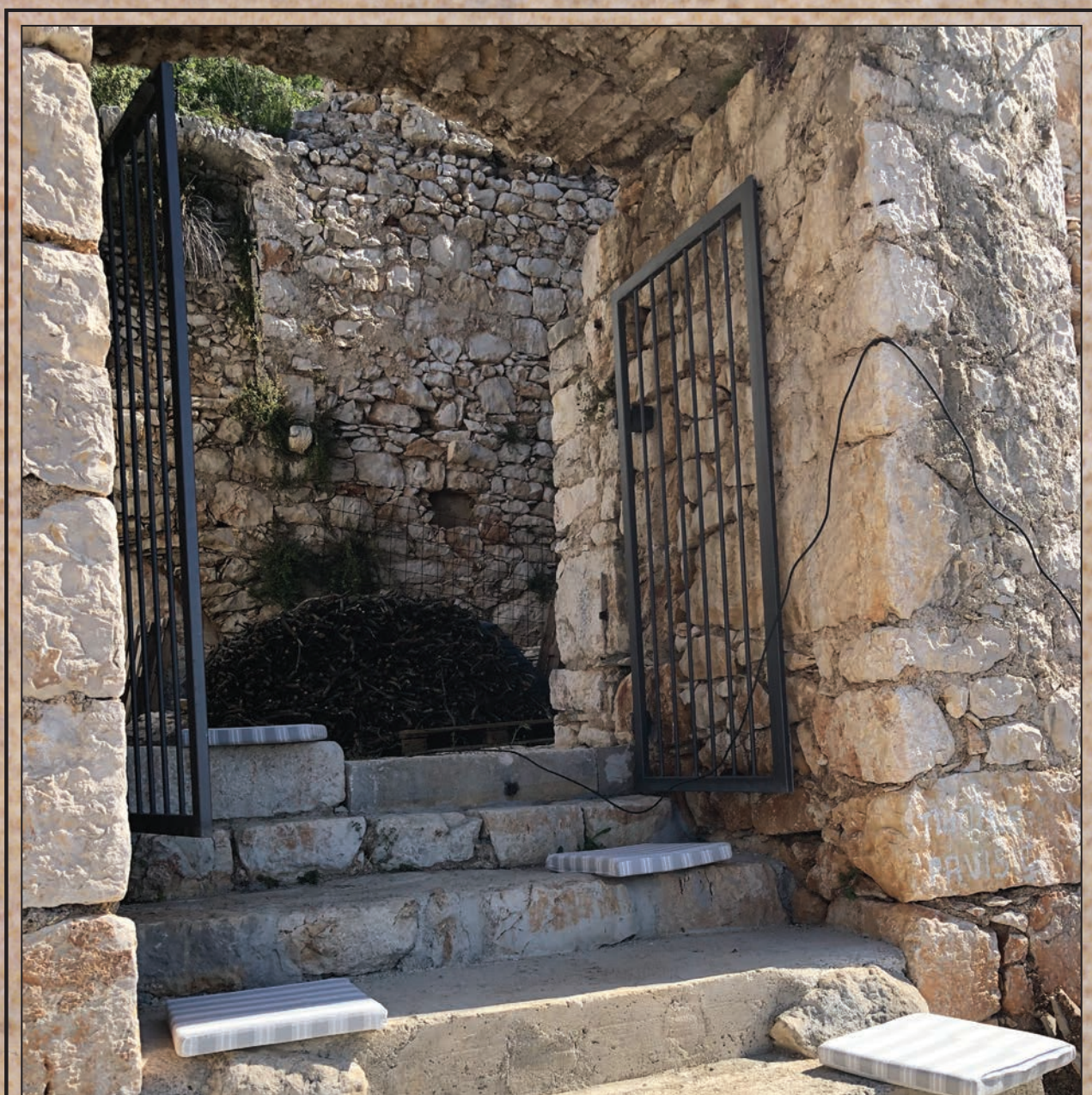


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GOSSIPING GOING SOUTH: ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSIGHTS INTO GOSSIP ON A DALMATIAN ISLAND

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to identify different scripts of gossip among the inhabitants of the municipality of Bol on the island of Brač. The method of participant observation is used in combination with interviews, deep hanging out method and thick description. The results are introduced, embedded and reflected in the relevant social theory. Different gossip solidarity groups are distinguished and the reference to the truth of the gossip material is analysed to distinguish between modern and postmodern gossip, the latter being referred to as bullshitting.

Keywords: gossip, Brač, local taxonomies, social stratification, Generation Z, tourism

IL PETTEGOLEZZO CHE VA A SUD: APPROFONDIMENTI ANTROPOLOGICI SUL GOSSIP IN UN'ISOLA DALMATA

SINTESI

L'obiettivo di questo articolo è di analizzare le diverse tipologie di gossip raccontati dagli abitanti del comune di Bol, località dell'isola di Brač. Al metodo dell'osservazione partecipante si affiancano quello delle interviste, dell'immersione totale tra i soggetti e della descrizione densa. I risultati vengono presentati rispetto alla relativa realtà sociale degli individui. Gli stessi gossip sono suddivisi in due categorie (in base alla veridicità del materiale raccolto), al fine di distinguere tra gossip moderno e postmoderno (ove quest'ultimo viene etichettato con l'appellativo di 'cazzate').

Parole chiave: gossip, Brač, tassonomie locali, stratificazione sociale, Generazione Z, turismo

INTRODUCTION

*The sole method of studying mankind
is to sit on a Melanesian island
for a couple of years and
listen to the gossip of the villagers.*
(Grafton Elliott Smith)

Egyptologist Grafton Elliott Smith's acid remark was a not-so-incorrect summary of the main method of social and cultural anthropology, participant observation, invented 100 years ago by Bronislaw Malinowski (Šterk, 2020). His first publication on the islanders of the Trobriand Islands in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski, 1922) is still considered the birth certificate of the modern anthropological method. Since then, gossip has been the primary vehicle of participant observation and became an exemplary focus of anthropological observation some 60 years ago, deserving to be considered a total social fact comparable to kinship, marriage, language, status differentiation, division of labour or gift-giving. For a phenomenon to be a total social fact, it must be:

*at the same time juridical, economic, religious,
and even aesthetic and morphological, etc.
They are juridical because they concern
private and public law, and a morality that is
organized and diffused throughout society;
they are strictly obligatory or merely an occa-
sion for praise or blame; they are political and
domestic at the same time, relating to social
classes as well as clans and families. They
are economic. The idea of value, utility, self-
interest, luxury, wealth, the acquisition, and
accumulation of goods—all these on the one
hand—and on the other, that of consumption,
even that of deliberate spending for its own
sake. (Mauss, 2010, 101)*

Gossip fulfils too many social functions to be left to the gossipers. It tackles a variety of topics, contributes strongly to group identity, establishes hierarchies and solidarities, and conveys myriad cultural messages, to say the least. And in the field of gossip research, "methods more sophisticated than eavesdropping and more convenient than ethnography need yet to be developed and applied" (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012, 2665). Until then, there is an anthropological report.

