger gossip's potential domain.

Interestingly, an excess of familiarity leads people to overlook both discretion and the absence requirement: for instance, parents at times brag about or belittle their children in their presence. The common reactions of the child is a mixture of coyness, embarrassment and irritation. These acts breach two norms at once: they talk of a topic which would be better kept secret and, if not secret, then at least reserved for gossip rather than voiced in the presence of OBJECT (7). A

(7) Here I exclude gossip with OBJECT present which involves joking, teasing, flirting with OBJECT rather than the receiver.

case in which the absence requirement is successfully circumvented is reported by Helen Watson, in *Women in the City of the Dead*: the women living in Cairo's old cemetery gather with their children each evening before the men return from work to chat and tell stories. Often these stories are accounts of the lives of the women themselves skilfully disguised as fiction (8).

The absence requirement combined with the requirement that OBJECT must be known to participants suggests that the spreading of mass media has a double effect: first, since more people become known in common to any pair of individuals meeting at random—comedians, TV presenters, newsreaders, stars—this extends prodigiously the number of potential OBJECTS; next, it creates a new category of OBJECTS who are absent even as they speak to us through the radio or the box, and about whose hairdos, mannerisms, opinions, blunders and sexual inclinations we can say whatever we like. In contrast with the standard belief that small communities are prone to develop gossip, whereas anomic societies do not, this suggests that gossip has spread enormously in mass media dominated societies. The difference is that in small communities the same piece of gossip travels longer distances, for people have a common curiosity about local characters, enjoy frequent informal encounters and have little else to talk about. By contrast, in a faceless urban environment, people talk more within family boundaries about colleagues or media characters, but gossip does not extend beyond their walls thereby giving the mistaken impression that gossip is absent. Rather than being more widespread, in small communities gossip is perhaps just easier to detect.

Gossip requires that instrumental motives be concealed

'Gossip insists on its own frivolity' argues Spacks (1985: 6). The participants 'must act as if their talk were idle, had no serious intent—were not designed to advance their interests' write Sabini and Silver (1982: 94). This is an interesting requirement. Gossip does not work well if the receiver suspects ulterior motives behind the transmitter's story; the rewards of gossip *qua* gossip evaporate if such a suspicion is manifested. The instrumental motives of the participants are not at all necessary to prompt gossip, but if such motives exist they must remain concealed.

'Good morning!' says a psychoanalyst.

'I wonder what he meant' thinks the other psychoanalyst.

(8) I am grateful to Rebecca Abrams for bringing this to my attention.

Although, there is evidence that, ironically, psychoanalysts gossip about patients (Olinick 1980), to sustain the fiction required to make gossip rewarding with a psychoanalyst is harder than with ordinary human beings. Consider the following psychoanalytic explanation of gossip:

the gossip has heard and/or seen something which excites his repressed impulses and affects. In order successfully and without anxiety or guilt to de-repress he can disguise and diffuse his internal pressures by means of collusion with a potentially equally interested interlocutor, with whom he can projectively identify, in this way bypassing or bribing his superego (Olinick 1980: 442).

Besides being an excellent specimen of the kind of arguments which give psychoanalysis a bad name, this view is unlikely to encourage further gossip with its proponents. Even if they say nothing, you know that—like policemen—they suspect your motives professionally, as it were. If not genuine trust, there must be at least a tolerable pretense of trust in gossip exchange.

If the relevant information were a serious crime, the pretense of idleness would be more difficult to sustain: 'Mr X raped his daughter' cannot be regarded as a piece of gossip, especially if Mr X's crime is as yet undetected. In such a case one should rush to the police rather than gossip. On the other hand, 'the task of negotiating a path between serious motives and too serious motives requires a degree of subtlety and sensitivity that enhances the pleasure of gossiping' (9).

