

## Chapter 6



# The Use of Gossip

## *Setting Cooperative Boundaries*

The idea of moral borders is salient throughout this ethnography. The discourses of ‘clean and just’ that co-articulated with the food activism pursued by the co-ops’ administration are indicative of a degree of separation and distinction. So were certain views of kinship and relatedness close to mafia – relations sealed out from the co-ops by a strict seclusion based on ethical boundaries of meritocracy. This idea is drawn from conversations with co-op members, overwhelmingly administrators, and is the basis to explore the administrators’ social activity in San Giovanni as well as their associations while outside the cooperatives’ offices.

Central to this were the contacts they established with people who wanted to collaborate with the co-ops. These activities will be analysed in the remainder of this chapter, in terms of border marking and crossing as well as of the management of personal and cooperative reputation. The narrative here illustrates how administrators shielded the cooperatives from certain local influences, elucidating how they traced who was a *mafioso* in the village and how they negotiated such information, shaping their own and their cooperatives’ self-image as against the San Giovanni mafia. Their attempts to reinforce anti-mafia change suggest interesting continuities with local codes, as they appropriated gossip,<sup>1</sup> a practice continuous with local ‘cultural codes’ (cf. Schneider and Schneider 1976), to seclude the cooperatives from malign (‘unclean’) influences. They stand, in this way, as another form of moral quarantine in ‘a sea of socio-cultural malice’, a phrase uttered to me by Luca in an unsuspecting moment.<sup>2</sup>

Gossip is of fundamental importance in the ways people experienced their involvement in the anti-mafia cooperatives. It became an anti-mafia resource because administrators used it to create boundaries around their enclaves of ‘good’; while locally, as a cultural code, it in fact blurred these boundaries between mafia and anti-mafia. The ethnography shows how locals used it in different ways and most importantly as a form of metatalk: to examine who talked with whom. Co-op persons most often utilised it to prove their anti-mafia credits or to solidify the ‘moral borders’ between mafia and anti-mafia. Following Schneider and Schneider’s

notion of 'reputational networks' (1996: 9), I show how, depending on the person, reputation through gossip may be used to blur or to set boundaries.

Continuity with, and interactions between, the histories of mafia and anti-mafia have been hinted throughout this book. The ways administrators followed tactics hostile or simply suspicious of kinship is indicative of a tendency to separate the co-ops from local social life and solidify the anti-mafia cooperative phenomenon as a presence slightly aloof from the doings on Spicco Vallata ground. In this chapter, I decipher how actors sought to deal with this problem by using gossip to constitute mafia and anti-mafia as *separate* categories. However, as some vignettes below show, the local code of gossip was also used by other people to *blur* mafia/anti-mafia distinctions. How did people in public spaces speak to and about each other in San Giovanni – and what kind of idioms brought them together or kept them apart?

Gossip is twofold: there's gossip about who was a *mafioso* and what it meant to be one and, especially, about who maintained contacts with people considered significant in San Giovanni. Indeed, the police themselves tracked gossip, and 'affiliation' of someone to mafia was akin to a legal category. This dimension further frames the problem of horizontal relations in the cooperatives, offering insights into moralities and practices. Gossip impacted on the equity relations among members of the cooperatives as well as on the relationship between cooperative members and the local community.

The narrative serves two aims. The first is descriptive: I shall elucidate the role of administrators in the local community, highlighting instances where they were exposed to local rumours as well as moments when they instrumentalised these rumours to demarcate a separation between the blurred categories of mafia/anti-mafia on the ground. The second is analytical: I suggest that the administrators' plan to shield the cooperatives from local influence, in envisioning and forming cooperatives as 'enclaves of good', also takes discursive forms. Their commitment to virtuous networking and their idea that land boundaries were moral borders is here reproduced in their appropriation of local gossip. Focusing on contamination, they deploy information for purposes of surveillance of other cooperative members. This attempt to set moral borders *around* the cooperatives was informed by their own status as outsiders to San Giovanni's social life and reflected their lack of kinship ties to the area and their suspicion of locals' anti-mafia commitment.

## Flows of Rumours in San Giovanni

Claudia, a thirty-year-old administrator for the Falcone co-op, could not imagine that men visiting the newsagent around the corner from the Rex, a local *bar*<sup>3</sup>, entertained mafia sympathies. She was unaware of the kin relations between Rex regulars and the co-owner of the newsagent, a man called Salvatore, who had spent three years in prison for ‘mafia allegiance’. Once, as Claudia and I entered Salvatore’s newsagents to buy cigarettes, she inquired whether they sold ‘anti-mafia periodicals’. Receiving no answer, she flipped through the magazines and fished out the only available copy of the ‘S’, an anti-mafia-committed investigative journal. Salvatore’s brother-in-law, who sat behind the counter, gave us a cold, hard look as he handed her the change. Claudia did not sense his hostility. Some weeks after, when I met the brother-in-law again, he explained that he recognised in me ‘someone who lived in the village and was hence able to understand’ his look of contempt for my companion.

