

Negative Reciprocity at the Rashō Gate: The Dynamics of Social Breakdown and the Role of the State

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Human interaction always unfolds within a framework of reciprocity. What changes is the shape the reciprocity takes. It can be positive or negative, a reciprocity of good actions – of kind words and kept promises, gifts and helping hands – or a reciprocity of bad actions: of insults and betrayals, theft and violence. Almost everyone would agree that positive reciprocity is preferable – in fact, social life is not possible without it – and yet, perhaps unexpectedly, it is also more fragile and vulnerable.

This vulnerability is ordinarily not visible, but it risks being exposed when disaster strikes. Beyond the immediate damage caused by an earthquake, typhoon or flood, there is the danger that the initial catastrophic event will be accompanied by a catastrophic breakdown of positive reciprocity and the emergence of a self-perpetuating cycle of negative reciprocity.

Akutagawa Ryunosuke describes this process with great acuity in his classic tale “Rashōmon.”²⁾ I will begin with this story because I believe it holds universal lessons that are equally applicable in other times and places. “Rashōmon” is set in Kyoto towards the end of the Heian Period, at a moment when the city has been successively ravaged by earthquakes, hurricanes, fires, and famine. The protagonist is a servant who has lost his job amid the general disaster. Cold and hungry with nowhere to go, he has taken refuge from the rain under the abandoned Rashō gate and is wondering how he can make it through the hopeless situation in which he finds himself. He keeps thinking that he will starve to death unless he is willing to do whatever it takes to survive. But he resists following this line of reasoning to its logical conclusion: that in order to survive, he must become a thief.

One might assume at this point that the story will be about the way catastrophic material circumstances oblige a formerly law-abiding man to enter upon a life of crime. But what really interests Akutagawa is the process by which the protagonist overcomes his internal resistance to robbing or stealing.³⁾ As we shall see, this process does not unfold exclusively within the man’s own psyche; it involves a social interaction – an interaction with a fellow creature who is just as desperate as he is.

When the servant climbs the steps to the top of the tower over the gate, he expects to find only the unclaimed bodies of the dead that he knows are often discarded there. In that forlorn place, he thinks, he will at least be free to sleep undisturbed. But he is startled to encounter someone else

already up there: an emaciated, “monkey-like” old woman who is busy plucking hairs from the head of a corpse. She pulls out the long strands of hair one by one, like a mama monkey carefully picking lice from the head of a baby monkey. At this ghoulish sight, the servant is seized with a revulsion against all forms of evil, a revulsion that reinforces his own desire not to commit evil deeds himself. To pull out the hair of the dead, for whatever reason, strikes him as an unforgivable sin. At that moment, the narrator says, if the servant were faced once more with the question of whether he should starve to death or become a thief, “he would probably have chosen starvation without the least regret.” Yet, only minutes later, he will change his mind – not because of any turn for the worse in his material circumstances, but as a result of listening to the monkey-like old woman justify her own behavior.

The woman explains that she is taking the hair to make a wig she can sell. Perhaps it is wrong to pull out the hairs of the dead, she says. But she notes in her defense that “these corpses up here – all of them” were hardly the sort of people who could object. Indeed, they “deserve what they get.” For example, the woman whose hair she was just plucking used to cut snakes into little pieces, dry them, and sell them at the headquarters of the palace guard as dried fish. Had she not died of disease in the epidemic, she would most likely still be doing the same thing today. The guards always said her dried fish tasted good. Where was the harm in that? She only did what she had to do to keep from starving to death... Just as I am doing what I have to do to keep from starving to death, the monkey-like old woman concludes. And she adds that the dead woman, who understood such situations of necessity, “would probably forgive me for what I’m doing to her too.”

As the servant listens, a change comes over him. “She would, eh?” he says mockingly. “You won’t blame me, then, for taking your clothes. That’s what *I* have to do to keep from starving to death.” And he strips the helpless crone of her kimono and steals off into the night.