AIMS AND METHODS

The aim of this study is to elucidate varieties of gossiped material, different gossiped and gossipers solidarity groups, and single out different scripts and tenets of hearsay and gossip of the inhabitants

of municipality of Bol and Murvica, located on the south side of the island Brač in central Dalmatia region of Croatia. According to the 2021 census, the town Bol has 1,656 inhabitants with spread over 23.3 km² and village Murvica, situated 6 km west of Bol has 22 inhabitants over 0.3 km² (Državni zavod za statistiku RH, 2021).

The core method of this study is the principal ethnographic method of participant observation (Okely, 2012) lasting for over two decades. After gaining insight into patterns and curiosities of social conduct, several distinguishable characteristics of gossip groups and scripts are established. Subsequently informal conversation on the subject included a total of 73 participants, followed by semi-structured interviews with 36 participants, of whom 16 were younger than 35 (born after 1990) and 8 were older than 70 (born before 1950). As to accomplish the state-of-the-art protocol, the interviews were upgraded to so-called deep hanging out method, which allows for the observer to gain an insider perspective and mitigate the power imbalances of the fieldwork (Snodgrass et al., 2024). The interviewed sample was composed of 14 females and 22 males. The information gathered is contextualized with relevant fragments of general social theory and applicable interpretational scopes of social and cultural anthropology. The method of thick description (Geertz, 1973) is used to further elucidate, illustrate, and exemplify the material.

GENERAL THEORY

*Hear no evil, speak no evil,
and you will never be invited to parties.*
(Oscar Wilde)

The most recent and comprehensive empirical meta-analysis of gossip as behaviour shows that the average person participates in gossip for 52 minutes per day (Robbins & Karan, 2019). Gossip is likely to "comprise between 65% and 90% of people's everyday conversations" (Harris, 2021, 7650). Gossip is not only a quotidian and time-consuming practice, but also a passionate one: There is evidence that "people gossip with an appetite that rivals their interest in food and sex" (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012, 2641).

If the empirical studies support the methodological and epistemological value of gossip for an anthropologist, one is inclined to regard it as nothing less than a total social fact, a term applied most proficiently in anthropology by Marcel Mauss, having previously been introduced into sociology by his famous maternal uncle, Emile Durkheim (1982). Mauss is adamant: "In our opinion, nothing is more urgent or more fruitful than this study of total social facts" (Mauss, 2010, 102).

Another sociological concept that can be useful in contemplating gossip is the idea of social capital (Witteck et al., 2000). Bourdieu (1986) distinguishes between economic and social capital and defines the latter as “accumulated actual or virtual resources acquired by individuals or groups through the possession of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, 119).

Social capital is thus anchored in the individual and linked to social connections that a person can use for one’s advancement. Gossip is a mixture of both, financial and social capital. In postmodern ‘celebrity culture’ (Feeley, 2012), it is institutionalized as an asset and drives substantial media production that can be aptly described as the gossip industry.

Gossip arises from rumours and vice versa; rumours are “unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity and that function primarily to help people make sense and manage threat” (Difonzo & Bordia, 2005, 273). Gossip is evaluative idle talk about individuals – usually not present – often shared for amusement, to convey social mores, and to exclude someone from a social group. Gossip is spread with the aim of establishing, changing, or maintaining social structures such as norms, hierarchy, and group identification (Gluckman, 1963).

Gossip was traditionally regarded as an efficient means of transmitting information about rules, norms, and guidelines for life in a community. It served to create and maintain a consensus on the need for conformity to crucial cultural values and as such functioned as an efficient means of informal social control. It contributed to egalitarianism and a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders (Gluckman, 1963). Ruminating on the old days, one of the important social norms of conversation was also to pass on accurate information. Belief in a rumour and gossip was associated with their transmission; spreading false rumours and betraying confidentiality could damage credibility and social capital. In terms of social power and status, “high frequency gossipers were perceived as less powerful than low frequency gossipers” (Farley, 2011, 578).

Although gossip is a *non plus ultra* anthropological phenomenon, once a prominent object of empirical observation and theoretical contemplation of a community, it has been in past decades adorned with more personalized and individualistic notes and as such overtaken by the discipline of social psychology. The established taxonomy of social psychology and sociology divides gossip into positive, negative, and neutral. This assessment is too value-ridden for an anthropologist, too moralistic, too context-dependent, and frankly outdated in

times of postmodernity and post-truth (Rommetveit, 2022), where all opinions count, facts have become alternative and fame and infamy collapse into a single signifier of celebrity. Even my interviewers themselves, especially the younger ones, too often hesitated to attribute a gossip with such value characterization. This may be due to the self-denial of the prevalence of malice in the gossiped content, which is also measured in theory (Robbins & Karan, 2019), albeit the most sinister and fervently taken-for-granted aspect of gossip, “gossip aimed at influencing or manipulating others, was rated as the least important motive” (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012, 2667). The clash of traditional taxonomic orientations may also be reflective of the postmodern interchangeability of moral prerogatives, expressed in popular culture in the maxim ‘there is no such thing as bad publicity’. As expected, when they were the targets of ‘positive’ gossip, all respondents experienced pleasurable self-conscious emotions, culminating in satisfaction, joy, and pride of the old and vanity, self-righteousness, and smugness of the young. In contrast to recent findings in social psychology (Martinescu et al., 2019), the targets of ‘negative’ gossip in my study experienced virtually no negative self-conscious emotions (e.g., embarrassment, shame, or guilt). The older generation reacted with contemptuous mockery, the younger generation with disparaging laughter. Given the prevailing *zeitgeist* of cultural decadence, debatable facts, and the moral obscurity of the (gossiped about) state of affairs, one cannot expect the reactions to be anything but ambiguous. The principle of confidentiality is also considered obsolete, evermore so by the younger participants in the study. If the gossip was introduced with the proverbial ‘I need to tell you something, but you must not tell anyone else...’ curiosity often gave way to reluctance to participate further in the conversation for fear of not being able to keep it a secret. As if there is some anxious compulsion to gossip that cannot be tolerated but must maintain its necessary circulation.