A few days after my visit to the newsagent with Claudia, I was spending a sunny afternoon coffee break at the Rex with some of the members of the Falcone cooperative administration when Valentino Barbetto, a mid-range *mafioso*, appeared in the *bar*. He was greeted by many of those present, but not the co-op members. Valentino had a dandy-like persona, with his expensive sunglasses and gleaming-white-teeth smile, like a typical male icon from Italian glossy magazines. He was popular in San Giovanni and the younger brother of the legendary *mafioso* Giovanni Barbetto, and Valentino had spent a few years in prison himself. He approached me and asked if he could borrow the *Giornale di Sicilia* once I was done with it. Marelio, a cooperative administrator, quickly told him that I would indeed give him the paper as soon as I had finished. I noticed in Barbetto’s smile and nod that he understood I was a stranger to the mode of newspaper sharing widely practised in bars of the village. While I had assumed that the cultural gap between these two individuals (self-categorised respectively as mafia/anti-mafia) would be unbridgeable, in this case Valentino and Marelio formed an easy consensus out of common sympathy for my ignorance of a local custom.

These two different vignettes, both involving Sicilian periodicals, elucidate the administrators’ varying degrees of knowledge of local codes. Adamo, from the manual work team of the Falcone, told me later on, when we were talking about the Claudia incident, that ‘the Palermitans just cannot get some stuff’, indicating that there were local idioms and

shared codes of meaning that only natives of Spicco Vallata were able to grasp. In my wider observations of the Palermitan administrators in San Giovanni, I noticed that some scrutinised the locals' channelling of information flows through gesturing, engaging in a game of Lotto or offering a coffee to somebody they knew or wished to meet. Ernesto told me that there was more in spending time in bars than simply occupying one's leisure time:

Ernesto: For us it is a way to learn the local society, see how they behave and think, finding out who is on this side and who is on the other side . . .

Theo: What do you mean by this and other side?

Ernesto: Well, studying locals' behaviours in bars, me and my friends can learn, in the long run, not only how to behave in San Giovanni but also who is sympathetic to our cause, and how, and what they do for it, and whether they are pro-mafia or anti-mafia, and so on. So, you learn where the boundary is, between mafia and anti-mafia, in the village. And of course, you learn how to behave and meet people.

Sharing the same newspaper was one way to meet and discuss local and national issues, which local men did vociferously almost as soon as they entered a *bar*. The *Giornale di Sicilia*, a conservative and mafia-tolerant newspaper printed in Palermo, was the main means of official information in the bars and the most promoted newspaper across all newsagents in the village. People consumed it cover to cover between a coffee and a sweet on small tables, with friends throwing in a terse comment or two on football or politics. Rarely did anyone read an article from start to finish. Skipping through the pages as others filled in with informal commentary, readers were satisfied to learn the news and talk to their friends at the same time. The paper provided the headlines and photographs, while the 'real news' was filled in by the live commentary. As the Rex bartender told me, 'no Sicilians really buy the paper, most copies are sold to cafés – but everybody reads it. The *Giornale* is a paper read and shared but not bought.'<sup>4</sup>

The reading and accompanying counter-reading – or, rather, counter-speaking – of newspapers shows the sense of community that is conveyed in San Giovanni through the layering of trust that does not simply 'buy into' the official printed information but, rather, re-negotiates it through filters of grounded personal knowledge channelled through rumours, which locals were more likely to believe than the newspaper itself. These rumours were 'from the source', as people put it: from the so-called 'great men'<sup>5</sup> of Spicco Vallata (the active *mafiosi*) or from people linked to mafia networks around the island. There was no doubt about the validity of information derived from such sources. News spread around as 'Chinese

whispers' were more reliable than the contested 'news' printed in the paper.

As the village lacked public spaces such as piazzas or parks, the *bars* attracted locals for recreation and socialising. In total there were thirteen *bars* in San Giovanni and San Turiddu, strung out along *via Porta Palermo*, the road linking the two villages. The administrators of the Falcone and Borsellino cooperatives took their lunch breaks either at Virilia or Rex, spending most of their free time in San Giovanni in these neighbouring *Porta Palermo bars*. These were relatively close to the cooperatives' offices and generally popular, offering a less exclusively male ambience. By visiting these bars regularly and interacting with the locals, cooperative members gradually *learnt* the local codes of indirect communication – common gestures and indirect speech forms employed by the local men when discussing the news.

The *bar* was the locus where male sociability was performed and indirect communication techniques developed their full range of meaning.<sup>6</sup> In San Giovanni, the strongly gendered space of the cafés made them the preferred public space for male gossiping (although those engaged in this kind of talk would not call it 'gossip' but 'rumour-talking'). To circulate convincing and interesting information was a manly capacity, and it was only certain men, like the *mafioso* Baffi (see more in chapter 9), who monopolised narratives about the mafia, local politics and power, construed in this semi-public ambience. This was a task performed with a combination of taking extra care to be distant from others but be half-heard nevertheless. Bars provided the setting for the reproduction of the blurred boundary between the public and the private, in which the figure of the *mafioso* was central as a metaphor of communication through silence (Siebert 2000).