Gossip may be used manipulatively, but the fact that for it to work this needs to be concealed, reveals that gossip's specificity is to be or successfully present itself as non-manipulative, non-instrumental communication. One reads because of the pleasure one expects and does not assume an ulterior motive hidden behind the text, at least not a motive that need concern the reader. The same applies to gossip. Were something to be said instrumentally, the pleasure connected with gossip would be eroded: we would start wondering about ulterior motives, and doubting whether the content of the report was truthful or shaped by those motives. Trespassing the idleness barrier makes gossip indistinguishable from other forms of functional communication such as *publicity* for instance (10). Here the transmitter informs the receiver how great OBJECT is and OBJECT pays for the service (11).

- (9) Rebecca Abrams, private correspondence. anonymous calls or letters for, regardless of whether they spread what may eventually turn into or was picked up in the course of gossip, instrumentality cannot be expunged from the exchange: the transmitter must have its instrumental reasons for divulging that piece of information which are unlikely to be idle.
- (10) Taylor (1994) contrasts two good examples to show how to talk about an absent person motivated by a more general concern does not qualify as gossip.
- (11) The condition that motives must appear to be idle is violated in the case of

The idleness condition is hard to assess for observers of course, but also for participants; it is negotiated between the parties, and the threat of suspicion eroding the pleasure of gossip is ever-present: 'attitudes may be ambiguous, mixed and shifting even in the course of one conversation. It is therefore not surprising that the boundaries between what does and does not constitute gossip are rather fluid' (Taylor 1994).

Gossip does not require truth

'Rumour' attacks the speaker's claim; 'gossip' attacks its idleness' (Sabini and Silver 1982: 92). In gossip, I suggest, there is no truth test involved; truth, as established by evidence, is not part of gossip. 'It may manifest malice, it may promulgate fiction in the guise of fact, but its participants do not value it for such reasons; they cherish rather, the opportunity it affords for emotional speculation' (Spacks 1985: 3). Once again gossip is reminiscent of fiction: when we read or watch fiction we suspend our disbelief, we turn our attention to the story, to its internal consistency and allure, and through a story effectively represented we live the same emotions as if it were true, sometimes more intensely still. Plausibility is more relevant than truth. A convincing story gets repeated because of its appeal not its truthfulness—'myth is gossip grown old' wrote Stanislaw Lec.

Occasions which by definition are concerned with the establishment of truth, such as court hearings, contravene two of gossip's fundamental requirements: motives are clearly not idle but focused on a pre-defined purpose and there is a presumption of truthfulness in the reports which is ostensibly intended to sift 'gossip' from evidence. ('This is not to deny that such events can be enjoyable even more than plain gossip for the context disposes of the sense of guilt).

Further aspects reveal the precarious link between truth and gossip. First, proving that a piece of gossip is not true is difficult for OBJECT; OBJECT has an interest in denying negative gossip regardless of truth, which weakens his or her claim *a priori*. The idleness claim almost by definition fails to apply to denials, and this is part of what makes OBJECT defenceless. Only third party's counter-claims are potentially on an equal footing with SPEAKER's. The astute victim of gossip knows he cannot reply directly, but only by trying to discredit the transmitter's credibility (12). Second, truth and gossip are connected by a self-fulfilling process: if a rumour spreads that A is untrustworthy, others may prudently avoid dealing with A for fear of being cheated or losing

- (12) For this point I am indebted to Federico Varese.

their reputation. A will have fewer chances to develop his business and turn to crime in desperation.

Gossip requires shared tastes

'... [O]nly when the gossipers share moral views—wrote Merry—is the soil fertile for gossip. The person sharing the juicy tidbit expects the listener to join in condemning that behaviour, not to approve it. If only minor differences in norms exist, gossip can forge consensus, but where fundamental ideas of proper behaviour differ, gossip will be stunted' (1984: 277). Merry takes gossip to be essentially reproachful (perhaps as an unwitting result of thinking of gossip as a sanctioning device). But if we relax this requirement, the importance of sharing morals can be extended to conventions and tastes. If the news spread that OBJECT was spotted flashing himself, the receiver may feel disgusted, sorry, amused, or some combination thereof; alternatively, he may feel just puzzled at the fuss since he and his friends too habitually indulge in it. If the parties share a common reaction, or have reactions within a negotiable range, gossip is rewarding for both; if reactions differ dramatically, and they could differ in taste as much as morals, mutual suspicion ensues reducing the likelihood of future gossip (13).