The most definite gossip, for example, that refers to the inhabitants of the island of Brač and is epitomized in countless jokes about the islanders, is that they are stingy. This reputation is a good example of how it is impossible to label gossip morally, as positive, or negative, and even of how once compatible notions of (good) reputation and honour diverge. For outsiders, stinginess is considered a bad thing, while the islanders are proud of it because in their minds it is equated with conscientiousness and proves them to be financially savvy, responsible, and penny-wise. One person’s gossip is another person’s social capital; one person’s stinginess is another person’s competence.



Figure 1: Peeling the beans: traditional occasion for spilling the beans (personal archive).

Contributing to gossip's bad reputation is the fact that monotheistic moral codes across all times and cultures condemn all forms of gossip (Cohen & Soukup, 2023), for in Christianity it is culpable of bearing false witness, separating intimate friends and damaging reputations; in Islam, it assassinates characters and creates unnecessary doubt; in Judaism, *lashon hara* or the 'evil tongue' functions as a curse or witchcraft and can have immediate lethal effects on anyone involved in spreading the rumours, even if they are true.

It was only anthropological cross-cultural evidence that first drew attention to 'good' gossip, and provided reflections on cultural mores regarding gossip and the positive functions it fulfils in a society (Gluckman, 1963; Meyer Spacks, 1982; Rosnow & Fine, 1976; Goodman & Ben-Ze'ev, 1994; Feinberg et al., 2012; Ferrari, 2015; Giardini & Wittek, 2019). Social and cultural anthropology views hearsay, rumour, and gossip in terms of their usefulness and empowering potential as tools for challenging established social hierarchies and resisting social domination. These weapons are seen as symbolic: They enable the vulnerable to express their opposition to social domination and exploitation, while providing

them with the anonymity and security necessary to do so. Since gossip is treated as an anonymous form of political discourse, it allows vulnerable political actors to participate in the contestation of a political order without having to jeopardize their personal standing. As an invisible, intangible source of empowerment of the subordinate social groups and communities, gossip provides for counter- and anti-hegemonic opinions and attitudes (White, 2000), which helps us to understand why gossip is adorned with negativity and/or feminine attitudes in the dominant discourse of the West.

One study, which briefly summarizes the social construction and etymological span of the word, claims that "gossip started out as a gender-neutral term and only gained a bad reputation when it began to denote specifically feminine behaviour in the 19th century" (Leaper & Holiday, 1995, 176). Thus, while men engage in a non-nonsense talk about non-intimate subjects, exchange ideas about politics and sport celebrities, debate and argument serious broad issues, women merely chitchat, tittle-tattle, and gossip. This is a traditional patriarchal and paternalistic strategy to dismiss relevance to women's talk and take away its empowerment potentials, social role, and solidarity effect.

Recent studies, however, confirm moral neutrality of gossip since the findings suggest that the affirming the negative reputation through gossip is much less important than adjusting the image of other people to be more attuned with oneself (Hartung et al., 2019). Negative influence motive is consistently self-reported as the least important reason to gossip (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012).

Empirical studies also agree with my observation that gossip is gender-neutral (Levin & Arluke, 1987; Eckhaus & Ben-Hador, 2019) and generation-specific (Eder & Enke, 1991). It is a truism that different generations gossip about different things; in the life cycle, at first, we are preoccupied by the number of toys and parents' professional statuses, then come identity issues, body image and sexual exploits, later we focus on our professional achievements, parenting techniques and consummation of experiences, and still later come eschatological issues. What is less known and unexplored in the literature is the parallel divergence of ontological and epistemological frameworks, which was established in my field research results. Only the older generation still holds to a certain reference of truth and some gossipers are therefore seen as trust worthier than others. For them, gossip is not only relevant to the social condition, a serious endeavour that one must not go trivially about, but also a form of art (Gluckman, 1963). With regard to the notion of truth, my study showed a clear distinction between the old-fashioned 'modern' gossip and the 'postmodern' gossip of the young.

COMING ON STAGE IN BRAČ

In 2000, I bought a dilapidated stone house in the small village of Murvica on the south side of the island of Brač. As a foreigner of Slovenian nationality, 30 years young and female, I immediately became embroiled in all sorts of innuendos, insinuations and gossip typical of a small patriarchal environment when confronted with a newcomer, a single blond female nonetheless: where is her husband, where did she get the money, how many apartments will she build on the property, what is with this German shepherd dog of hers? It is common knowledge to expect “rural inhabitants as inclined to respond with suspicion when diversity is introduced into the community” (Haugen & Villa, 2006, 213), but I did not expect the prejudices embedded in gossip and hearsay to persist for so long. To tell the truth, the natives still think there’s something shady about me. When visiting, the first question after the formal greeting and casual offer of a drink is always ‘what’s new in the village’. This vaguely refers to one’s own circumstances, but is more focused on who is coming to the village, when, and if there is any news from the descendants of the village who only come in the summer. The old people are mainly inquiring about the health of their generation, the younger ones are curious about new romantic relationships and when everyone is coming for their summer vacation. Owing to living next to one of the most beautiful beaches in the Mediterranean, the Golden cape (*Zlatni rat*), the everyday life of the islanders is sharply divided into the tourist season and the rest of the year. Tourism has grown exponentially since the Croatian War of Independence in 1991–1995. Brač counted 154,746 overnight stays in 1995 and 590,105 in 1997 (Kuveždić, 1999), 1,212,00 in 2012 and 1,505,000 in 2022 (Ministarstvo turizma RH, 2023). In 2000, the municipality of Bol contributed with 342,877 overnight stays (Splitsko-Dalmatinska Županija, 2023) and in 2011 with 442,655 (Državni zavod za statistiku RH, 2012) and in 2022 with 499,480 overnight stays (Splitsko-Dalmatinska Županija, 2023).

During the height of the tourist season, it is all hands on deck. Children of primary school age are mostly left to their own devices, those in secondary school help in the tourist industry, if there is one, they are expected to contribute to the family business. The work of the family offspring is largely underpaid, as it is seen as a contribution to their own inheritance or is done for the sake of good family relations. In the off-season, the younger generation does not participate in any of the social or entrepreneurial events; the traditional weakly bowling (*balote*), wine and oil harvesting are considered activities of the older men, the carnival and Christmas fair should only involve women and children of school age. The unemployed youth, and local high school students, either hang around idly gossiping, or they are endlessly glued to one popular streaming network or another. Either way, they take delight in being deviant.

