The orthodox account has it that in 1989 democracy triumphed and socialism died. Barry Hindess isn’t convinced. He argues that if social democracy, as well as socialism, is in peril, democracy itself is looking pretty ill.

The collapse of the Soviet empire has been depicted in many ways. One influential version of events identifies that collapse both with the end of communism (at least in Europe) and with the correlative triumph of representative democracy—as an objective if not yet an established reality. Since these developments in the East took place at a time when social democracy was also in retreat, some commentators have been tempted to see these developments as signalling not only the end of communism as a serious governmental project but also that of socialism. On this view, the victory of democracy and the death of socialism are one and the same.

The most triumphalist version of this representation of events in Europe incorporates them into the global story of the ‘End of History’, according to which the greater part of humanity has finally come to realise that representative democracy is the only feasible political ideal. All that remains is history—without the capital letter. In the less fortunate parts of the world this mundane history will consist primarily of the struggle to put the End of History into practice—against the resistance of self-interested minorities and perhaps also, in some places, of unenlightened majorities.

The End of History is an easy target and I will not spend time on it except to note that it is little more than a philosophically pretentious elaboration on the political implications of modernisation theory and other influential discourses on the nature of something called ‘modernity’ or ‘modern society’. In this modernisation perspective, representative democracy of the western kind appears as the central political feature of modern society. It is something that other, less fortunate societies must aim to acquire if they are to have any hope of catching up.

This same perspective underlies a more sanguine version of the end of communism theme, and one that appears to be somewhat more plausible. This is the story of the lid of the cauldron. Here the cauldron is the political repression imposed on Russia and its European satellites, and the moral is the terrifying effect of removing that lid: namely, that a host of atavistic national and ethnic chauvinisms are immediately released into the atmosphere. In this version of the modernisation story, democracy remains, as one of my colleagues keeps telling me, the only game in town. There is, however, one important qualification: in many modern—not essentially pre-modern—societies of the old Soviet empire and elsewhere there is likely to be a bloody and a lengthy intermission before that game is ready to be played.

As the tone of these remarks may indicate, I would tell a rather different tale. In place of the triumphalist association of the death of socialism with the victory of democracy I argue that
we should distinguish the fate of communism from that of social democracy. If the latter is in serious trouble—as I believe it is—then there is an important sense in which socialism and democracy are in much the same kind of boat. If the one is indeed sinking beneath the waves of History we should not be optimistic about the future of the other. As to the lid of the cauldron story, it is clear that ethnic and national chauvinism is on the increase throughout Western Europe, albeit on a less destructive scale than in the East. The death of socialism, the problems of democracy in Europe, and the rise of ethnic and national chauvinism are certainly connected, but not in the ways suggested by the more sanguine variants of the modernisation perspective.

The broad traditions associated with the ideas of 'democracy' and 'socialism' both present the idea of a self-governing community in which significant aspects of the life of the community are to be brought under its control. So too, in a rather different sense, do the representations of society involved in ethnic and national chauvinism. In the case of democracy—the case of socialism is only a little more complex—the community is identified both as a political unity and as a cultural and moral unity, usually with a supposed foundation in ethnic or national identity. Although such formulae as 'Government of the people, for the people, by the people' have a strongly universalistic appeal, they also suppose that the people in question has some definite identity, distinct from the identities of other peoples. In this respect at least, democratic politics are no less atavistic than the particular forms of nationalism on which they are based. We should not be surprised to find a reassertion of the importance of such identities under conditions in
which the community or the capacity of the community to govern itself is thought to be under threat.

To say that a community is democratic is to say first that it is a republic—a community governed by its citizens. In effect, this means that all decisions should be made by the community or by agencies and governing minorities that are regarded as answerable to the community as a whole. Self-government here means that the community can decide which matters affecting the life of the community should be brought under its direct control and which may safely be left to others. The assumption here is that if all citizens have equal political standing then the majority of citizens (the demos) rule.

