

david triggs' long view



One lesson that may be drawn from the current economic and financial crisis is that it rather matters what we believe—and what we doubt. Belief and confidence, as we all now know, lies at the root of credit and money, but it underpins, drives, and makes possible, much more—in fact the whole economy and our very lives depend upon this subtle aspect of human nature. It lies behind people's hopes and fears and may inspire the most ambitious and glorious of actions or the most foolish or wicked. It may also lead to the most despondent paralysis. For something that has such a profound impact upon the economy and on the way we live our lives it is perhaps strange that most of us rarely pause to question whether the beliefs that rule us individually and politically are based upon reality, error, or illusion.

We might be tempted to suppose that the time when the power of belief to harm society was long past and that today, with all the advances in human knowledge we are immune to such superstitious and malign influences. I do not think so. Whilst we may now see that many of the beliefs that governed our forbears were false, and were responsible for much unnecessary pain and suffering, that is no reason to suppose that we are now free of the tendency that led them to such errors in the first place. The tendency I am referring to is that where I am tempted to claim as my own that which in fact only belongs to a role that I, for a time, might play in this world. This tendency it seems follows from the common error—to believe that the part that I am now playing is who I truly am. As we move from one role or part to another a moment's pause or reflection may alert us to the reality of our existence, but when, through habit we identify with the part we play, we are apt to suppose and claim the obligations and 'props' that attach to it, as 'mine'.

Today we use the word 'ego' to refer to the self we believe we are, and adjectives such as egocentric and egotistical when referring to people under its domination. Human functions and roles in the world have natural limits. Ego driven ambition, it seems, may not. Many are now aware of the environmental and socio-economic consequences of limitless demand for the use of vital resources. Less well known are the beliefs that give rise to it. Likewise are the mental stresses that may come with identifying as 'mine' those obligations that properly attach only to a part we may, for a time, play.

Henry George indicated how the natural laws that we need to acknowledge in addressing the problems of 'political economy' and 'the problem of individual life' had a common root. He saw the laws of nature as the expression of the will of what he called the 'all maker' and saw liberating virtue in the words of the prayer to let 'Thy will be done on earth as a counter to the problems that followed from the assumption that 'my will' was a practical substitute.

Could it be that the belief in 'my land', and 'my money', has the same root as that which causes us to believe that what I have been given the use of for a time—including body, mind, and opportunities—are all mine, and that this is 'my life', together with its corollary that 'I'll do what I like with it'?