The bars were also where cooperative administrators negotiated mafia and anti-mafia boundaries. Certain gestures signified specific things: a subtle touch of the speaker's nose delivered the message that someone was '*in odore di mafia*' (literally: in mafia odour), that is, of suspected mafia allegiances. Cooperative members replicated this gesture at the Rex as an inside joke. Nose touching became a humorous, albeit secretive expression, shared among friends when they 'sensed' *mafiosi*, a gesture conveying uncomfortable ambiguities that they nevertheless found amusing. Similarly, they often mentioned *puzza* (stench) to denote that they suspected someone in their company of being a *mafioso*, evoking an intuitive sense of unease.<sup>7</sup> At the Rex, I also noticed that men pressed a thumb against the right cheek to indicate that someone was a *mafioso*. This gesture, at once straightforward and indirect, indicated an idea of mafia

potency: accompanied by raising the eyebrow, the finger slightly pointing to the sideburns, it emphasised machismo. However, social interactions involving people from the ‘opposite sides’ of mafia and anti-mafia manifested connotations that not everyone shared, as is evident in Claudia’s case.

Meeting in bars often entailed allegiance to the ‘great men’ of the village. Informants spoke of old *mafiosi* who spent ‘all their elderly lives’ at that *bar*. Adamo told me he was surprised, as a child, to see that the father of his fellow classmate Torinese always sat at the *bar* Circolo. ‘Didn’t he have a job to do?’ he asked his school friend. Later, as he started going to bars himself, Adamo realised that ‘this was Torinese’s real job: to check and control the flows of people in and out of the *bar*; this was his territorial control’. While for local workers such knowledge was acquired during their coming of age in the village, in the case of administrators it had to be learnt. On one occasion I was enjoying my morning coffee at the *bar* Circolo in the company of Pasquale, a young cooperative administrator from Palermo. The place was the favourite of Mimmo Netti’s: the old *mafioso* and his friends gathered there to play cards. He had a reputation for being a peaceful, sage kind of old-school *cappoccia* (‘gentleman’, ‘leader’).

Another *mafioso*, the much younger Ignazio Baffi, a forty-five-year-old construction entrepreneur fresh out of *colleggio*,<sup>8</sup> walked into the *bar*. All the men present, working and pensioners alike, greeted him warmly and many seemed to compete for his attention. Meanwhile, Netti and his company, immersed in the play of cards, and generally distant, remained silent. Among the men at the barstools, one offered the newspaper and asked if he would like a coffee: ‘So what about a coffee, Ignazio?’ (*il caffè lo vuoi, Ignazio?*). I noticed that the man making this offer was Mr. Tratone, Adamo’s father-in-law, a pensioner who rented out office space to the cooperatives. Pasquale and I were surprised to witness the particular enthusiasm with which Pitone welcomed Baffi. Later on, discussing the event, we agreed that he had as much of a right to ‘hang out’ at a ‘mafia-friendly’ *bar* as we did.

Of the village’s thirteen bars, not all were mafia-affiliated, of course. *Mafiosi* would visit the most central ones. In that way, the anti-mafia/mafia rhetoric was somehow inscribed in the local landscape, as certain spots of the village were renowned for being *mafiosi* favourites. The main church was one such spot, as leading *mafiosi*’s alms were displayed in full view – and the *bar* just opposite was a known space for card-playing and gambling.

The intricacies that involved locals such as Pitone with *mafiosi* were entangled with loose local links of relatedness. This meant that Pasquale, lacking any kinship or friendship relationships with the village, felt unable to explain Pitone's loyalties to me. Not long after Baffi had made his entrance, Malva, the mayor of San Turiddu, also entered the *bar*. Baffi himself treated him to a coffee. Malva remarked smilingly to a few other sympathetic men that he was in the habit of meeting Ignazio Baffi in a central *bar* as 'an act of transparency', as this way their discussions were open to the 'public'. Probably the reason why the politician highlighted this transparency paradox (speaking to a *mafioso* in 'public') was because of his role, at the time, as the president of the 'state-local anti-mafia apparatus', the Consortium. Pasquale confessed to me that learning of the blurred boundaries of mafia and anti-mafia in such palpable way – that the incumbent president of the Consortium was a friend of the *mafioso* – was distressing to him but also useful to realise.

Offering coffee was a means to publicly recognise another man's respected position in the local male community, 'an act of honouring someone', as a bartender told me. Such recognition was often associated with people's mafia connections; for instance, treating *signori* such as Baffi or Netti to a coffee or a sweet was a noble task. This reveals, *in micro*, a tendency to exchange gifts and favours among the higher echelons of local society, as well as among the underprivileged peasant population, with certain local *mafiosi*. One is reminded, again, of Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa's memorable phrase that anti-mafia activists liked to cite to me often: 'The state gives as a right what the mafia offers as a gift' (see page 9). To start with, this idea resonates in a fascinating fashion when thinking back to mafia confessants' gifts to the state (Moss 2001; cf. Rakopoulos 2017c). Despite claims that the mafia engages in free gift-giving (Pipyrou 2014), the truth is somewhat different. The mafia needs the backing of consent in mobilising networks and organising structures of support. Such exchanges and gifts sometimes had repercussions that would at once put the mafia to shame – for wrongdoings – and be a source of pride – for the eventual functioning of the rule of law – for Libertà and the Consortium in Spicco Vallata. For instance, Tazio, the mayor of Bocca and a Consortium member, was arrested for mafia affiliation in 2006. 'Thankfully, his dealings were revealed soon enough', as Matteo explained to me.