What made the servant change his mind so quickly? Did he weigh the woman’s arguments and find them persuasive? It seems clear that he did not come to his decision through rational deliberation: “The servant was no longer debating whether to starve to death or become a thief. The way he felt now, the idea of starving to death was virtually unthinkable.” Rather than rethinking his position, the servant has simply *imitated* the monkey-like woman – he has imitated her as reflexively as if he were a monkey himself. He has imitated her just as she says that she was imitating the woman whose hair she was stealing.

That woman died in an epidemic, we are told. She did not transmit her illness to the old woman or the servant, but she transmitted something else that proves equally contagious: her lack of scruples, her willingness to cheat or steal in order to survive.⁴⁾ In a time of crisis, negative reciprocity can spread from one person to the next like a contagion. If one individual resorts to cheating or stealing, why should another not do so too? Isn’t such behavior only to be expected? The first person can hardly blame the second for acting in the same way. Indeed, the old woman seems to suggest that the dead woman whose hair she was plucking might positively approve of her actions. Since she “understood so well these things we have to do,” the old woman says, she

“would probably forgive me for what I’m doing to her, too.”

It is remarkable how the old woman contrives to transform an epidemic of negative reciprocity into something more positive. A subtle shift takes place over the course of her speech. At first she frames her callous treatment of the dead as constituting just retribution (negative reciprocity): “these people here deserve what they get.” But soon she presents the dead woman in a more flattering light, first defending her actions – “she only did what she had to do” – and then endowing her with an admirable propensity for understanding and forgiveness. How generous she is to let the old woman tear out her hair! As for the servant, he attributes the same generosity to the old woman, giving her the chance to be just as understanding and forgiving when he tears off her kimono. After all, one good turn deserves another...

Every detail in Akutagawa’s narrative is significant. It seems to me that we can understand the dead woman’s commercial activity as a metaphor for the behavior of the other characters. The dead woman repackaged her snake meat and passed it off as tasty fish. In the same way, the old woman and the servant repackage their treacherous behavior and pass it off as something more appetizing. They repackage negative reciprocity and pass it off as positive reciprocity.

Of course, we are not fooled. Akutagawa casts an ironic gaze on his characters. He does not want us to praise their generosity the way the soldiers praised the dead woman’s tasty fish. At the same time, though, the writer is letting us glimpse a deeper truth. Akutagawa’s story reveals a genuine parallel between negative and positive reciprocity. The content is different, but the structure is similar.

The reciprocity of actions, whether good or bad, rests on an underlying reciprocity of expectations. People are more likely to be generous when they expect others to be generous, and selfish when they expect others to be selfish. In stateless societies where the economy is based on gift exchange, people are generous to those in need because they know that others will be generous to them should they ever find themselves in need.

The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins cites many examples of such generalized positive reciprocity in his landmark study *Stone Age Economics*. He quotes from an account that missionaries to Tahiti wrote about the natives: “All are friendly and generous, even to a fault; they hardly refuse anything to each other if importuned.” All the Tahitians are generous because they all expect everyone else to be generous. Sahlins suggests that this portrait of native generosity may be too good to be true. However, the end of the quoted passage puts the generosity of the Tahitians in a somewhat less rosy light. It tells us what happens when a Tahitian fails to display the expected generosity to neighbors in need: “Should any man betray symptoms of incorrigible avariciousness and refuse to part with what he has in time of necessity, his neighbors would soon destroy all his property, and put him on a footing with the poorest, hardly leaving a house to cover his head.”⁵⁾

One must agree that this is a strong incentive to be generous: if you hold on to your goods selfishly and hoard them rather than distributing them to your neighbors, they will come to your house and destroy everything you have. This Tahitian example suggests that the threat of negative

reciprocity lurks beneath the surface of even the most generalized form of positive reciprocity. That is why, in a time of crisis, positive reciprocity can collapse so easily back into the negative form. It is why, in Akutagawa's story, negative reciprocity can itself be portrayed as a cruel parody of positive reciprocity.