3. *The motives*

Gossip's sufficient motive and reward is pleasure, a pleasure which derives from satisfying our curiosity, a concern we share with rats and primates (Frijda 1985: 349). As Ariosto put it:

Questo disir, ch'a tutti sta nel core,
de' fatti altrui sempre cercar novella.
(*Orlando Furioso*, II, 36)

Gossip evokes idleness; it is enjoyed in small groups, it revolves around shared emotions, it thrives on immediacy and freshness, novelty and secret, exclusion and privacy. Several writers have pointed out that gossip is pleasurable (Haviland 1977; Olinick 1980; Spack 1985; Zinovief 1991; Taylor 1994), but this has hardly been taken as a feature worthy of more than cursory attention. Some writers hold gossip to be a poorer substitute for other pleasures: gossip 'fascination bears some

(13) In the case where gossip occurs between two individuals of greatly different power, the transmitter being the most powerful of the two, the outcome of taste dissonance can be quite different: the receiver is likely to yield and conform to the taste expectation of the transmitter.

relation to that of pornography—wrote Spacks—(...) The atmosphere of erotic titillation suggests gossip's implicit voyeurism (...) Poring over fragments of people's lives, peering into their bedrooms when they do not know we are there, we thrill to the glamour and the power of secret knowledge' (Spack 1985: 11). Olinick, the inspired psychoanalyst I quoted above, wrote that 'the "lip-smacking" over a "juicy" bit of gossip, the "tongue wagging", the "sharpe-tongued" gossips and their "large eared" listeners metaphorically point to oral and phallic exhibitionism' (1980: 442).

My hypothesis is that, albeit blander, gossip is not a surrogate for other pleasures, but a specific one. Gossip may be saddled with countless ulterior motives and deliver a maze of by-products, both positive and negative, but it is first of all related to the pleasure of satisfying curiosity as such: spying, intruding, minding other people's business, speculating on motives for actions, scrutinizing characters, deducing wholes from minutiae, this is the stuff of gossip. Gossip is value-free for one can indulge in it, as much as in any pleasure, whether for entertainment, destructive purposes (like Jago), or beneficial intents (like Ms. Marple).

The psychology of emotions gives us an idea about the conditions of curiosity: '[n]ovel, unexpected, complex stimuli not only elicit arousal, they also tend to evoke exploratory, investigative activity; moreover they are often sought out.' (Frijda 1986: 345). The trigger of curiosity is the 'occurrence of a mismatch between stimulus input and preexisting cognitive dispositions (knowledge, expectations)' (*ibid.*, 346). While this suffices to explain passive curiosity, which responds to stimuli which are actually met, 'it does not explain active seeking of such stimuli nor their reinforcement value for humans and monkeys in uninteresting environments', which are also commonly found. The answer of cognitive psychology is that cognitive assimilation is a goal in itself, it is rewarding when it succeeds regardless of whether the content of the information is itself pleasurable: '[s]uccessfully exercising the cognitive apparatus' (*ibid.*, 346) is curiosity motivating concern (14).

Curiosity and gossip are very likely to be evolved dispositions: 'there is little doubt—according to Barkow, an evolutionary anthropologist—that the modern practice of gossip is the result of evolved psychological mechanisms that had adaptive consequences in the Pleistocene' (1992: 629). 'We were selected for the ability to predict and influence

(14) Think of the unsuppressible and friction between the pleasure of having one's embarrassing giggle with which we sometimes respond when informed of the death of an acquaintance: it may be indicative of an intense curiosity satisfied and the sadness at the content of the news.