The reciprocity of such dealings was hard to penetrate in fieldwork, although I did observe and partake in the most ubiquitous aspect of it: offering coffees and meals to shady figures like Baffi. Such petty exchanges were thus the main means of engaging with others at a *bar*, such as offer-



ing to buy a piece of pastry for the man who first got hold of the newspaper in order to claim access to the news and his company. In this way, consensus and popularity developed around the circulation of the newspaper and gifts of pastries (sweet in the morning, savoury at noontime) rotating among the men. The ‘public, yet hermetically sealed’ (in the words of Piero) position of bars as the hub of such information streams was fundamental to the development of sociality in San Giovanni. Locals communicated in *sussuri* (whispers), gestures, dialect jargon, narrations and rhyming jokes in these semi-public spaces. I consider the gossiping and whispering as important data precisely because the actual validity of information conveyed through rumours cannot be established.

After going through the whereabouts of such whispers, situating them in the sites of male commensality in San Giovanni, I would like to turn my attention back to the idea of putting co-ops in moral quarantine and forging enclaves of good practice. The ethnographic narrative so far might have discussed administrators as somehow removed from local life; however, their appropriation of the *sussuri* was often exemplary. Their use of gossip played a crucial role in fostering this protection from mafia influence locally.

### **Marking Boundaries: Idioms, Actors, Practices**

The very idea of influence often acquired epidemic connotations and operated in a jargon of allegories drawn from medical disease. Specifically, cooperative administrators and Consortium politicians frequently used the term ‘mafia’ alongside idioms of insidious growth and contamination. They characterised flows and networks deploying interests of people thought to belong to mafia clans as ‘mafia diffusion’. The mafia was compared to disease and indeed to cancer, a language shared by public officials (such as judges and Consortium politicians). Reale’s mayor talked to me of the ‘need to isolate the contaminated cells in our society’. The mayor of Fonte, another Consortium village, characterised the influence of the San Giovanni clans into his community as a ‘metastasis’ (invoking the spread of cancer cells to other parts of the body), a term also used by sociologists in Italy (Sciarrone 2009). San Turiddu’s mayor Malva, despite his friendship with Baffi, told me in an interview that the ‘[mafia] lump had to be removed from the body of our community’. Keeping track of gossip regarding *mafiosi* guaranteed, for cooperative members, the preservation of legality: they saw it as a mode to frame and contain this contamination and a net to impede its spreading.



The metaphors of diffusion and flows spreading throughout the (community's) body indicate the way that cooperative administrators conceptualised *mafiosi* as potentially contaminating any social networks in which *mafiosi* participated, even marginally. Any connection with mafia links was deemed to be morally challenged and permanently at risk until 'the lump is removed', as Gianpiero emphasised to me, unwittingly echoing Malva. Gianpiero, not only a Borsellino administrator but also the head of Libertà Palermo, reflected the association's views. Pamphlets and leaflets of anti-mafia civil society associations spoke of the perils of 'the disease of the South' (Libertà 2009; Addiopizzo 2009; cf. Lumley and Morris 1997).

Libertà construed this paradigm in terms of mafia as a nucleus that transmitted its corrupting influence to the political and economic order. Nico, a member of the Borsellino cooperative, compared the members' anxiety about becoming exposed to 'contamination' with the fear of polluting clean water: a social network was like a river with a dead body lying in its stream; when the clean waters pass over it, the stream becomes polluted from that point onwards. In that respect, cooperative administrators saw a flow (of things, commodities, ideas, jobs, labour and similar resources) as wholly 'impure' when a *mafioso* occupied a broker position in it. The contamination imagery was constantly evoked in documents and informal discourses among the cooperatives' administration, the Consortium, local policy actors such as the mayors and civil society agents such as Libertà activists. Some of this discourse incorporates the flow of gossip and informal information gathered in bars and public spaces in Spicco Vallata.

Contamination calls for containment and hence articulated the administrators' tendency to form 'moral borders' while, conversely, underlining the 'cleanliness' of the cooperatives with their strictly demarcated moral universe. By knowing through gossip what was said and who said it, the administrators formed discursive moral borders around the cooperatives (akin to the moral borders formed around land). This form of gossip in San Giovanni was constructed as *metatalk*, because tracking gossip was to talk about talking. A person was 'clean' not only when they were not a *mafioso* or a *mafioso's* relative but also when it was proved that they did not speak with *mafiosi* or relatives of *mafiosi*, as this could be contaminating for the cooperatives. This metatalk meant sharing information about who shared information with whom. Paying attention to or tracing whispers, cooperative members identified who was 'talked about' (*chiaccherato*). My attention to gossip here suggests analogies with what Favret-Saada says about witchcraft in France: aiming to study prac-

tices, she included discourse in her analysis, pointing out how ‘the act, in witchcraft, is the word . . . witchcraft is spoken words; but these spoken words are power . . . to talk, in witchcraft, is never to inform . . . words wage war. Anyone talking about it is a belligerent’ (1980: 8). Although the mafia is more than words, reputations and resources (job positions, state funding) were attached to spoken word, as it can, in specific contexts, be instrumentalised.