The old woman in "Rashōmon" lives up to the expectations of her neighbors as assiduously as the Tahitians do. She defends her selfish behavior by arguing that no one could expect her to act otherwise – not the woman whose hair she is stealing, and not any of the other dead people in the tower. "These corpses up here – all of them – they were just the sort of people who wouldn't have minded," she says. *All of them* would have behaved the same way: this is generalized negative reciprocity. In such a bleak situation, it is dangerous for an individual to buck the trend. If you can't expect others to do the right thing, you risk ending up a loser unless you imitate them and put your own interest first. When everyone acts on the basis of negative expectations about everyone else, a vicious circle ensues.

Once negative expectations take hold, it is hard to transform them without outside intervention. The difficulty of repopulating New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina is a good example of this phenomenon. The residents of a devastated city can only be expected to come back and rebuild their ruined houses if they know that their neighbors will do the same. As long as everyone fears returning to a ghost town, no one will return, making the fear a self-fulfilling prophecy. I would argue that only the state has the power to help people escape this type of vicious circle by intervening from above.

Unfortunately, under President George W. Bush, help from the top was slow in coming. According to an insightful report filed at the time by journalist Peter Gosselin, "New Orleans appears almost entirely dependent on a bottom-up process of one individual's decision to rebuild piling atop another's until recovery becomes self-sustaining." But as a local congressman pointed out, "It does no good to stand up just one person or family, because there's nothing left where they once lived – no schools or grocery stores, doctors or banks, police stations or firetrucks."⁶⁾

No one will return to a neighborhood unless they can expect to find grocery stores to buy food and schools to send their children. But no one will open a school or grocery store unless they expect large numbers of people to return to the neighborhood. As economist Thomas Schelling told the same journalist, "It essentially is a problem of coordinating expectations. If we all expect each other to come back, we will. If we don't, we won't. But achieving this coordination in the circumstances of New Orleans seems impossible." More precisely, it is impossible if one relies on the market alone to solve the problem. "There is no market solution to New Orleans," Schelling declared.⁷⁾

Economist Paul Krugman agreed, and not only because the private sector can't provide flood protection or basic infrastructure. "Rebuilding is also blocked by a vicious circle of uncertainty," he wrote. "Business owners are reluctant to return to the gulf region because they aren't sure whether their customers and workers will return, too. And families are reluctant to return because they

aren't sure whether businesses will be there to provide jobs and basic amenities." The problem was that the authorities had failed to come up with a "credible reconstruction plan." Such a plan "could turn that vicious circle into a virtuous circle, in which everyone expects a regional recovery and, by acting on that expectation, helps that recovery come to pass." Otherwise, the loss of faith in a recovery of the devastated region could become a "self-fulfilling prophecy."⁸⁾

Krugman's analysis possesses a broader relevance. It is not only after a natural disaster such as Hurricane Katrina that a vicious circle of negative expectations prevents recovery. The same type of vicious circle blocks recovery in the case of an economic crisis with no natural origin. Businesses will be reluctant to hire and invest unless they can expect customers to continue buying their products, while their customers will be reluctant to spend money unless they can expect to continue working. The loss of faith in recovery becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy even though nobody intended this to happen. For this reason, an economic crisis seems to strike with the same uncontrolled, impersonal force as a natural disaster.

Writing in 1930, John Maynard Keynes warned that the world was living "in the shadow of one of the greatest economic catastrophes of modern history." Yet this catastrophe was of purely human making. "For the resources of Nature and men's devices are just as fertile and productive as they were... But to-day we have involved ourselves in a colossal muddle, having blundered in the control of a delicate machine, the working of which we do not understand."⁹⁾

I would argue that what has broken down in such a crisis is the machinery of reciprocity. Once negative reciprocity sets in, there is no way for the machine to get back on track by itself because there is no way to coordinate expectations among the millions of independent individual agents in the marketplace. Just as there was no market solution to the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina, there is no market solution to an economic crisis either.