the behaviour of potential rivals for resources, present and potential allies, possible mates, and of course kin' (1992: 628). Two facts lend support to an adaptive explanation of our taste for gossip. First, it is universal, namely people indulge in it regardless of culture. Second, some evidence suggests that its *content* also may be universally shared. Most topics which, say, Zinacantecos gossip about coincide with the topics *we* gossip about. If we regroup the list of the content of gossip items collected by Haviland in his study of that Mexican people (1977) in just five categories—sex, violence, possessions, cheating and health matters—we virtually exhaust the list. If we ask ourselves—Barkow writes—'what kinds of information would have had the most bearing on fitness (...) the short answer is relative standing and anything likely to affect it, control over resources, sexual activities, births and deaths, current alliances/friendships and political involvements, health, and reputation about reliability as a partner in social exchange' (Barkow 1992: 628).

A problem with this explanation is that it seems to list just about all topics of any interest available to us at all, and does not consider that 'by-products of adaptive features need not themselves be adaptive' (Elster 1983a: 103). The causality could be more complex than Barkow suggests: the adaptive trait could be the exercise of our cognitive apparatus regardless of topics; this, in turn, would be triggered by those activities in which something is more likely to go wrong and attract curiosity. Whether topic-generic or-specific, it would be very hard to make sense of our universal disposition to curiosity and gossip in other than an evolutionary way.

But does curiosity also prompt the supply of gossip? After all, gossip is as much about reporting as about listening. There must be a reward in reporting which cannot consist of the immediate satisfaction of the transmitter's own curiosity: he could simply silently savour what he already knows. The pleasure of reporting is perhaps parasitical on satisfying other people's curiosity, the occurrence of which is signalled by the range of emotions attached to gossip—laughter, wonder, indignation, animosity. Manifest emotions are reporting's tangible payoffs.

Gossip can thus be understood as an exchange of two distinct services, curiosity satisfaction and emotional complicity. Part of the confusion surrounding the concept of gossip is due to the fact that other forms of exchange in which only one of these services is sought independently of the other are mistaken for gossip: we can satisfy our curiosity by reading a paper or planting a bug in someone else's bedroom and we can provoke agreeable emotions in others through means other than gossip such as play, humour, sex, gift-giving or

fiction-writing. But none of those activities qualify as gossip. Only the barter of those two services is peculiar to gossip. If either were traded for cash it would not qualify as gossip but as a different resource: I pay you to satisfy my curiosity and you become, say, a *paparazzo*; you pay me to listen and, for example, I become—god forbid—your psychoanalyst. Neither case qualifies as gossip. If the currency of exchange was something other than curiosity and emotions, gossip would blend with other types of communication (15).

Keeping a diary and filling it with trivial details meant for one's consumption only, a common practice, might be taken as a sign that the pleasure to supply gossip is unrelated to the satisfaction of the curiosity of others or, at least, that it is triggered by some other motivation as well, strictly related to the pleasure of narrating trivia as such (16). That reporting must contain its own rewards, is suggested also by the fact that gossip is not an exclusively demand-led market. There are plenty of would-be transmitters chasing after patient receivers. Tongues, in other words, are not always scarcer than ears. The extreme case of gossiping to oneself, as it were, might be analogous to other forms of solipsistic pleasure like masturbation, gluttony or narcissism, which are not themselves adaptive behaviours but innocuous by-products of adaptive behaviour: some people may experience pleasure at narrating trivial episodes to themselves as a way of savouring them twice, once as experiences and once as narratives. This does not disprove the hypothesis that the supply of gossip is fundamentally motivated, or at the very least reinforced, by the pleasure of satisfying other people's curiosity.

