The Scope and Rearrangement of Durkheim’s “Cult of the Individual”:
The Legalization of Illegal Occupation of the Itami Airport Site

KANEISHI Kiyoshi

Should squatting, which is a worldwide phenomenon, be treated as an extralegal concept positioned outside the framework of national law, or should it be incorporated within legal frameworks? Squats are normally regarded as areas in which national law does not apply, and as such, the civil authorities of nations that do not address squatting in their legal systems either turn a blind eye to it or resort to eviction. This report, however, concerns itself with one of the biggest cases of illegal occupation in Japan, and how the authorities sought to resolve the issue amicably through public compensation conforming to the nation’s legal system. In this respect, illegal occupation could be seen as having been incorporated within the nation’s legal system.

In this paper, I use Durkheim’s concept of the cult of the individual to examine the logic that enables squatting, which in many countries is treated as lying outside the law, to have been incorporated into a legal system along with public compensation. Durkheim’s “cult of the individual” defines the individual as the one and only constant on which people can count in the modern world with its increasing complexity, division of labor and diversity of ever-changing opinion. The squatters concerned in this case were forced to live life bare, alienated from the privileges that normally attach to individuals, such as good environment (the site suffered jet noise pollution), status as nationals (the squatters were Korean), and property under the law, but this does not invalidate the concept of the cult of the individual. Public compensation for the illegally occupied land rather pointed to opportunities in the system for remediation in the process of personification.

More specifically, I attempt to show how it was in the context of personification of (1) airport facilities at the public administration level and (2) roadside deities at the private sector level that compensation for the people living on the illegally occupied site was arranged and illegal occupation resolved. The purpose of this report is to provide social policy pointers to halting and reversing the localized proliferation of poverty.

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