Ultimately, the administrators rendered gossip a powerful resource for the dominant model of anti-mafia cooperativism that they promoted. This was a vision in which the local community was regarded warily, seen as imbued with problematic notions of tradition and where the state and law enforcement should be present at all times.

### **Setting and Blurring Boundaries**

For this reason, tracking informal information became part of the cooperative administrators’ workload. It involved investigating how ‘clean’ the people who approached the cooperatives were by examining the discursive networks in which they were enmeshed. Secluded in their virtuous networking, Palermitan administrators performed this in two main ways. First, they traced information by consulting the prefecture and the police. The police provided an outline of a person’s relationships with the authorities, as documented in their official archives. Secondly and more important, the administrators followed informal means of gathering information, including paying attention to random local gossip, especially the *sussuri* that took place in bars. The instrumentalisation of gossip therefore developed in a twofold way. On the one hand, state authorities documented rumours and shared this information with the cooperatives’ administrators; on the other hand, the cooperatives tracked rumours on their own behalf. In doing this, they were in fact replicating the state’s surveillance practices – but were able to penetrate further. Police practices correlated with the cooperative members’ interest in local informal information.

Specifically, the state’s gossip tracking resulted in ‘signalling’ (*segnalazione*), documentation confirming a person’s contacts with *mafiosi*. A law-enforcement entity (the *Carabinieri* or the police) inscribed the person’s name as a ‘mafia contact’ and informed the cooperatives that the person was to be avoided. ‘Signalling’, therefore, referred at the same time to ‘official documentation’ regulations and to informal gossiping techniques. As demands for labour intensified with the development of the cooperatives, this situation dramatically influenced the anti-mafia

cooperatives' recruitment, as the cooperatives could not hire 'signalled' people.

When an agrarian labourer (*bracciante*) asked a cooperative for a job or when a peasant who cultivated organic grapes approached the cooperatives proposing collaboration under supplier status, cooperative members mobilised a variety of control mechanisms, partly based on gossip. Firstly, through rumours documented in the police's records, they traced whether the person was 'clean' (*pulito*) and therefore suitable to collaborate with an anti-mafia cooperative. The administrators did not accept 'non-clean' people as members, workers or suppliers under any circumstance, as they thought that this would introduce 'contamination'. The case of Leonardo Barbeto (cousin of *mafia* leader Giovanni Barbeto) is typical. After his release from prison (he had served a three-year prison sentence for 'being a member of a mafia association'), Leonardo managed a Barbeto land plot that bordered a Falcone land tract (as discussed later in chapter 9). When he approached his old acquaintance Giusy to ask for a possible temporary contract as a *bracciante* in the Falcone cooperative, she calmly replied, 'Are you serious? If I am to take *you*, I might as well consider closing the cooperative down altogether!'

Checking by anti-mafia cooperatives' administrators on whether people approaching them were clean, through actual existing data and through informal but valuable gossip in bars, was deemed by the Consortium to be a most efficient way of surveillance. Nevertheless, the cooperatives were double-checked themselves for cleanliness by the state's law enforcement agencies. Ironically, given the use of 'signalling' by administrators, the police sometimes 'signalled' cooperative members themselves and communicated their conduct to the cooperatives' presidents. For instance, Piero once entered a *bar* at San Turiddu for his morning espresso and saw the local *Carabinieri* marshal having a coffee with young Aiola, the first cousin of a San Giovanni mafia clan leader. Piero ignored this seeming paradox and had a brief trivial chat with both men.

The next day, he had the police at his door: he was advised not to approach that person again, since he was a *mafioso*. The police officers told him that they were obliged to communicate this information to the president of the cooperative, and after that 'it was the cooperative's own issue' to decide on Piero's future. When Piero went to the police department, he complained that he had approached Aiola only because the marshal was there and that indeed the marshal introduced him to Aiola. The police replied that they often spent time with known *mafiosi* and 'it was not his business imitating that conduct'. Therefore, the police

took advantage of the mafia/anti-mafia discourse as well and insisted on monopolising this system.

'Signalling', in this way, did not directly inflict on the rule of law, but it did affect the lives of cooperative members themselves. At the very least, it made them realise that they were not immune from state surveillance. More seriously, it could lead to the signalled person's expulsion from a cooperative. The case of Pino is similar to that of Piero: he underwent a *segnalazione* as he 'kept contact' with his village's mafia boss. Informants confirmed, however, that what the police meant by 'contact' was that he had simply stopped to say hello when he and Netti met on the street. In a small village like San Turiddu it was difficult to avoid meeting anyone, and Ninno's civil engineering office was on the main road, some thirty metres from the stairs to the main church and to Circolo, Netti's hangout bar. In fact, I came to appreciate myself that his was a strict policy: Pino introduced Netti to me, as we met him by chance at Circolo one day. I thought the fact that I had met him was perfectly inconspicuous and actually part of the daily routine of walking around with a local co-op worker.