It has taken me over 20 years to become privy to the islanders’ most sensitive issues: wealth, well-being, work habits, love life and pedigree. It is not automatically acquired by buying a plot of land or a house in a village, by participating in the grape or olive harvest, or by registering your residence, nor does or marrying a local help. Idle life in the village, permeated with casual nagging about the weather in times off tourist season and especially in times of crisis, does. In my case, the village fire contributed a little, in 2020–2021 my stay the whole coronavirus episode did the rest. Only then could I hear a gossip being introduced with “I can tell you; you are one of us”. Dwelling upon who is ‘us’ in that statement for quite some time, I realized that I was let in a glimpse into the most exclusive, elite, precious and valuable identity of the locals, the identity that trumps all other social networks, economic standing and political influence, the identity of ‘born here’. Even the natives may frown upon this blood-and-soil mentality, but the principle of birth they claim either tacitly or openly, gives one the right to stand above conventions and rules, moral or otherwise. Written and unwritten laws of the community no longer apply: if the catch is good, the fishermen offer it to you before they take it to market, you are given access to home-grown food that is only bartered and never sold, you are allowed to visit unannounced, you may pick wild asparagus and capers in the scrubby no-man’s land, a store or petrol pump can be opened for you outside working hours, you even have the right to disobey traffic signs, to no longer be judged for having an unconventional romantic engagement, or a dog. To have equal or at least comparable standing in a ‘born here’ gossip group, one must have extensive genealogical knowledge of the prerequisite of that group, its ancestors. Never gossiped about in any other social settings or belittled to other solidarity groups, the tales about ancestors, whether dead or alive, are told to legitimize, verify, and underscore the current state of affairs. Like everyone else, ancestors cannot escape bad reputation. Most of the gossip revolves around them being attributed undeserved bulk of land in the post-World War II agrarian reform, or that they let the land become overgrown with brushwood so that it is no longer of any use, that they favoured one child at the expense of another, that they gained or lost their wealth through shady sexual escapades, or that they simply drank themselves to death.

Be that as it may, the law of gossip formulated by anthropologists a long time ago still applies: “The more exclusive the social group is, the more will its members indulge in gossip and scandal about one another. And the more persistently will they repeat the same gossip again and again and again without getting bored” (Gluckman, 1963, 315).

Since the vineyards are the most prized and distinguishable assets, the first interaction a greenhorn into a village life gets with members of the elite group of ‘born here’ locals, is the annual grape harvest. This

occasion also provides an insight into the attitudes of the participants, their mindsets, evaluation of social groups and an initial distinction between different gossip solidarity groups.

The 12 km of coastline from Bol to Farska Bay (Murvica being in the middle) is considered the best location for *Plavac Mali*, a very traditional, highly prized and extravagantly high-priced sort of wine. There is an unconfirmed legend circulating far and wide that the Austro-Hungarian rule (1867–1918) forbade this strip of land to be planted with anything other than vineyards due to the perfect soil and abundant sunshine. Truth be told, the olive groves in the south of the island were only planted after the Second World War and are located on rocky plateaus away from the sea.

The traditional grapes hand-harvesting brings together family and relatives, neighbours and/or other acquaintances, for whom reciprocity is obligatory and who are rewarded daily pay (*žurnata*, Ital. *giornata*) in wine or *prošek*, most famous Croatian dessert wine. In the last two decades, they have been joined by an increasing number of hired workers who are paid in cash. The vineyard owners start preparing for the harvest at least a month in advance, bringing baskets, scissors, knives, and sacks. During their almost daily visits to the vineyard, they nervously measure the sugar content of the grapes and feverishly lament about the possibility of rain, which would postpone the harvest and ruin all logistical efforts. On the day the harvest begins, the owners arrive first with their immediate male family and relatives, bringing the alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. Then the majority is assigned to picking and some of the most physically fit men are given the task of carrying the sacks once they are filled with the grapes. The chatter begins by shamelessly mocking those who are absent but should have been helping for one reason or another. Older men who were ‘born here’, are either experienced pickers or own their own vineyards, are highly revered and most welcome, even if they are very opinionated on all issues: they habitually complain that the harvest started too early in a year and too late in a day; the grapes, they say, have not yet reached their full potential and the work did not start at dawn as it should have. In their opinion, work should start punctually at dawn and not an hour later, as it is normally the case. After that, their discussions focus on the stupidity of other vineyard owners who have already harvested earlier in the harvest season. Those old men do most of the gossip and things get particularly intense when it comes to the sugar content of the various vineyards. The higher the sugar content, the higher the value and price, but the owners of such a successful harvest are never praised for the success. A good vintage is attributed to the position of the vineyard and the age of the plants – the closer to the sea and the older, the better. Experienced older men do not trust the refractometer

for sugar content, they are convinced that they can better predict the sugar content in the grapes based on the presence of wasps (high sugar content) or the presence of worms (low sugar content). This ability is supposedly only granted to the ‘born here’ owners of local vineyards, although anyone can see if there are wasps or worms, and if the scissors are getting sticky because of the high sugar content, but no one dares to intervene. There are many more things that bother the grape pickers. They complain most about the weeds that overgrow the vineyard and about vines that are uneven or not tied up. Leaving the newcomer none the wiser, as all of the above is also typical for old, most cherished vineyards. The biggest shame that can befall the owner during harvest is when there are not enough baskets or when the sacks pile up before they are loaded into the truck that takes them to the owner’s winery or to the one winery that buys from the local grape growers in Bol. A certain amount of respect is only paid to the owner if one managed to successfully complete the harvest without having to pay in cash for hired labour, if there were enough sacks and baskets, and if there was enough food for everyone to even take some home and enough drinks for everyone to get drunk. Traditionally, women did not take part, only when labour became scarce in the last two decades, were they allowed to join in. This does not apply to the women from the owner’s immediate family. They are still at home preparing lunch for the midday break, but their absence is nonetheless frowned upon by the other female participants in the harvest. Lunch is taken in the shade in the vineyards; it is a scandal if it reaches the grape pickers cold. As a rule, the owners do not take part in either the harvesting or lunch because they are too busy emphasizing their crucial role, organizing, and looking worried and burdensome. The owners thus engage in what is called “impression management” (Barth, 1966, 3), a selective communication in which what is considered relevant is over-communicated. Vineyard owners try hard to generate the so-called skipper effect (Pálsson & Durrenberger, 1990), but to no avail. The successful harvest and the subsequent high sugar content of the grapes are attributed to the ancestors who left them a good vineyard, the position of the vineyard and the amount of rainfall in the previous months. In a way, this is comparable to the local valuation of good olive oil, the production of which has been growing steadily on the south side of the island since the Second World War. It is believed that the laziest owners of the olive groves produce the best oil, as their disinterest in the olive groves is the best guarantee that the fruit has not been treated with chemicals.