4. *The social dynamics*

I begin by considering briefly the relationship between gossip and trust, and then examine the relationship between gossip and reputation. At first sight, trust and gossip seem antithetical in so far as gossip often entails breaches of trust. But things are not so simple. First of all, they

(15) In some cases the wish to obtain each of these resources could, alone, bring gossip about via a second-order motive: it is conceivable that the transmitter could report a piece of gossip, only in order to be paid back with yet more gossip; or that the receiver could listen to a piece of gossip only with a view to reporting it to someone else later on. Chains of this nature are probably common, but the existence of specialized populations of either

receivers or transmitters seems unlikely.
(16) This objection was put to me by Nick Humphrey. His conjecture is that gossip can be 'sometimes thought of as having magical properties. So by merely writing down a story about someone else, one can diminish him (if that is the intention). It would be rather like sticking pins in a doll' (personal correspondence).

share a peculiar aspect: they are resources that deplete by *not* being used (Hirschman 1986, Dasgupta 1988). The more gossip circulates, the greater the potential for further gossip. Secondly, they interact with each other both positively and negatively. On the one hand, gossip leads to more trust and trust leads to more gossip. If I confide my secrets to you this may encourage you to trust me and, in turn, to confide more secrets to me. (This relationship holds only up to a point: if I gossip 'too much', you may think I am a gossip and suspect that I may be indiscreet with someone else about you, and hence become more circumspect). On the other hand, trust increases the likelihood of revealing personal secrets to others and thereby increases the exposure to gossip by increasing the circulation of material suitable for it: if you tell me in confidence a secret about yourself I can pass it on to someone else and breach your trust.

If we join the two effects together we find that gossip ultimately should generate *positional* trust: it increases mutual trust among gossiping agents at the cost of breaching trust with those who are the object of gossip. The overall effect on the amount of trust, however, is not clear. Consider the following case: A confides a secret to his immediate circle of friends whom he trusts; each of his friends, in turn, passes the secret on to their immediate circle of friends, who may not be friends with A. A ends up being talked about by a larger circle of people than he might have wished. Whether this chain of breaches of confidence leads to an overall decrease in trust depends on the opportunities for *short circuits*, whereby some person in the chain reports back to A that his secret is travelling around. Otherwise A will never know, for as much as he is unlikely to talk to circles which are removed from him so these circles are unlikely to talk back to A. In large enough groups gossip is unlikely to diminish overall trust despite breaches of confidence and may even increase it by increasing trust in each pair exchange. In small circles, by contrast, the chances of short circuits grow and eventually reach a critical mass. A rumour then starts which says: 'there is a lot of gossip around'. This may then make people less trustful. In conclusion, there is no way we can say in theory whether gossip increases or destroys trust.

Among the many functions attributed to gossip a prominent one is that of affecting reputation. But as with trust the effects of gossip are hard to predict in theory: gossip can build reputations, destroy them or make no difference to them at all. Here, I will try a different route and focus on the inverse relationship, namely the effect of reputation on gossip.

Worlds of either complete certainty or complete uncertainty are worlds of zero gossip: in the former, mismatches which excite curiosity

are ruled out, no surprise ever occurs; while in the latter, since there are no common conventions there cannot be comprehensible deviations, anything can happen and there are no surprises either. Typically, curiosity is fostered if there is a set of universally recognizable standards or conventions, *and* if there is no certainty that people will conform. Gossip is predicated upon the existence of a norm and triggered by the abnormalities, physical or otherwise, of others. Given a certain probability of deviation from the norm, the higher the number of norms the higher the potential for gossip.

Under which conditions can we expect conventions to be both relevant *and* uncertain? If we can answer this question, we can make some progress in predicting the dynamics of gossip. A possible answer—which derives from work I developed elsewhere (Gambetta 1994)—is as follows. Markets in which it is hard to prove the authenticity or, more generally, to ascertain the quality of the commodity develop a set of interesting features. (Here I use 'market' and 'commodity' in the broadest sense which includes services as obscure as religious solace). At one extreme, there are commodities whose quality is easily assessed, like an apple; as we progress toward the opposite extreme, the cost of finding out about quality grows and we face a reliability problem which involves asymmetrical information: although we do not know the truth about the quality of a commodity, the seller will, for instance, know whether the second hand car he is about to sell us is a *lemon*. Finally, at the other extreme, there are those commodities, which concern us here, and whose quality we have no way of discovering. For some intangibles, such as psychotherapies, political programmes, God's forgiveness or love promises, it is hard if not altogether impossible to distinguish the bogus from the authentic case, the impostor from the genuine supplier, the true specimen from the imitation. In this case the problem is not just one of asymmetrical information, because the supplier *himself* knows little of the quality of his product and of that of his competitors (Gambetta 1992, 1994).