This sense of republican self-government clearly supposes that the community has the capacity to exercise the control to which it makes claim, but it also conceives of self-government as self-restraint. In this latter case the individuals and groups of which the community is composed agree to subordinate themselves and their collective endeavours to a superior power which they themselves jointly constitute. In effect, they constrain themselves and their government to act only within a specific framework of laws and institutions. A number of different grounds for such restraint can be distinguished, but two have been particularly influential in the history of modern democracy.

First, if the community is to be regarded as a community of citizens, then individual rights must be seen as establishing a limit to communal action. A community whose members are thought to be autonomous actors cannot encroach too far on that autonomy without becoming a community of a very different kind. Modern ideas of constitutionalism and the rule of law are particularly concerned to establish limits of this kind.

Secondly, the community may be regarded as constituting an entity with a life of its own—an 'economy' or a 'society'—subject to its own laws and functional requirements. This perspective suggests that government should take account of those laws if it is to have any hope of acting effectively. Political economy and its successor, economics, have been particularly successful exponents of this way of looking at society. They suggest that practices of economic regulation should operate within restraints imposed by the nature of economic activity itself. There is an obvious tension here between the idea of the community exercising final control of the agenda of government and this notion of society as a practical entity. If economic activity (or other aspect of social life) is governed by its own exigencies then these same exigencies impose an objective limit on what can realistically be placed on the agenda of government. The liberal critique of the economic pretensions of socialist planning is simply a development of this line of argument.

Democratic government, in other words, exists in a tension between two distinct but related aspects; it is a matter of the citizens collectively deciding and acting on matters of general concern on the one hand, and a matter of collective self-control on the other. Where radical democracy tends to stress the first aspect, liberalism as always emphasised the second. Liberal or representative democracy is, as the former name suggests, a somewhat unstable compromise in which the institutions of representative government are expected to play a major part in satisfying both sets of demands. On the one hand, they are supposed to secure a significant degree of individual liberty against the threat of majority or minority tyranny. On the other, representative government is said to allow an active government by the people to be extended to large, geographically dispersed and relatively differentiated populations.

Where does socialism belong in this account? What the many different variants of socialism have in common is not much more than a desire to bring economic activity (and therefore property) within the domain of an active self-government. Like democracy, then, socialism presumes an actual or potential governmental capacity to exercise control over significant aspects of the life of the community. Unlike democracy, however, socialism has not always identified the relevant community as a community of citizens—that is, as consisting of autonomous persons whose capacity for independent action should be secured. Nor have socialists been much impressed by the vision of the economy as a benignly self-regulating realm of social activity, preferring rather to see the economy as a field of dangerous and potentially disruptive forces that must always be carefully regulated. Of the two most powerful liberal arguments for governmental self-control, then, socialists have sometimes—but not always—disputed one and they have invariably been sceptical of the other.

In fact, the two most influential variants of socialism of the 20th century can be distinguished by the position they take on precisely this issue. On the one hand, social democracy has tempered its activist understanding of government by a commitment to governmental self-restraint of a broadly liberal kind. Communism, on the other hand, proposed to bring economic activity under popular control while dismissing what it regarded as the bourgeois idea of governmental restraint. It has been used to defend political regimes that not only failed to protect the autonomy and moral integrity of their subjects, but, rather, actively sought to subvert such values. The difficulties of planning the construction of a complex modern economy in East Europe were therefore seriously compounded by the effects of widespread corruption and unwillingness to speak the truth. The collapse of most of these socialist regimes has no direct implications for the survival or otherwise of social democracy.
To say that a community is democratic, and therefore self-governing, is also to say that it has the capacity to govern itself and, in particular, that it is not governed by other agencies. This is to suppose, of course, that there can be a clear identification of the population and the territory over which its government is said to be exercised. The fact that most of us in the West now live in communities of this kind should not be taken for granted. Many politically significant communities have existed in settings of overlapping territorial claims and jurisdictions—as in the European middle ages, for example. Imperial possessions throughout history have frequently been identified as distinct political units primarily by the fact of their subordination to some particular ruler. In Europe today there are regions in which both the population to be governed and the relevant territory are in dispute. In such cases, the question of self-government, and therefore also of democracy, can arise only if there is some prospect of these disputes being resolved.