Another law proposed by anthropologists, which is typically Mediterranean, was blatantly obvious: the more honourable the social group, the more shameless (Busatta, 2006).

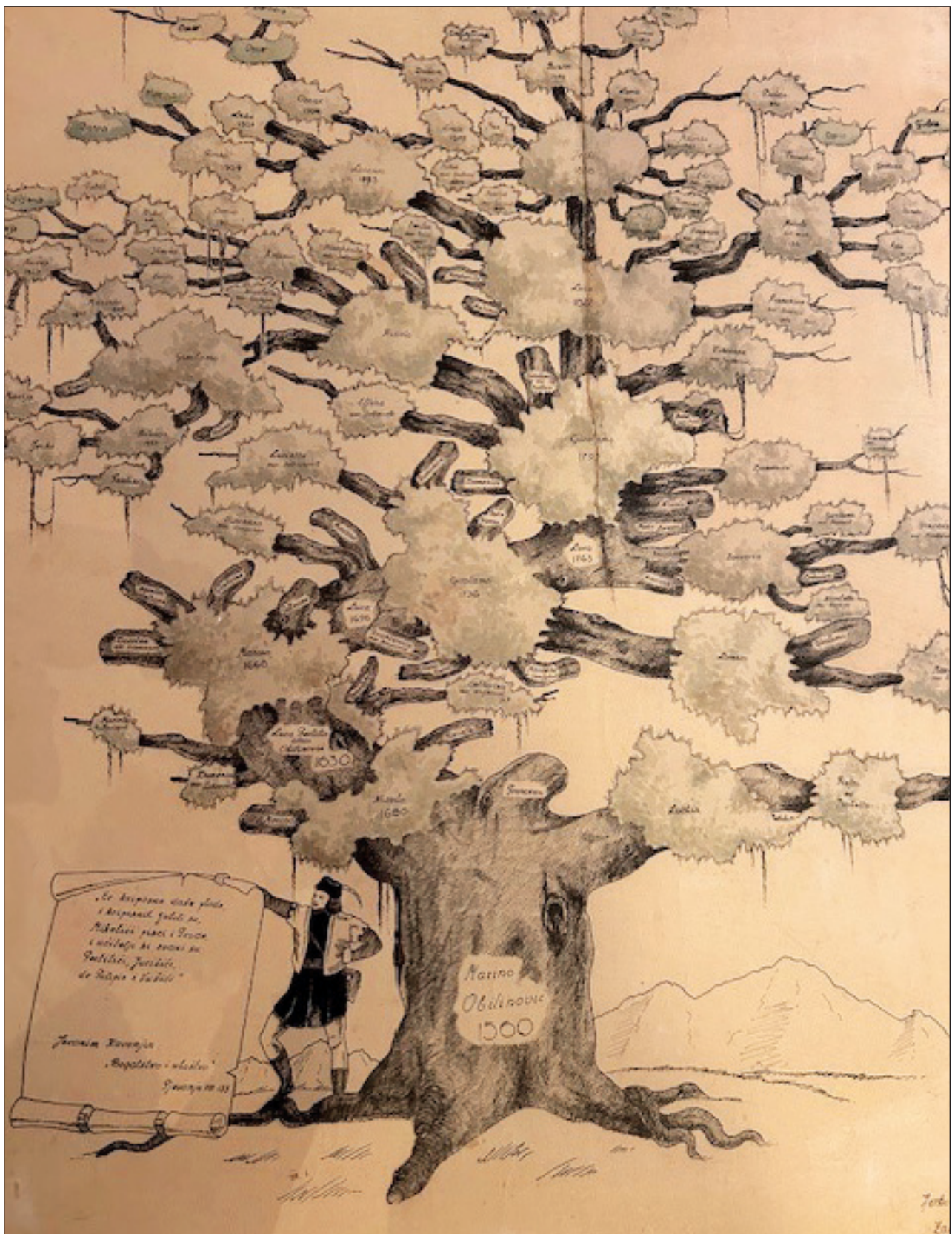


Figure 2: Genealogical tree of the oldest family from Murvica (personal archive).

HONOR AND REPUTATION OF SOLIDARITY
GROUPS OF GOSSIPED AND GOSSIPERS

Most prestige is attributed to the above-mentioned group of the 'born here', where 'here' refers to the whole island of Brač. All others are assigned to one or another derogatory category. When people are being assigned to diverse categories, there is a general, cross-culturally established classification according to the principle of gender, generation, and affiliation to moral philosophy.

In terms of gender differences, most of the literature suggests that gossip as a function of social control "puts pressure on women to act in certain ways and not challenge the traditional gender roles" (Haugen & Villa, 2006, 214). The exact opposite is true for the younger population in my study sample. The younger the respondents are, the more they emphasize that male norms are more burdensome, strict, and non-negotiable. This might have to do with the confusing gender anticipations of the new masculinities of the 21st century (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) invading an otherwise very patriarchal community, or it could be an extension of the same paternalistic attitude that women can do no wrong simply because nothing good is expected of them.

While they are gossiped about, the young people of Bol and Murvica are attributed the same traits that characterize Gen Z (born in the mid-1990s) throughout the Western world. Many synonyms are used in the literature to describe this generation, and they are fairly accurate in describing some of its characteristics: Facebook generation, C generation (C stands for either connected, clicking or computerized), and iGeneration to name but few (Dolot, 2018). Its social participation is seen to be limited to online social media and Internet forums. Gen Z members consider themselves proactive and engaged, while others see them as a bunch of aloof and opinionated couch activists who cannot really critically evaluate the social and environmental issues on which they so freely express their opinions. In the public opinion, they are sharply divided into the insecure ones, who are reluctant to leave home, to get a steady job; and standoffish ones, who have left the island to study and pursue careers abroad. The division, fitting the criterion of mobility, roughly corresponds to the gender split: young men stay at home, which is justified by the fact that they are supposed to inherit the family's land, young women are accused of being ambitious, which is supposedly due to the prevailing cultural discourse of exaggerated feminism. Due to the prevalence of multitasking, i.e., being present in the real (public) and virtual (private) worlds at the same time, they are judged for having a short attention span and an addiction to instant and constant access to mobile devices. Attributed to the values of child-centred society, they

are blamed of having inflated narcissistic tendencies, a grandiose sense of self, materialistic preferences, a malignant ego, and a general lack of empathy (Lasch, 1978). All in all, rumour has it, their purpose in life is to have fun, and that they despise jobs they find 'unattractive', which refers to any manual or low-paying work.