The magical recipe for surviving in 'inscrutable markets' is a good reputation. All firms enjoying a good name are spared from repeating the burden of proof at every transaction and are relatively sheltered from competitive threats. But some trades are more susceptible than others: the more a commodity belongs to the elusive category just defined, the more it has to rely on reputation alone. Doctors, for instance, are extremely sensitive to reputation. So are bankers: if people stop believing that a bank is reliable, that bank notoriously collapses as a result. Playboys too count on name: as Gabriele D'Annunzio points out

in *Il Piacere*, Don Giovanni's fame as a lover of great standing makes him even more of a successful lover. Leporello is in charge of advertising and recording his master's conquests in a catalogue, which is effectively Don Giovanni's professional asset.

In trades in which reputation is highly valued, the way in which an agent personally behaves and appears acts as a proxy for the elusive service he supplies: moral codes and conventions are likely to emerge and stand as signs of quality for hard-to-test products. They can emerge both intentionally and as a result of accidental associations between a certain sign and success, followed by conformism among suppliers. Minor deviations in the propriety of behaviour, in adhering to conventions or performing rituals, reflect badly on the commodity. There is a keen interest in both maintaining and checking standards. Reputation is at once closely guarded and brittle.

The corollary of this model with regard to gossip is the following: in inscrutable markets minutiae and minor mismatches become salient; the expectation of conformism engenders a corresponding curiosity for deviations. The production of potentially telling details is abundant and supplies gossips with plenty of material. In addition, gossip's allure is compounded with its potential for instrumental manipulation: the friction between the apparent idleness of gossip and the all too real consequences makes gossip both rife and dreaded, enticing and dangerous (17). Secrecy is treasured and norms against gossip are also likely to emerge. At least, the rumour that gossip is rife will be rife because of the mighty fear it.

An empirical prediction of this model is, for instance, that academics in art subjects are more prone to gossip (as well as more exposed to its consequences) than scientists, because their output is more controversial: who is a good sociologist or literary critic? How can we tell an impostor from a genuine scholar? There is no agreed method of detection, no common theoretical frontier against which to measure achievement. Some retreat to the classics or erect jargon barriers, others wave an author around as both shield and sword, others still take the mud of the fieldwork or the dust of the archive as sure signs of authenticity. But there is no certainty on which to rest. The arrangements of the various schools of thought are reminiscent of religious sects, and agents are particularly touchy with respect to the use and consistency of their shared totems.

(17) In elusive markets it is also more difficult to be proven wrong. So gossip is rife because of this too, and doubly dangerous.

Max Gluckman pointed to the exclusiveness of a profession as a major cause of gossip, mentioning lawyers and anthropologists, and, characteristically, stressed the function of gossip as a way to 'put a comparative newcomer into his place, (...) make him feel a neophyte' (Gluckman 1963: 309). The model I suggest can explain both the exclusiveness connected with certain professions *and* gossip, as resulting from the same analytical conundrum concerning the opaqueness of quality and authenticity in those professions. (Unlike Gluckman, I would also be prudent about the functions of gossip. We quite simply do not know whether gossip, rather than hinder, may not in fact help willing novices to learn the subtleties of the trade and ease their way in).

I will now briefly illustrate three cases, and dwell longer on a fourth case, which shows how gossip grows in connection with problems of quality and authenticity opaqueness. Both the Makah Indians of North West United States (Gluckman 1963: 310-2) and the Zinacantecos Mexican (Haviland 1977: ch.4), for a variety of reasons, have no clear hierarchical signs—such as money or skill—and, as a result, the social standing of individuals is rather indeterminate; members are constantly engaged in gossip, sifting through the minutiae of the behaviour of others and struggling inconclusively over who is the authentic Makah or the deserving Zinacanteco whose performance in rituals is above reproach. They do not gossip *in order to* sort out their problems of status uncertainties, as the functionalist interpretation of the authors who studied them suggests. They gossip *because* those uncertainties trigger a high level of curiosity.

