

Self-responsibility (*jikosekinin*)

Encountering the term

This term was encountered on Anne Allison's *Precarious Japan* (2013), and Takeda and Hook's article "Self-Responsibility and the Nature of the Postwar Japanese State: Risk through the Looking Glass" (2007), even though we did not place much focus on it. The term is used (or referred to) by Prime Minister Koizumi (mentioned by both readings) in describing the vilified Japanese hostages when they were captured in Iraq as hostages in 2004, however the Japanese state was reluctant to pay hostage fees because it was "their responsibility" for treading into a dangerous zone.

What is *jikosekinin*?

jikosekinin refers to self-responsibility (or individual responsibility). How is the term related to neoliberalism? As I quote from Anne Allison's *Precarious Japan* (2013),

Aligning with (and protecting) big business, privatizing more and more of (what once were) government services under the banner of "individual responsibility" (*jiko sekinin*) and investing too little in social programs, including welfare (for, but not only, the newly flexible labor force with low wages). (p. 52)

With the above explanation given, it is clear that this term is interconnected to the ideology of neoliberalism, where it advocated for the liberalization of markets and the decreasing state role in the economy. As markets liberalize, the increase in contract-based workers (*haken*) had increased during the late 1990s. At the same time, corporations have also decreased their employment of regular employees, and the percentage of 'working poor' (people who are regular employees but their income fall below poverty level) have also increased. However the state chose reduce the role they are playing in the society by advocating for the reduction of welfare spending, and thus these groups of people fell or are in the danger of falling into precarity.

With this background in mind, we should understand that the reduction of state role in the society inadvertently calls for individuals to not rely on the state for help. Instead, they should exercise self-responsibility to ensure that they do not fall into precarity. If they were to fall into precarity then, it is also their responsibility to exercise *jikosekinin* to resolve the issue.

What is problematic about *jikosekinin*?

The term *jikosekinin* seems good at the surface level: citizens consciously understand the need to be independent for themselves. However at an in-depth level, we can see that this term has some negative implications.

Firstly, *jikosekinin* as a term is commonly used to classify problems into individual problems that they should solve themselves. For example, there are increasing numbers of university graduates who cannot land themselves a job. However, by using the term *jikosekinin*, the blame is placed on the graduates themselves for not studying harder than those who are successful in employment.

Secondly, *jikosekinin* can be used to people's advantage in order to ridicule those that are weaker than them. This is very commonly seen in bullying cases in Japan. The term empowers bullies, in which they may say that they are exercising *jikosekinin* by "hammering down the nail that sticks out". At the same time, they comment that those that are bullied should exercise *jikosekinin* to prevent bullying acts done towards them.

Lastly, the need for *jikosekinin* is so strongly rooted in Japanese mindset that the family as a unit is slowly eroding in the society. Together with the need to embrace *jikosekinin*, is also the need for "self-reliance, self-independence and self-sustainability" (Allison, 2013, p. 152). Thus, many of them choose to reduce their dependency on others by living alone. Most of them also have no plans of moving in with them in the future, because feel that they should not "bother" their families.

Phenomenon that challenge *jikosekinin*

In the presence of a strong consciousness for *jikosekinin*, there are several phenomenon in Japan that seems to challenge this notion.

One of the phenomena is the emergence of *hikikomori*. According to the definition provided by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, this term refers to people who refuse to leave their house for a period of at least 6 months. This may be due to various reasons such as bullying, and thus Allison observed that being a *hikikomori* may perhaps be looked upon as a rejection of *jikosekinin* that they are expected to take up in the society.

Another is the emergence (and rapid increase) of *freeters* in the society. *freeters* refer to people who chose to work part-time instead of seeking regular employment. This group of people mainly chose work part-time because it is an exercise of *jikosekinin* to lead such a lifestyle. However, while *freeters* serve as a symbol of self-responsibility as it is a lifestyle choice that people choose to follow, being a *freeter* does not make them "productive citizens" within the society. Thus, *freeters* are looked upon negatively mainly because they do not directly contribute to the economy.

References

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