According to moral philosophy, the locals are divided by religious denominations, only one of which is commendable: Roman Catholicism. There are 'the churchgoers', who are in the majority; they deem themselves to be permeated with decent traditional family values. On the other side, there are 'the communists', whose reputation strongly corresponds to the popular label of cultural Marxism (Bolton, 2017): they are class-conscious, liberal, atheist, anti-capitalist and fierce advocates of public sector accessibility.

And then there is a locally specific taxonomy of social groups with its own nomenclature: *furešti*, *vlaži*, *uhljebi*, *filipinci* and of course there are *turisti*. Ever so many of them.

First of all, there are the *furešti* (from the Italian *forestiere*, foreigners). They are locals but were not born on the island. They are developers either from Croatia or abroad, who have acquired some property, either an old house or a plot of land in the immediate vicinity of the locality. They are most despised when they come from the Croatian capital Zagreb. They are accused of exploiting the beauty and tranquillity of the small town by the crystal-clear sea at the expense of the local community and are seen as the main cause of overcrowding, overpopulation, pollution and the corruption of both, the traditional way of life and the local political structures in the pursuit of their economic interests. Official reports from the municipality of Bol municipality reflect the local attitude:

The investors based outside the municipality of Bol (and most often the island of Brač), build apartments for temporary residence, in which no one lives for most of the year. Therefore, jobs are not created, space is usurped, natural potentials and resources are harmed, there are no additional supporting facilities, the vision of a small Dalmatian town is changing with none or minimal benefits for the local community, which is most often reflected in one-time charge for the acquisition of land. (Turistička zajednica Općine Bol, 2022)

Another category with a bad reputation and frequent unified (and unifying) gossip are parvenus, the newcomers either from the Dalmatian mainland (Zagora) or from regions of the former common Yugoslav state. Derogatively called *vlaži*, they are emigrants to the island who usually came for seasonal work in the tourist industry and stayed on the island

for marriage arrangements or the quick acquisition of new wealth, or both. They are considered primitive, ignorant, pretentious, and boorish as they do not have the proper native pedigree but act as if they are entitled to the same privileges as the native population with an island ancestry. For example, the *parvenus* are considered self-righteous because they effectively privatize public access to the sea, which is prohibited by law but done by the 'born here' locals. The few who have not enriched themselves by building tourist facilities, such as plumbers, electricians, or cashiers, are spared the harshest judgement.

The most recent social group that functions as a well cohesive cluster are the migrant workers from Asia, named *filipinci* (Filipinos), whether they come from the Philippines or elsewhere. In the first two decades of this century, seasonal workers continued to come from inland Croatia, mainly from the Dalmatian Highlands, Zagora, and the eastern region of Slavonia, or from other former republics of the former Yugoslavia, especially Bosnia and Serbia. Since Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013, the traditional work force poll got steadily depleted and seasonal recruitment has become increasingly difficult. Due to immigration to the wealthiest European countries, Croatia has lost an estimated 350,000 jobs and one million inhabitants, or almost 20%, since before its independence war began in 1991, 396,360 of them in the last ten years. This led to national legislative changes and the abolition of work quotas and temporary residence permits for non-EU citizens in 2021. The formerly non-existent Asian community, employed mainly in low-paid physical work, is held in high regard. They are considered modest, hardworking, humble, and docile. Truth be told, when talking about them to their peers, locals usually start with 'everyone says they are no good and cause troubles, but they are really okay, they are good and polite'. Such unwarranted introductory remarks inevitably resonate with what is known as Freudian negation (Freud, 1925), in which the speaker's actual but unwelcomed attitudes are shielded by an unprovoked negation, revealing racist attitudes. This group, which engages in manual labour and takes odd jobs with low incomes, is seemingly comparable to a segment of *vlaji* emigrants. The difference, however, is that the *filipinci* are not considered a marriage material, which, again, is a clear expression of racism.

And then, of course, there are the tourists, who come in large numbers and whose numbers are steadily increasing. The tourism sector's share of GDP in Croatia was estimated at 19.5% in 2019, 8.9% in the corona year 2020, 19.9% in 2021 and 19.5% in 2022 (Ministarstvo turizma i sporta RH, 2023). It is forecasted to rise continuously by a total of 1.5 percentage points per year between 2023 and 2028. The share of GDP is estimated to be at least 26% in 2028 (Statista, 2023).

According to the local tourist board, Bol with its 1656 inhabitants had 8192 registered tourist accommodations in 2022 and has been visited by over 100,000 tourists annually in the last ten years, with the exception of the corona year 2020 (Turistička zajednica Općine Bol, 2022).

The village of Murvica does not have its own official statistics, but until 2000 there was not a single registered accommodation facility. By connecting the village to the municipality's drinking water network in 2010, the village transformed into having over 40 rental apartments with around 180 beds to date. The sanitation supply chain is currently still under construction and is being financed by the EU Cohesion Fund. The locals 'born here' regard the latest developments as progressive, while everyone else blames them of irrevocably erasing any semblance of village life.

Tourists seasonally and temporarily level existing hierarchical differences or local social groups by uniting them in their attitudes towards and gossip about them. They are considered too frivolous in their use of apartments' furnishings, too ostentatious and stay too short to make their stay optimally profitable. Everyone is very nostalgic about the good old days when Bol used to attract family tourism, while lately predominate single guests or groups of young people staying only a few days; the situation worsening with onset of online platforms (e.g., Airbnb, Vrbo, Booking.com) and the fashionable so-called island hopping. Compared to 1997, when the average tourist spent 7.2 days in Bol (Kuveždić, 1999), according to the latest available statistics in 2021 it was 5.2 days (Turistička zajednica Općine Bol, 2022).