This strictness is indicative of the normative practice of using gossip to strategise the next moves of a cooperative. Such tactics meant identifying people through specific flows of information in their villages. These flows corresponded to networks of acquaintances, affiliations and sympathies of the police because of their determination to control reputational networks and the setting/crossing of boundaries. The normativity in this practice peaks in the role of the police in negotiating the zone among mafia/anti-mafia behaviour, a role important to the nature of these imagined boundaries that were often demarcated through gossip. The police are of course the embodiment of the state's monopolisation of force, and re-establishing that position had a lot to do with re-establishing legality, normality and, indeed, the perceived boundaries of mafia and anti-mafia. This implied that police officers had to be strict with cooperative administrators as well, and were often quite arbitrary in the way they redrew these boundaries, operating to a degree illegally, at least insofar as their own actions were very much unregulated. As the local *Carabinieri* marshal told me, 'I go about looking for gossip to decide my next moves, basically asking *mafiosi* about *mafiosi*. You do the same thing, Theo. I look for informers, you look for informants'.

The boundaries were imagined through the channel of either words attached to people (such as 'fox', or '*pere pere*') or words that people shared with others (the discourse about 'who is talking to whom'). As mentioned, I follow Favret-Saada's take on the power of words being actions,

having no autonomous meaning outside the practice of hex (1980); in San Giovanni, they construed ‘moral universes’ (and resources attached to them, such as jobs, or funds). The social connections sharing words were, in their turn, formed in what appeared to be mutually exclusive patterns shaped by law and the informal information around relatedness and friendship. Therefore, internal strategies in the cooperatives involved informal flows of information, as well as firm references to definitions of ‘mafia’ in criminal law and procedure. Often, people actively evoked the language of law, playing with its applicability, in order to back their suspicions. Hence, they talked of Baffi’s release from prison as a legal mistake and circulated rumours in the village that he should have been imprisoned for ten years more, but a bureaucratic mistake in the *wording* of his sentence led to his early release. Tracing these whispers through people back to their source, I found that the person who had initiated them was the local *Carabinieri* marshal.

In that respect, gossip’s relationship to the law, the police and state power is explicit and structural. In gossip becoming a resource there is a discursive realignment, translated into structural effects, since the banality of everyday contact is decontextualised to fit within a defined category of power and ethics, a moral universe, informed by specific values.

### Pursuing ‘The Clean’: Gossip as an Anti-mafia Resource

As mentioned, the *bar* was the locus for the process of rumour tracking. The case of a prospective supplier from the neighbouring village of Camo further illustrates this. As Falcone members collaborated with the sequestered farm Tazza, which cultivated an olive grove, they became increasingly interested in olive oil extraction. Tazza was administered by a friend of Luca’s, Giulio Erice, whom he had met through Palermo University’s circles (see page 106). Moving around the area where Tazza was located, Luca and his virtuous-circle-network friend Paolo were anxious to find a ‘clean’ (*pulito*) olive mill. Tazza was a long way from San Giovanni; therefore, Luca had no information about who to trust in the area. Some locals suggested that the co-op members might find relevant information in Camo, a village located about forty minutes from San Giovanni. There, they could speak with a local olive mill owner who could potentially become an excellent supplier.

Piero decided to go to Camo indeed, and I tagged along. Before we did anything, though, he asked Luca to find out whether there were negative penal records on the olive mill owner in the prefecture archives in

Palermo. Nothing came out: the entrepreneur had even received public funds for his agricultural business enterprise. The documents proved that the mill manufactured organic oil exclusively, that the quality was high enough and that the owner was 'clean'. Piero's job, however, included not only performing a quality control for the prospective cooperative collaborators as an agronomist but also 'tracing a clean person through a *spicciola* [minor but detailed] research on what people said' about those who could become the cooperative's prospective collaborators. He described this process as 'a small-time control [*controllo spiccio*] that I do myself, often the most important one, as it reaches to webs of contacts the prefecture cannot arrive at'. He generally inquired of local providers or similar contacts 'what is said in the village' about the prospective collaborators or workers. Through this kind of gossiping, the cooperative established some security with regard to their next moves in 'dealing with people who are clean'.

I accompanied Piero in his car as he drove to Camo: his first task there was to establish whether the mill was sound and appropriate for the job. We went to the centre of Camo, a sizeable village, to meet inconspicuously with a grain supplier to the cooperative and ask him what he knew about the olive mill. Although the supplier hardly knew anything, he introduced Piero confidentially to the owner of the *bar* where they took their coffee. The barman told us he trusted 'the anti-mafia': he himself was a member of the Addiopizzo organisation of anti-racket retailers. His choice to join the Addiopizzo had resulted in his *bar* being burnt down by the main local *mafioso* clan of the village a year ago – the state had helped out with subsidies for reconstruction. Piero knew from this that the barman would be very much attuned to local gossip regarding mafia allegiances. Indeed, when asked, the barman revealed that the supplier with whom the Falcone cooperative was about to sign a partnership contract collaborated with that local mafia clan. The relationship with the *mafiosi*-brokers guaranteed the olive mill owner a steady supply of olives and a loyal clientele as a result of the mafia's social influence.<sup>9</sup> The cooperative cancelled the agreement with the olive mill. Piero explained to me that

small talk in bars is the most efficient way to find out about people's cleanliness; the whispers you hear here and there make you aware of local doings. Of course, we do not want to collaborate with a supplier who walks arm in arm with these people [*vá a bracceto con questi*].