In a modern market economy, it is the role of the state to act as the ultimate guarantor of positive reciprocity. The reason is that reciprocity in the sense of ongoing mutual obligations between individuals has, strictly speaking, no place in market exchange.¹⁰⁾ This is a crucial difference between market and gift economies. We cannot rely on the extended kin networks that support members of tribal societies when times are bad. To illustrate the functioning of such networks, let me take another example cited by Marshall Sahlins. Among the Bemba, a Bantu tribe studied by Audrey Richards, if "a man's crops are destroyed by some sudden calamity, or if he has planted insufficient for his needs, relatives in his own village may be able to help him by giving him baskets of grain or offering him a share in their meals."¹¹⁾

Thus, when catastrophe strikes an individual, he may expect to survive thanks to the generosity of relatives in his village who are better off than he is. But what happens when catastrophe strikes an entire village at the same time? Do people in neighboring villages that are better off chip in to help? The Bemba are apparently quite generous about sharing food. When they hear about dire hunger in another village, do they dispatch massive amounts of food aid to alleviate the suffering in the name of social justice? No, that is not how things work in a tribal context. If a

whole village has suffered the same calamity, “such as a locust swarm or a raider elephant, the householder will move himself and his family to live with other kinsmen in an area where food is less scarce.”¹²⁾

In other words, the solution is always the same. If an individual has no relatives who can help him in his own village, then he must leave his home and move to a different village where he does have relatives with enough food to go around. And if everyone in a given village suffers a food shortage at the same time, then everyone must disperse in different directions, following the paths of kinship. In modern society, positive reciprocity no longer follows the paths of kinship and traditional bonds of solidarity. When we think today about our collective responsibility towards the victims of a catastrophe, we refer to an abstract notion of social justice precisely because we do not have the concrete obligations to help the needy that one finds in tribal societies.

The Tikopia, a Pacific island people studied by Raymond Firth, have a suggestive expression to describe the sharing of food in fulfillment of traditional obligations. When food becomes scarcer, households closely related through kinship ties “link ovens” (*tau umu*), “each drawing upon its own stock of food and then sharing in the work of the oven and in a common meal.”¹³⁾ The modern form of scarcity defined by Paul Dumouchel as “the social construction of indifference to the misfortunes of others”¹⁴⁾ is foreign to the Tikopia. However, when hurricanes ravaged the island, provoking a serious famine, even the Tikopia experienced a partial breakdown of positive reciprocity and the emergence of negative reciprocity in the form of stealing and hoarding.

Not unlike the characters in “Rashōmon,” the Tikopia tried to keep up appearances and put a positive veneer on uncustomarily negative behavior. They still gave visitors to their home a polite welcome at the height of the crisis. “But while in matters of hospitality all the *forms* of etiquette continued to be maintained throughout the period of famine,” Firth observes, “its *substance* radically altered. No longer was food actually shared with visitors. Moreover, after food had been cooked it was... concealed – sometimes even locked up in a box.”¹⁵⁾

Keynes demonstrated that hoarding – or excess saving – is an equally decisive element in modern economic crises. If people keep their money locked up in a box rather than spending it on consumption or capital investment, they aggravate the crisis. In better times, saving is a virtue, but not when unemployment is high. In those conditions, Keynes showed, saving can only increase the number of the jobless. Moreover, it sets off a dangerous chain reaction, for “when a man is thrown out of work in this or any other way, his diminished spending power causes further unemployment amongst those who would have produced what he can no longer afford to buy. And so the position gets worse and worse in a vicious circle.”¹⁶⁾

The servant in “Rashōmon” was not hungry because his stock of food had been destroyed in one of the earthquakes or fires that struck Kyoto. He was hungry because he had been thrown out of work. Before he entered the vicious circle of negative reciprocity described by Akutagawa and robbed the old woman of her coat, he was already a victim of the vicious circle of negative reciprocity analyzed by Keynes. Of course, the participants in this vicious circle commit no crime.