Be that as it may, tourists are considered fair game. If you talk to restaurant owners and various suppliers of local products (wine, cheese, fish, oil), about 30 years ago there was an unspoken fixed arrangement for the income of the restaurants: one third of the earnings went to the supplies, one third to the salaries of the employees, one third was the profit of the owners. In the 2023 tourist season, according to one informant, the target ratio of supply costs to owners' profit was 1:7, price of the local products increased exponentially, by several hundred percent even, while employees' salaries barely increased by about 30%, with owners chipping them off by using family labour from far and wide and Asian workers, who are still satisfied with being paid less. So-called freeriding on the tourism wave is not seen as shameful or norm-violating behaviour (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012); rather, islanders consider it a privilege that belongs to those who were 'born here' and for which *parvenus* have sacrificed themselves. There-is-a-sucker-born-every-minute mentality prevails in the local community. Only a few old-fashioned entrepreneurs with decades of tradition and native

pedigree are exempt from this general attitude. On the other hand, everyone, tourists, residents of the Croatian hinterland and the mass media, loathes united members of the entrepreneurial hospitality industry. Here is a typical excerpt from news website from 22. 2. 2024, in which a restaurant owner from the coastal region of Croatia laments about the difficulties of hiring seasonal workers: “I cannot give a waiter a 3000 euro salary” (Index.hr, 2024). The reactions are strong and representative:

have you been puffing yourself up and bragging over the past few years? Have you paid the minimum wage? Have you been aloof to workers and told them there are many at the unemployment office if they don't want to work? Did you buy a BMW and go skiing? Did you demand knowledge, experience and a command of three languages? Was it important to you that the worker had a stable income all year round? Either you pay or you shut up... who cares... Import a Bushman from Africa to be your waiter. (Index.hr, 2024)

And another one:

I've been a seasonal worker for many years! Nobody steals more than restaurants and cafés; I'd rather not tell you about the selection of ideas for issuing non-fiscalized invoices, which still have JIR [jedinstveni identifikator računa – the unique identifier of the invoice op. K.Š.]. There is no facility in which 50, 60, 70% was not cashed illegally earned and the rest with proper fiscalization. Last year, due to circumstances, I had to work in the hospitality industry in a hotel for a while, I have university diploma, but I could not find work in my profession. My salary was 1000 euros of which 300 euros was black money, without tips because it was not a La Cart, 7 days a week without a day off.... Never again! A person literally feels like a slave. I have a lot of experience with the tourist seasons, I have had better and worse salaries, but this last year the restaurant industry completely disgusted me and let me tell you, no one was stingier with the salaries than the restaurateurs and they stole MILLIONS for all to see. I have no sympathy for them at all, thieves, honour to the exceptions if they exist. (Index.hr, 2024)

Another distinctive category of gossiped are those who have managed to get a job in the public sector; in Bol, employees of primary and secondary school and kindergarten are exempt. This category is called *uhljebi*, an untranslatable word that refers to a particularly foul kind of social parasite, a shameless

person without any merit, unqualified and unable to do the work for which they are paid, and who only got employed because of political or family connections.

In Bol, as the gossip goes, *uhljebi* are employed in an office of the municipality, and the public Communal services *Grabov rat*. Since 60% of employees in the municipality of Bol are temporary or seasonal workers (Ministarstvo turizma i sporta RH, 2023), jobs in public offices are highly sought after because they offer a rare opportunity for stable employment. It does not matter how competent you really are to get a job in the public sector, the rumour is always the same – you are well connected and supposedly deserve to be fiercely gossiped about, ridiculed and belittled. This is a very Croatian rumour, not specific to Bol or even the island, albeit on the northern side, in the capital Supetar with 4,325 inhabitants, the moral discretization of officials is not so taken-for-granted.

The unifying principle of all solidarity groups, which is also another well-known anthropological law, is that everyone lies (Metcalf, 2002) but there is another commonality in the conversations of the islanders that is not so cross-culturally universal – in Brač everyone complains about everything all the time: the annoying weather, the poor quality of tourists, the large quantity of tourists, the high prices, the local government, the lonely winters, the summer crowds, unpleasant neighbours, uncooperative relatives, the tasteless nightlife, the flamboyant gender-benders, the tacky outfits, the inconvenient opening hours of offices, corrupt dignitaries, the standoffish hospitality industry, the nonchalant youth, the niggling old folks, the fuzzy catamaran timetable, the lack of parking spaces, the reckless drivers, the incompetent national soccer team, the ungrateful children, the spoiled teenagers, the greedy employers, the lazy employees, dog shits, feral cats. Everything bothers the locals, and they freely admit it would be best if vacationers just sent them the money but stayed at home. And they are not joking.

GOSSIP AS A GIFT-GIVING

In general, the literature on gossiping as a form of gift-giving is sparse and outdated. Besnier very briefly mentions Maussian gift-giving as a possible analytical paradigm of gossiping, and Bailey was the first to point out the relationship between the micropolitics of reputation and gift-giving practices (Besnier, 2009, 118–119; Bailey, 1971).

Is there a similarity between the exchange of material gifts (commodities) and the exchange of ideas (symbolic goods)? Can one of the most famous and accomplished analysis of a total social fact in anthropology, the Maussian gift-giving, be compared to gossiping? Or, to put it differently: what are the conditions under which ideas may circulate like gifts? This,



Figure 3: Gossip setting waiting for full shade (personal archive).

at least, is the logic implicit in Mauss' two introductory questions: what law of legality and self-interest compels the gift received to be inevitably returned? What power lies in the gifted object that causes the recipient to pay it back? (Mauss, 2010).

The main part of Mauss' theory of the gift is his analysis of the concept of *Hau*, the spiritual force, the main essence, and value of a gift (Mauss, 2010). *Hau* is responsible for the fundamental characteristics associated with gift-giving: the necessity to return a gift received, the obligation to give and the obligation to receive gifts. The character of gift-giving is only seemingly free and unconditional, but at its core it is obligatory and driven by interest. Giving encourages giving. What is the rule that determines the exchange and reciprocation of gifts in societies? According to Mauss, every gift carries a *Hau*. The gifted thing is not dead, "in the gift, the living forest of the giver, his land" (Mauss, 2010, 14) resides. To receive a gift means "to receive part of his essence, his soul" (Mauss, 2010, 31). On the other hand, *Hau* brings with it the absolute obligation to return the gifts, under the threat of losing social standing, reputation, and the source of wealth.

Lévi-Strauss in his Introduction to the work of Marcel Mauss, elaborates further: *Hau* "is not the root cause of exchanges; it is the conscious form of the concept, which expresses an unconscious necessity" (Levi-Strauss, 1982, 44).

Reading this, the gossip practices inevitably come to mind: it is suggested in the literature and confirmed by my interviewers, that the social group is willing to punish, ostracize or be offended by an individual who did not share the gossip (Wilson et al., 2000). The exchange of gossip seems to function as the *Hau* of communication, an empty speech, which denotative value is completely suspended and irrelevant. The surplus value created by the symbolic gifting of gossip is the survival of the gifting community itself. Gossip, the giving, receiving, and returning of gossip are necessary to maintain at least the fiction of at least a 'liquid' (Giddens, 1990) community.

