



Codes of the Underworld: How Criminals Communicate

Diego Gambetta

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How do criminals communicate with each other? Unlike the rest of us, people planning crimes can't freely advertise their goods and services, nor can they rely on formal institutions to settle disputes and certify quality. They face uniquely intense dilemmas as they grapple with the basic problems of whom to trust, how to make themselves trusted, and how to handle information without being detected by rivals or police. In this book, one of the world's leading scholars of the mafia ranges from ancient Rome to the gangs of modern Japan, from the prisons of Western countries to terrorist and pedophile rings, to explain how despite these constraints, many criminals successfully stay in business.

Diego Gambetta shows that as villains balance the lure of criminal reward against the fear of dire punishment, they are inspired to unexpected feats of subtlety and ingenuity in communication. He uncovers the logic of the often bizarre ways in which inveterate and occasional criminals solve their dilemmas, such as why the tattoos and scars etched on a criminal's body function as lines on a professional resume, why inmates resort to violence to establish their position in the prison pecking order, and why mobsters are partial to nicknames and imitate the behavior they see in mafia movies. Even deliberate self-harm and the disclosure of their crimes are strategically employed by criminals to convey important messages.

By deciphering how criminals signal to each other in a lawless universe, this gruesomely entertaining and incisive book provides a quantum leap in our ability to make sense of their actions.

Codes of the Underworld: How Criminals Communicate Details

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From Reader Review Codes of the Underworld: How Criminals Communicate for online ebook

Liralen says

Dry and academic in language, the subject matter of this book is anything but. Sometimes intensely graphic in the examples, it's a very thorough depiction of the ways criminals communicate through everything from how and whom they fight to the stamps on bags of drugs. I would highly recommend this as a research resource for anyone who has a character involved in mob, mafia, or organized crime, or just for anyone that wants to know more what signs might be right under their noses.

It really does help that the author is Italian, and that he has a few examples of how the Families tried to get him to shut up too.

Steve says

Some interesting stuff, but a lot of over-analyzed obvious things.

Nathan says

Recommended by Cory Doctorow. I abandoned this for more exciting material: I was fascinated by the conundrum of signalling in the criminal world, but didn't have immediate use for it in the same way that a lot of the tedious business books were immediately useful. I will return.

Thus, by solving the problem discussed in chapter 1 and identifying each other as bona fide criminals, they also unavoidably let each other know that they have those constraints, opportunities, motivations, and dispositions, thereby landing themselves in what we may call the villain's paradox: a criminal needs partners who are also criminals, but these are typically untrustworthy people to deal with when their self-interest is at stake.

Catherine says

I'm not personally particularly interested in organized crime. The fact that it is not my cup of tea perhaps influenced my rating. I read it to participate in a discussion within my Anthropology department and would not have read it otherwise. Simply reading an article with the same discussion points would have sufficed. Gambetta includes some interesting studies but also makes more conclusions than he has enough evidence for.

Lashaan Balasingam (Bookidote) says

In all honesty, I felt like a lot of these signals and communication issues that Diego Gambetta raises are logical and anyone who thoroughly thinks about it will have arrived to the same logic. What I really appreciate about this book is how it puts a lot of these signals and icons into one academic book that applies a rather academic language to explain and understand them. Although a lot of the claims the author does is based on rather loose evidence and demands a lot more evidence than what was exposed. I mean, more often than not, fiction was used to show examples of one thing or another. I also thought that Donnie Brasco was mentionned A LOT thorough the book. I mean, it is totally understandable that evidence is hard to come by and that books about undercover cops are some of the best sources for this type of subject, but in the end, *Codes of the Underworld* explores communication so that other researchers will delve into this subject even further in the future.

This remains a very fun read in how ridiculous things can be in the criminal world. After all, these people have the additional issue of discretion and secrecy, on top of additional trust issues since they live in the underworld.

P.S. Full review to come

Yours truly,

Lashaan | Blogger and Book Reviewer
Official blog: <http://bookidote.wordpress.com>

Nick Black says

<http://reason.com/archives/2009/12/03...>

FiveBooks says

Criminal barrister Alex McBride has chosen to discuss *Codes of the Underworld* by Diego Gambetta on FiveBooks as one of the top five on his subject - Trial By Jury, saying that:

“...Gambetta looks at the underworld from the criminals’ point of view and uses social anthropology to examine how criminals think and communicate with language and signs, how a pecking order is established....Gambetta says it doesn’t pay to go through associates like shit through a goose; you won’t be successful. For example, when Toto Riina ordered the death of Falcone in 1992 everyone in the room knew that if a flicker of doubt about the decision showed in their eyes they would be instantly killed. These barely perceptible signs become so important in this world. ...”