They are not purposely doing harm to their fellows. Like many political leaders in our own era, they may even be convinced that a firm commitment to saving and austerity is always intrinsically virtuous. The vicious character of the negative reciprocity is not as visible this time, and yet it is just as real.

Speaking to a British radio audience during the Great Depression, Keynes tried to bring the nature of this vicious circle home to his listeners by addressing them directly and spelling out the unintended consequences of their actions. “The best guess I can make is that whenever you save five shillings, you put a man out of work for a day.”¹⁷⁾ The more money is saved, the more people are hurt. Take the extreme case, Keynes said. “Suppose we were to stop spending our incomes altogether, and were to save the lot.” What would happen then?

Why, every one would be put out of work. And before long we should have no incomes to spend. No one would be a penny the richer, and the end would be that we should all starve to death – which would surely serve us right for refusing to buy things from one another, for refusing to take in one another’s washing, since that is how we all live.¹⁸⁾

Rather disconcertingly, Keynes presents his doomsday scenario as a matter of just retribution. Not only would we starve to death, *it would serve us right*. This judgment may seem harsh. It recalls the initial comment made by the old woman about the corpses in the tower: “these people here deserve what they get.” In effect, Keynes is framing the situation as a dramatic choice between two forms of reciprocity. Hoarding means refusing to sustain one another’s livelihood in a deadly spiral of negative reciprocity that is bound to end badly for all concerned.

Conversely, when we spend our money, we do more than simply buy things – we buy things *from one another*. Keynes could not say more clearly that the modern market economy is founded on positive reciprocity. Buying things from one another is just as much a form of exchange as taking in each other’s wash, but it is a very impersonal form of exchange that depends on the smooth functioning of the market as a whole. At that level, it is impossible for individuals to coordinate expectations. When the delicate machinery of reciprocity suffers a catastrophic breakdown and falls into a self-perpetuating negative cycle, only the state can act to get it moving in a positive direction again.

Sometimes literature is able to convey important truths of human interaction that may otherwise elude us. I began with a story about the disastrous emergence of negative reciprocity. To illustrate the role that outside intervention can play in restoring positive reciprocity, I would like to conclude with another story: a European folktale about a visiting stranger who teaches stingy villagers a miraculous recipe for overcoming a food shortage.¹⁹⁾

The stranger is tired and hungry after a long journey, and he hopes to receive the hospitality due a guest. Unfortunately, he has picked the wrong time to visit, for the place is suffering from a serious famine. Everyone he meets tells him the same thing: there is not a morsel to eat in the

entire village.

As it happens, that is not completely accurate. It is true that food is short, but the problem is compounded by the fact that each household keeps what little it has locked up in a cupboard, concealed from sight. Everyone is afraid that if they share food with their neighbors, they might end up giving more than they receive. This fear appears amply justified in the eyes of each villager because each is convinced that the others are terribly miserly. The proof is that those other villagers keep their cupboards locked and never share any food with them!

When the stranger hears that the villagers have no food to give him, he is not discouraged. "I will make dinner myself with this," he says, drawing a smooth round stone out of his knapsack and displaying it with a flourish. "All I need is a big pot of water and a fire, and I will cook a hearty soup for everyone here."

The villagers look at him wide-eyed, but they set a pot of water boiling and the stranger drops his stone in it. "Ah," he says, smacking his lips. "I can hardly wait. Nothing hits the spot like a nice stone soup!"

After a moment he dips in a spoon and gives it a taste. "This is going to be a very fine stone soup," he says. "It could just use a pinch of salt." That's easy enough, the villagers say, and someone goes to fetch the salt.

"Salt, and a touch of parsley. I don't suppose anyone has parsley?" Another villager goes to get parsley. "And a little onion to make the flavor stronger, if it isn't too much to ask?" A woman remembers that she might have a few onions left in her kitchen.