AN ALTERNATIVE HYPOTHESIS: GOSSIP AS BULLSHIT

*One of the most salient features of our culture
is that there is so much bullshit.*
(Harry Frankfurt)

Developed from the linguistic theory of speech acts and analytical philosophy, "bullshit is a statement made without regard to whether the hearer comes to believe it, or without regard to whether it is actually true or false" (Easwaran, 2023, 8). The term gained popularity when anthropologist David Graeber published the book *Bullshit jobs: A theory* based on his 2013 essay *On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs* in 2018, which immediately caused a sensation.

A bullshit job is a "form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case" (Graeber, 2018, 9–10). Bullshit job does not equal a shitty job, as the latter has a positive impact on society, while bullshit jobs, by employees' own admission (Graeber, 2018, 14), have no positive social value, moreover, their disappearance would most probably make the world a better place. Graeber provides an impressive qualitative research scheme and compelling statistics: he claims that more than half of working time in American offices is spent on bullshitting, while 37% of British citizens and 40% of Dutch workers said they believe their jobs have no reason to exist (Graeber, 2018, 24).

The percentages skyrocket when gossipers are asked to evaluate in this respect their own gossip and gossip in general. The consensus is unanimous; the world would be a much better place without gossip, albeit a bit boring. Hardly anyone would contest that gossip is pointless and unjustified. Old-fashioned, 'modern' gossip, on the other hand, was "a discourse predicated on trust, anonymity, and the effective existence of a community among which informal discourse may circulate safely" (Monot, 2020, 18), postmodern gossip has none of these prerogatives. Furthermore, there used to be unwritten rules: firstly, that you don't 'kiss and tell', secondly, that the people you gossip with are not to be gossiped about in other social contexts, and thirdly, that the content of gossip was confined to clearly distinguishable circles of either family members, close friends or acquaintances, and those boundaries should not be transgressed. There was also a clear rivalry between recognized solidarity groups of gossipers (Mayer, 1966), and the information motive was the most prevalent reason for instigating gossip (Beersma & van Kleef, 2012).

Although gossip, viewed through an anthropological lens, still fulfils many of the familiar purposes and functions, in its postmodern version it is neither positive nor negative, it is neither confidential nor informative, nor does it contain any important moral lesson, and it is definitely devoid of any reference whatsoever to truth. As such, it is mainly bullshit. Bullshit is a speech act (Frankfurt, 1986; Easwaran, 2023) in which the speaker holds neither sincere nor insincere attitudes. An honest speaker means what is said, and also believes it. A liar means it but does not believe it. A bullshitter does neither.

When bullshitting, we are only acting out, playing the role in our own scenario of ourselves, managing the impression we have of ourselves for ourselves. Information gathering and validation,

credibility of material, honesty, reputation of all involved, etc. become secondary to social entertainment, narcissistic pleasure, and the enjoyment of acting out. What you do tell is irrelevant as long as you are telling it. Truth gave way to opinions, argument-based debate succumbed to user experience, facts and fakes are becoming indistinguishable. And nobody cares.

CONCLUSION

All the local solidarity groups mentioned above, whose participants are connected by gossip, have lost their integrative potential in recent decades due to the loosening of the prerogatives of good, old-fashioned gossip. They all view themselves “as disembedded from local culture, tradition and place” (Giddens, 1990). The literature (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) also points to institutionalized individualism in post-industrial society as the main culprit for the de-traditionalization of collective group identities, whereby “authorities such as kin, family, religion, class, and gender systems have been weakened” (Haugen & Villa, 2006, 211). The truth is that gossip has always been treated with caution, but in the post-truth times we live in, combined with the emergence of new technologies,

new identities, and new realities, it can be expected to transform further in its social functions, cultural value, and critical scientific evaluation.

The limitations of the present study are manifold. As the study was conducted in a specific setting of a post-socialist society in transition in terms of values, identity politics and technological progress in combination with an increasingly industrialized touristic region, the results would benefit from a comparative insight into an milieu not affected by this gigantic leap in social change, as well as an economy more representative of the social organization of a (post)industrial (post)modern megapolis. Quantitative methods, questionnaire surveys and statistical data on the characteristics of generational samples could also be informative to confirm or refute the findings of the present study. Given the IT revolution of the last two decades, it would be instructive to comparatively assess online gossiping and the diversification of gossip groups, especially for distinct and cyber-savvy Generation Z, born between the mid-1990s and mid-2010s.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to my fellow gossipers and apologetic for spilling the beans.

SENČNA STRAN GOVORIC: ANTROPOLOŠKA PERSPEKTIVA OPRAVLJANJA
NA DALMATINSKEM OTOKU

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POVZETEK

Namen te študije je raziskati o čem teče beseda, ko ogovarjamo, in razmejiti solidarnostne skupine tistih, ki so akterji ali tarče ogovarjanja med prebivalci občine Bol na južni strani otoka Brača v srednji Dalmaciji na Hrvaškem. Uporabljena metoda je osrednja etnografska metoda opazovanja z udeležbo. Po začetnem vpogledu v vzorce in specifične družbenega vedenja je opaziti več značilnosti, skupin in scenarijev ogovarjanja. V nadaljevanju je bilo izvedenih 73 neformalnih pogovorov, ki so jim sledili polstrukturirani intervjuji in globoko druženje s 36 udeleženci, od katerih jih je bilo 16 mlajših od 35 let in 8 starejših od 70 let. Vzorec je obsegal 14 žensk in 22 moških. Zbrano gradivo je nadalje kontekstualizirano z relevantnimi fragmenti splošne družbene teorije in uporabnimi interpretativnimi posegi socialne in kulturne antropologije. Metoda gostobesednega opisa je uporabljena za dodatno ponazoritev gradiva. Članek predstavi lokalno specifično taksonomijo družbenih skupin s svojo nomenklaturo: »tu rojeni«, furešti, vlaji, uhljebi, Filipinci in turisti. V kontekstu ogovarjanja so predstavljene značilnosti spola, moralne filozofije ter generacijske značilnosti. Ugotovljeno je, da se ogovarjanje mladih epistemološko razlikuje od staromodnega ogovarjanja, ker v to vnaša postmoderne značilnosti bulšit dejavnosti par excellence.

Ključne besede: opravljanje, Brač, lokalne taksonomije, družbena stratifikacija, generacija Z, turizem

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