The third case is that of New England Puritans who were obsessed with discovering the impossible, namely the identity of those predestined to salvation. The problem of authenticity reaches its climax in a case like this, for how can we tell the saved from the damned? According to Sissela Bok:

The seventeenth and eighteenth-century New England Puritans (...) labored with the strongest fears of not being among those who would turn out to be saved in the life to come; but they had no evidence for who was and who was not saved, and recognized no way to influence their fate, believing that it had been decided for them before birth. Might they nevertheless discern traces of such evidence in their own lives and in those of others? Might behavior and demeanor not hold some clues? *Speculating about imperceptible yet all-important differences* between persons took on a urgency rarely exceeded before or since (1981: 92, my italics).

At stake for the Puritans was eternal life, at stake with mafiosi, my fourth example, is physical life. The most striking feature of a mafioso reputation is that it saves on production costs. Car manufacturers benefit from a good reputation, but they still have to produce the real thing. By contrast, a reputation for credible protection and protection

itself tend to overlap. The more robust the reputation of a protection firm the lower the need to have recourse to its underlying resources, such as violence or intelligence gathering (Gambetta 1992, 1994).

But reputation in the mafia runs against acute imperfections in the circulation of information. The mafia is fraught with uncertainty, distrust, suspicion, paranoid anxiety, misunderstanding: who is the stronger? Who will be the successor? Is Don Peppe really a mafioso? Is he about to attack another Don Peppe? Is Mr X really protected by Don Peppe or just pretending? Is Don Peppe still strong enough to protect Mr X? Mistakes in answering these questions occur and account for some of the deaths which notoriously afflict this trade. The testimonies of mafiosi who turned state witnesses show that every sentence they exchange is scrutinized for potential ambiguity and hidden messages. Mafiosi are obsessed with details, minute variations, slips of the tongue, anomalies of demeanour. They collect and memorize an impressive amount of particulars which may turn out to be relevant. Gossip is at once irresistible because every trivial anomaly can be of significance and a serious threat. Joe Bonanno wrote that 'Because of this grapevine system of passing information, rumour and innuendo often traded places with truth' (p.232). Mafiosi represent an extreme case: every exchange of information is in danger of lapsing out of gossip as we defined it above: every single piece of gossip risks violating the idleness condition and to become strategically manipulable. The following is a telling example that shows how sorely aware of the problem mafiosi are.

The important thing is precise information—says Antonino Calderone. Within the mafia there must circulate accurate and exact information. Otherwise no one understands anything anymore, and there is great confusion. My brother ran the risk of being killed, around 1975, by a group of men from Catania who had fled to Milan after a clash with the Pillera gang, because their boss had wrongly got it into his head that [my brother] had become the boss of the Pillera gang. Three of them left Milan for the purpose of murdering him, and if it were not for Gerlando Alberti—who pretended to join the project, and bumped two of the killers off during a brief stop in Naples—I do not know what would have happened. A flaw in information can cost a person's life (Arlacchi 1992: 24) (18).

In fact it cost two persons lives! This introduces a major difference with the Puritans, for their gossip could not conceivably alter the chances of salvation, while mafiosi gossip can kill. Mafiosi cannot relax into gossip. It is understandable that mafiosi should be obsessed with secrecy and that gossip should be tentatively regulated. In Sicily generally a gossip is rated lower than a whore (Gower Chapman 1973: 40; also Banfield 1958: 133-137). When Filippo Marchese was killed an

(18) Antonino Calderone narrates at least another episode in which he himself risked his life because of gossip (1, 237).

order reached mafiosi in jail 'not to comment in any way his elimination because Marchese, although he misbehaved, had been a valiant man of honour' (19).

