



The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection

By Diego Gambetta

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In a society where trust is in short supply and democracy weak, the Mafia sells protection, a guarantee of safe conduct for parties to commercial transactions. Drawing on the confessions of eight Mafiosi, Diego Gambetta develops an elegant analysis of the economic and political role of the Sicilian Mafia.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Gambetta (sociology, Oxford) sets forth a new perspective on the Mafia, discarding the popular impression that it is a criminal community secretly controlled through a centralized structure. Gambetta constructs a theoretical framework, supported by evidence obtained from the mafiosi trials of the 1980s in Italy, that aims to clarify the Mafia's actual economic role. Unlike previous observers, Gambetta describes the Mafia as a "commercial identity" that supplies "private protection." He further characterizes it as "a particular trademark of the protection industry," comparing it with the automobile, insurance, and advertising industries. Drawing on history, geography, and social circumstances, Gambetta is able to rationalize the Mafia's role with surprising success. This work will benefit students, academics, and other informed readers wanting an intellectual understanding of the Mafia.

- Ali D. Abdulla, *East Carolina Univ.*, Greenville, N. C.

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Review

A remarkable theoretical achievement. Starting from what is apparently a most unpromising premise, that the workings of the Mafia can be understood within a rational choice framework, Gambetta repeatedly surprises us with his theoretical ingenuity... In a brief review, one cannot do justice to the complexity of the arguments in a book like Gambetta's. Let it suffice to say I could not put it down and I estimate it will become a classic in the burgeoning literature upon the rational choice approach to sociological analysis. (Peter Abell *British Journal of Sociology*)

The Sicilian Mafia goes far beyond the promise of the title. It represents an important and arguably enduring contribution to both sociological and economic theory. Gambetta's book shows the fruitfulness of a rigorous economic analysis applied with consistency and it is, in spite of the ominous subject, fun to read. It sheds new light on the birth and evolution of the mafia. Furthermore, the twofold parallel between the mafia, an economic industry, and the state, the political community *par excellence*, can bring us to a more accurate understanding of the nature of the markets for unusual commodities like protection, and it contributes, indirectly, to the political theory of the emergence of protection agencies. (Alberto Vannucci *European Sociological Review*)

Diego Gambetta's analysis of the Sicilian Mafia is likely to become a classic. It uses a dazzling combination of economic theory and sociological insight to make sense of a significant but mysterious social institution. (Robert Sugden *Journal of Economic Literature*)

This is a fascinating book. It provides a wealth of information about an organization which, despite its repellent nature, understandably continues to intrigue many people. And the narrative, based, as much of it is, on the testimony of various ex mafiosi who have turned state's evidence, possesses a compelling immediacy. As a work of history, it is first-rate. (Larry J. Sechrest *Journal of Economics*)

Gambetta's study is, quite simply, brilliant. At once thoughtful and provocative, he argues that the mafioso deals not in violence, but in protection...Witty and well-argued, compelling but not didactic, this is precisely what a scholarly work should be. (*Modern Italy*)

A carefully argued and well written interpretation of the Sicilian Mafia which should be required reading for

every student of criminology. (David Nelken *British Journal of Criminology*)

[Gambetta] has done an outstanding job of gathering and analyzing the data that were available...A tremendous achievement. (Peter Kollock *American Journal of Sociology*)

From the Back Cover

Blood ceremonies, obscure symbols, elaborate codes, brutal executions: the arcane remnants of a defunct culture? The Mafia, this book suggests, is not nearly as bizarre as all that, not nearly as remote as we might think. In fact, as Diego Gambetta's analysis unfolds, the Mafia begins to resemble any other business. In a society where trust is in short supply, this business sells protection, a guarantee of safe conduct for commercial and social transactions. It grudgingly shares the market with other concerns like itself, of which it is merely the most successful. The author develops his elegant economic theory with ample evidence, much of it based on the remarkable work done by Judge Giovanni Falcone and his colleagues in Palermo and Agrigento in the 1980s. Drawing on the confessions of eight Mafiosi and the trials their revelations triggered, Gambetta is able to explain all manner of peculiar Mafia marketing strategies that have been endlessly misinterpreted in the past. He makes illuminating - and unexpected - comparisons between the business of protection and ordinary industries, such as automotive insurance, and advertising. And he teases out the subtle distinctions between protection and extortion, in which the protector himself poses a threat. This new approach reshapes traditional interpretations of the Mafia - its origins, functions, and social consequences. Applying informal economic analysis, Gambetta shows how such a recognized evil can perform a real service, and how such a recognizable service can inflict great harm on a society.

Users Review

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