"Turnips would go well with those onions," the stranger observes. "Turnips, and maybe some carrots," he adds. The woman's neighbors go off to rustle up carrots and turnips.

"You know, I think I might have some potatoes," a man remarks thoughtfully. "Are potatoes any good in a stone soup?" The stranger assures him that they are.

Soon everyone wants to join in. One person brings peas, his neighbor brings lentils, a third person brings cabbage and a fourth, celery. Nobody wants to be left out. The butcher even tosses in some salted beef, and the baker contributes bread to eat with the soup.

All the villagers sit down with the stranger and share in the meal. When they are done eating, they sigh contentedly and thank the man who brought them such abundance in his knapsack.

To some readers, the gratitude of the villagers may seem excessive. After all, the stranger didn't truly add anything useful to the pot. In the end, he was just another mouth to feed, which is how the villagers saw him in the first place. Couldn't they have made the same dinner without him?

They *could* have, but they didn't. Until the stranger came along with his stone, they were stuck in a vicious circle. Outside intervention was required to launch a cycle of positive reciprocity. And the same principle applies when the market falls into a vicious circle. Unfortunately, when times are tight, some people believe it is wise to cut back on public spending. They see the state as a dead weight – not recognizing that it is like the stone without which there is no soup.

Notes

- 1) LIAS, Institut Marcel Mauss, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris.
- 2) First published in 1915, Akutagawa's story was inspired by a 12th-century tale from *Konjaku monogatari*. Rather confusingly, the famous 1950 Kurosawa film is actually based on another Akutagawa story ("In a Bamboo Grove"), with only the name and the setting for the frame scenes coming from "Rashōmon." A number of English translations of "Rashōmon" are available, and they sometimes vary slightly in points of detail (the original Japanese text also exists in more than one version). For the close reading undertaken here, I generally follow Jay Rubin's rendering (Akutagawa 2006, pp. 3-9), but I also draw on a translation by René Malenfant that can be consulted on his home page:
<https://sites.google.com/site/renemalenfant/Rashōmon>.
- 3) By introducing this element of inner struggle, Akutagawa gives the story a psychological complexity it does not possess in the original medieval version, where the protagonist is already a criminal from the beginning (see "How a Thief Climbed to the Upper Story of Rashō Gate and Saw a Corpse," in Ury 1979, pp. 183-84).
- 4) In the original 12th-century tale, by contrast, there is no hint that the dead woman had ever done anything bad. The old woman merely tells the intruder, "I lost my mistress, sir, and as there was no one to bury her, I brought her here" (Ury 1979, p. 183). Akutagawa has clearly invented the snake-meat story in order to create a continuous chain of wrongdoing.
- 5) Duff Missionaries 1799, p. 334; quoted in Sahlins 1972, p. 272.
- 6) Gosselin 2005.
- 7) Ibid.
- 8) Krugman 2005.
- 9) "The Great Slump of 1930" (first published in December 1930), in Keynes 1951, pp. 135-36.
- 10) For a detailed discussion of these points, see Anspach 2002, chapter 2.
- 11) Richards 1939, pp. 108-109; quoted in Sahlins 1972, p. 274.
- 12) Richards 1939, p. 109; quoted in Sahlins 1972, p. 274.
- 13) Firth 1959, p. 84; quoted in Sahlins 1972, pp. 273-74.
- 14) Dumouchel 2014, p. 51.
- 15) Firth 1959, p. 83; quoted in Sahlins 1972, p. 273.
- 16) "Saving and Spending" (broadcast address, January 1931), in Keynes 1951, pp. 151-52.
- 17) Ibid., p. 152.
- 18) Ibid., p. 153.
- 19) Known in English as "Stone Soup," it is folktale type 1548 in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification system. Many different versions exist in many countries. Every author retells the story in his or her own way, and that is what I do here.

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