But secrecy is constantly under threat. It is arduous to legislate on gossip: it is cheap to carry, easy to hide and pass on in secret. Much of Francesco Marino Mannoia's confession reveals gossip's ubiquity in the mafia: 'I heard rumours that Provenzano and Riina are not getting on perfectly well with each other, although they show nothing to the outside' (20). More recently, Gaspare Mutolo told the Parliamentary Anti-mafia commission that 'it seems as if [in Cosa Nostra] we speak in secrecy, but this is not so; for instance, I say something to a friend imploring him not to say anything to anyone else and he does the same with another friend' (21).

I would like to stress, Buscetta stated, that in the mafia, news concerning the mafia—even the most secret—sooner or later comes to the surface. (...) In my world questions are never asked, but the person you are talking to, when he thinks it is appropriate, leads you to understand, with a sentence, a sign of the head or even a smile, which was the hand behind certain stories. (...) Even silence can be revealing (22).

With all these elusive signs and allusive gestures, it is not surprising that misunderstanding is rife and that mafiosi do not take chances. Salvatore Cancemi, a mafioso turned state witness in 1993, said that 'if Totò Riina had suspected from just a look, if he had felt from just the smallest movement of the eyes that those of the Noce [a Palermo mafia family] were not following him [in his plan to kill judge Giovanni Falcone] he would have had all of us killed' (*La Repubblica*, 14 November 1993). It is easy to understand why mafiosi tend to develop a stony face and a fixed gaze in their interaction (which is then interpreted as being threatening). An expert like Lucky Luciano said: 'It's a funny thing about Sicilians. There just ain't no secrets. There is always somebody that'll sell out one of his own. Lots of guys got fingered just for *the prospect* that somethin' might happen' (Gosch & Hammer 1975: 101, my italics). It is also understandable that they should resort to unlikely claims: 'rumours in the mafia—said Buscetta to the Anti-mafia commission—are not idle talk among gossips [*comari*, i.e. godmothers]. If two men of honour talk between themselves they are

(19) Testimony of Francesco Marino sul Fenomeno della mafia, hearings of Ties-Mannoia given to Giudice Istruttore of day 9 February 1993, p. 1230.

(20) Testimony of Tommaso Buscetta given to Giudice Istruttore of Palermo Giovanni Falcone *et alii*, from 8 October 1989 to 19 June 1990, p. 247.

(21) *Ibid.*, p. 13.

(22) Commissione Parlamentare di Inchiesta Falcone *et alii*, July-August 1984, vol. 1, 115-7.

not engaged in gossip, they make statements, they tell truths' (*La Repubblica*, 20 November 1993).

Gossip can prove dangerous for the source: it caused irritation—Mannoia told the judge—that 'Casella (...) had commented on the physical appearance of Vincenzo Puccio while the latter was being taken to jail after being on the run for a long time. Casella had said 'he has become as fat as a *crasto* [castrato]' (23). This comment on size seems oddly common: Antonino Calderone told judge Falcone that while dining with Filippo Marchese and Bernardo Provenzano, two other mafiosi, to amuse his companions he made jokes about Marchese's protruding abdomen. To his chagrin they did not find his remarks funny: '[with] that big belly he can keep in secrets', was Provenzano's stern rebuke (24). In Sicilian dialect a mafioso can be called *omu de panza*, man of belly. *Aviri panza* (to have a belly) signifies the ability to keep a secret. *Omu de panza* is 'one who can keep secrets'. The tummy is like a *safe*. It is relevant for what it hides rather than what it shows. To have a belly is taken as a symbolic guarantee of secrecy, and its size is directly proportional to the quantity of guarded secrets. Any alteration of a mafioso belly must be telling for another mafioso. Maybe this gives us a clue to solving the etymological puzzle with which this article began. Maybe, the jump from honour to trivia, or, more prosaically, from godfather to fart, isn't that long after all.

- (23) Testimony of Francesco Marino Mannoia given to Giudice Istruttore Michel Debacq and to the Commissione Palermo Giovanni Falcone *et alii*, from 8 October 1989 to 19 June 1990, p. 225.
 (24) Testimony of Antonino Calderone 19 March 1987-23 June 1988, vol. I, p. 210.

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