The cases of Pino's and Piero's 'signalling', as well as the Camo vignette, highlight the fundamental assumption I identified regarding gossip in San Giovanni: sharing information is precisely about information shar-

ing. In the context of anti-mafia gossip, people speak about who speaks to whom. This *metatalk* renders gossip a prominent material resource for what I am calling the process of constituting the co-ops as enclaves in Spicco Vallata – the administrators’ intellectual and cultural labour of setting moral borders. Moreover, it is a means of accessing further material resources, thus forming part of the ongoing social arrangements for constituting the anti-mafia cooperatives. By clearly dividing local social relations into distinct moral universes, access to the cooperatives is ensured only to those free from contaminating contact with *mafiosi*.

In these conditions, anti-mafia cooperatives rendered rumours and gossip an instrument of internal policymaking and an even further affirmation of the administrators’ leading role in them. The role of gossip as fundamental in reputation-building is widely documented (Ghosh 1996; Kirsch 2010). What is original in the case of the anti-mafia cooperatives is the way tracking gossip in the gendered spaces of the bars is linked to processes of separating the cooperatives from their broader social ambience. Where anthropological accounts have characterised gossip as a resource for accumulating reputation (Engle Merry 1997), here gossip is a resource in a different way: a means of exclusion/inclusion in the work of creating a bounded universe shielded behind ‘moral borders’, which diverged from local values. However, the attempt to construct work and experience horizontality within the cooperatives – an important ideal – is trumped by the use of gossip by the administrators, as it separates cooperatives from local people, including the workers of the cooperatives themselves, thereby forming a hierarchy of reputations in which the administrators, because they are ‘free’ of any local connections, come to be the local representation of an ‘uncontaminated’ anti-mafia element.

Schneider and Schneider’s classic monograph proposed that ‘control over networks’ is the source of the mafia’s brokerage power (1976). In a more recent book, they identified hierarchical ‘reputational networks’ as an important means of social cohesion in Sicily, which impacts production and reproduction patterns, building people’s and families’ ‘respectability’ (1996: 195–96). The tremendously important discussion on the *pentiti* (informants, literally: repentants) among the Sicilian mafia is also telling, especially when the mafia confession is seen as a gift to the state (Moss 2001). Rumour has been a central anti-mafia resource, one the state has drawn from since the 1930s in order to capture and isolate *mafiosi* (Coco 2013). The information leaked by mafia repentants, although detrimental for their own reputation, was a main source of understanding the mafia (Allum 2006; Dino 2011). Indeed a cognitive anthropology of



the mafia might imply paying attention to leaked information. Such data allows one to imagine the organisation through confessional narrative. It is a method that works its way back from repenting *mafiosi* in order to construct a broader historical framework in which mafia selfhood is located (Rakopoulos 2017b).

My ethnographic discussion builds on these insights. Utilising reputational networks, administrators of anti-mafia cooperatives render gossip a resource, appropriating it from the local context to use against the mafia. These networks mediate categories of cleanliness, as well as anti-mafia that are further linked to other resources (land and labour) available through the cooperatives. Focusing on the flows of discourse and the modes of communication helped them to construct the binary mafia/anti-mafia and their conceptual separation in daily discourse.

As noted above, cooperative members instrumentalised information gathered through gossip as often as state actors did, although with more effective penetration of local networks. The gossip character of such communication was often seen as a way to 'know a territory' and infiltrate those spheres of information considered too intimate for the state to reach. The discourse of 'cleanliness' creates a difference from state actors, demarcating (in sensorial terms) the social ambience of the anti-mafia cooperatives. Whereas gossip and rumours blur the boundaries within which the people of the cooperatives were meant to act, they were also used to register people on one or the other 'sides'. This was also true of the 'signalling' of the cooperatives and the Camo vignette.

Gossip in Spicco Vallata meant both to tell stories (gossip with a narrative) and to talk about talking (gossip about who talks with whom). The anti-mafia cooperatives' administrators mainly utilised the latter form to identify who was a mafia affiliate. Gossip thus helps to set the limits of the law's applicability in that it conveys *meta-information*. In that respect, when a person was thought to have had contact (i.e., speak to, share words with) with someone recognised as a *mafioso* in legal terms, that person would be excluded from the cooperatives. Using gossip to strategise the next moves of a cooperative meant identifying people's location in specific flows of information in their villages. These flows corresponded to networks of acquaintances, affiliations and sympathies.

Gossip consequently entailed controlling channels of cleanliness – as mafia contamination transmits through words – through sharing information and talking with people perceived as contaminated. There is more interest in speech about speech, in knowing who spoke to whom than what they said. Gossip appears as metatalk to seal co-ops' enclave borders, checking on alliances and liasons. Words here, as in the Bocage (Favret-

Saada 1980), are not dangerous because of their content but because of their mere existence, addressing someone considered potentially contaminating. The usage of platforms evoking and conveying informal information in the form of gossip construed cooperatives' ethical positionality. This included the use of indirect communication, rumours, whispers and gestures, as well as of the purity-and-danger language of contamination. Reproducing a clear distinction between 'the mafia' and 'the anti-mafia', administrators employed gossip to distinguish sharply between these two 'moral universes'. This has had impacts on the work relations of the cooperatives, in the process of the administrators' seclusion behind the iron cage that these 'moral universes' construed.