The full interview is available here: <http://fivebooks.com/interviews/alex-...>

Ajay says

Possibly the best examination of how signaling works in practice, ever written. The possible implications for governance in kleptocratic states in some of the earlier chapters is fascinating.

Lance Wiggs says

Superb, though I have stalled for now. It's about signaling, and relates not just to criminals but to other fields. I've learned much about how Italian academics are promoted which resonated with my limited experiences in the topic. The reason I stalled is that the book is making me think so much. Something to ponder - if you join a political party you don't want to appear to competent, as the people who promote you want you to work for them and not the reverse. Oh well.

Carl says

The most interesting chapter was on the role of tattoos and fighting in prison communication, with comparison US prison culture to Polish. The chapter on nicknames wasn't that interesting, but the chapter on the feedback between movies and criminals was intriguing.

The sections on the values of incompetence, and corruption, were thought-provoking.

Shinynickel says

Off this review by Graham Lawton,

More social science than hard science, but an absolutely fascinating look at the unique problems criminals face when trying to communicate with one another - how, for example, do you advertise for a partner in crime, or win trust in an inherently untrustworthy world? - and the ingenious ways they solve them. There's a great chapter on the interplay between mafia movies and the real criminal underworld, and loads of true-crime anecdotes (Gambetta once infiltrated the mafia to study their codes of communication). Much of it is startlingly counter-intuitive; for example, fighting in prisons is a subtle form of communication designed to minimise violence, and measures to prevent it usually backfire. Fans of crime fiction will love this.

Colin says

This is a quick and accessible survey of the various ways in which criminals use signalling to communicate. The central insight here is that criminals (like everyone, but exacerbated by the illicit nature of their profession) face significant challenges in developing trust and verifying credibility during exchanges, which forces a variety of signalling responses depending on the type of interaction. This can range from facial tattoos to forms of initiation that require prospective partners to engage in joint criminal acts to prove their loyalty and strengthen group solidarity. Two chapters study how prisoners engage in fighting or self-harm in order to signal their toughness relative to their peers. Other chapters look at brand names in the drug trade, the use of nicknames by mafia members as a means of obscuring identities, and how media portrayals of criminal groups affect their self-identities.

There is no strong analytical narrative tying all the chapters of the book together, and the analysis primarily

takes place at the individual level. Jacob Shapiro's *The Terrorist's Dilemma* is better for exploring how the need to operate in secret imposes constraints on clandestine organizations' activities. Still, this was an easy and interesting read.

Mathew Walls says

Interesting subject matter, but not well-written. Chapters tend to start interesting and then just slowly grind down until suddenly it's time to start the next chapter.

Jintong Shi says

It's a world more built on trust, actually. It's an interesting world, though I am not a gangster or criminal.

Amar Pai says

The existence of heroin stamps poses two puzzles: first, competitors could adulterate or counterfeit a successful brand, and no court exists to enforce a drug dealer's trademark. Second, brands offer a clear chain of evidence that could lead law enforcement right back to the seller.

The first puzzle is more serious: how could heroin stamps survive the threat of mimicry? We know that "a few stamps acquired long-term reputations (like POISON, NO JOKE and 91/2 PLUS) and lasted for years" offering quality that was "consistently good," but very few stamps have been in circulation for more than two or three months, and "many stamps last only a few days before being replaced." So this question has two horns: first, why do some stamps manage to be stable and reliable over long periods of time despite the threat of counterfeiting, and why do dealers of all sorts continue to put stamps on bags even though the longevity of most of them is so short?

The answer to the first question seems to be that "a major deterrent to counterfeiting labels was that counterfeiters would be, and have been, threatened, assaulted or killed by the real dealers of that particular label."

...[W:]hat about the smaller dealers, however, the so-called freelancers, who continued putting stamps on their bags even though they expected their brands to be short-lived, and who kept changing them frequently? This defeats the purpose of branding, as the association between signs and quality is disrupted, making it impossible for a reputation to develop... To understand the possible logic of their choice, we have to consider the alternative they faced, namely selling *anonymous* heroin bags.

--from Chapter 8, "Criminal Trademarks"