### **(Far from) Moral borders**

Informal information in the form of gossip is surely important in the everyday lives of locals, *mafiosi*, state authorities and the cooperatives' administrators. But it also involves contradictions. First, the ways gossip was used creates fuzziness in the mafia/anti-mafia distinction. As people in the village's bars circulated flows of information construed to lie in the zone between mafia and anti-mafia, gossip was a vector of resources for locals (barmen and *mafiosi* in particular) and for state authorities. Anthropologists inhabit that area inside and outside of the law (cf. Harris 1996; Di Bella 2011). That area constitutes a grey zone permeating the cooperative endeavour in Spicco Vallata. Secondly, the administrators rendered gossip a medium of separation in their need to quarantine co-ops from 'malignant' or 'contaminating' features of local society. As has been discussed regarding food activism, the use of gossip was for administrators part of their attempts at protective seclusion.

That type of enclaving was particularly the case in San Giovanni, where administrators perceived *mafiosi* and people affiliated to them as a threat of contamination with local livelihoods. As the administrators came from networks unrelated to San Giovanni, their use of local information secured and consolidated their positions in the cooperatives. They participated in gossip flows not in order to engage with the life of the local community but to identify local mafia affiliations and distinguish themselves from them. Their idioms of contamination and cleanliness served this aim.

This point feeds into my general argument about the specificities of the division of labour of the anti-mafia cooperatives. The outcome of how (and to whom) people speak to strategise the next moves of a cooperative

implied locating people in flows of affiliations and sympathies in their villages: ‘whispers’ around local people often challenged their position and status. The flows of gossip functioned as the demarcator of their ‘moral universe’; alluding to contamination was a means of securing this universe’s boundaries. Gossip sits comfortably alongside views of food or practices of kinning and dekinning across the co-op workforce and reminds us of the material realities that information and ideas of contamination are imbued with and embedded in.

For instance, as explained, the administrators commuted to San Giovanni in the morning and returned to Palermo in the evening. The cooperatives were their work space; Palermo was their home. The separation of work from kinship links is a fundamental premise on which activities such as gossip-tracking are based. This separation is an axis of the antithesis between the two teams of the cooperatives, reproducing unequal relations within them. In the following chapter, I suggest further ways to tackle this moral and practical facet of the co-op division of labour. Like institutions existing outside and around cooperatives, like kinship or indeed rumours and reputation, paid and unpaid work must be taken seriously if we want to fully comprehend the extent and nature of cooperativist realities – in Sicily and beyond.

## NOTES

1. The core of my ethnographic attention in describing and analysing gossip is verbal communication – taking gossip *stricto sensu*, as speech about speech. However, throughout the chapter I also refer to non-verbal communication that accompanied verbal gossip, as these discursive means are part of the broader framework of indirect communication in which cooperative members are locally entrenched.
2. The phrase is situated right at the opening of this story (page 4).
3. A *bar* in Italy, unlike the use of the term in English, is a coffeehouse, where espresso is consumed while patrons usually stand; sweets and pastries are also on sale; there are a few tables available and perhaps a couple of newspapers. Most of the clientele spend just a few minutes in a *bar*, the time it takes to consume a coffee shot, while others, locals to specific *bars*, hang out there for hours, especially in bars that have a gaming room at the back, where elder men would play cards. (Here, when referring to more than one *bar*, I use the term ‘bars’ in order to avoid confusion (in Italian, the plural is *bar*).
4. Incidentally, this perspective offers a potential counterpoint to Anderson’s notion of ‘print-capitalism’ (2006: 37, 48): the convergence of capitalism and print technology in spreading information and eventually in nation-building.
5. The term ‘great man’ is used as an analytical category in the anthropology of Africa (Bayart 2009) and reminds us of the Melanesian Big Men (Godelier 1986);

it is operative in discussions about historical agency of people and collectivities (Sahlins 2004). In the context of this ethnography, 'great men' or 'gentlemen' (*i grandi, i signori, i cappoccia*) were emic designations to speak of *mafiosi*.

6. The gendered element is prominent in analyses of indirectness (Hendry and Watson 2001). The entirely male-centred *bar* of Sicily, not much unlike the tavern elsewhere, becomes the locus of sociability in the form of commensality, dominated by codes of male 'hearty' friendship in Mediterranean ethnographies (e.g., Papataxiarchis 1991; Almeida 1996; Desai and Killick 2010).
7. Sperber (1996) suggests a hierarchy of senses, ranging from sight at one extreme, which has the most rudimentary terminology based on it (colour words), to smell at the other, which is evocative since all one can say is that something smells *like* something else. Akin to symbolism, smell evokes a field of associations; it relates to connotation instead of denotation (Sperber and Wilson 1995). The emic idea of embodying smell (mafia stench) as an attribute people carried with them underlines the intuitive basis they evoked to think of mafia.
8. 'College' is a popular slang term, referring to 'prison', and suggesting the educative potential of the prison for *mafiosi* – educational in terms of criminal experience.
9. There is an apparent conflict of values here: what wins a good reputation for some, mafiosity, is seen as a contra-indicator by Piero.