This understanding of a democratic community as one whose population and territory are clearly distinguished from those of others, goes hand-in-hand with the further notion of the community as one that shares a common culture. This has often led to the view first that governments should act in accordance with the morality that emerges from what is often now called civil society and, secondly, that government interference with the life of civil society should be regarded as undermining the integrity of these standards. This assumption of a common culture is a particular feature of democratic and republican understanding of political community—and it is normally understood in a somewhat exclusive sense. Notions of descent—of which the idea of a distinctive national culture that cannot readily be acquired by persons who are not born into it is simply a variant—have always played an important part in the way citizenship has been understood within particular communities. In the modern period, such notions have generally coexisted in uneasy relationship with other principles of inclusion and exclusion, as I have argued elsewhere in ALR ('Citizens and Peoples', ALR 140, June).

Democracy is now considered, in the West and elsewhere, against the background of a conception of community in which the unity of a self-governing polity is expected to correspond to the unity of a national culture. Yet it is important to recognise the peculiarity of this assumption of cultural homogeneity. In fact, the experience of cultural diversity has been the normal human condition throughout recorded history.

The modern experience of cultural diversity poses a problem for all societies that claim to be democratic or where democracy is now on the political agenda—precisely because the discourse of democracy presupposes a common culture which functions both to sustain citizens' life together and to distinguish them from citizens of other communities. The appearance of national chauvinism in the European east is often treated as if it were an atavistic remnant. Yet if the notion of a self-governing community as a political ideal plays an important part in political life, so too will the identification of community in terms of a common culture and usually a common descent. We should expect these ideas to come to the fore whenever the community or its capacity to govern itself are thought to be under threat.

This is the point at which the two themes of this article come together. The idea that a community could be entirely self-governing is, of course, something of a fantasy—and it has frequently been recognised as such. However, there are significant features of the modern world that further undermine the limited plausibility it may once have had. The widespread loss of faith in Keynesian economic management provides a particularly clear illustration of the problem here. This loss cannot be understood simply as an ideological counterpoint to the rise of free market doctrines. Rather, it should be seen as a consequence of changes in international economic relationships—the internationalisation of financial markets, the relative growth of trade between countries (much of it within companies) and the relative decline of trade within them, the increasing significance of corporations engaged in multinational operations, and so on. These developments have significantly undermined the credibility of the perception of the national economy as a relatively self-contained entity—a central presupposition of government economic calculation and debate for much of the modern period. My point is not that governments are helpless in the face of these developments, or even that they have all been affected in the same way. Rather it is that there is an important sense in which their room for manoeuvre has been greatly reduced.

There is certainly a problem for social democracy here, but it is also a problem of more general significance. The broadly Keynesian view of economic management that allowed social democratic parties to pursue what they saw as socialist principles within the constraints of a liberal democratic polity was shared by many of their political opponents on the Right. The loss of faith in that view of economic management threatens to undermine any project of democratic economic management, not just for social democratic projects.

My second theme concerned the intimate relations between ideas of democracy on the one hand and cultural and ethnic chauvinism on the other. The fate of democracy and socialism and the rise of national chauvinism are intimately related on both sides of the old European divide, albeit in significantly different ways. In the west the economic sphere is by no means the only area in which the image of a self-contained national community has
been seriously undermined. On the one hand, supra-national agencies (together, in the case of Europe, with a supra-national political community) operate as an external constraint on the sovereign freedom of many national governments. On the other hand, the movement of people, narcotics, cultural artefacts and distinctive life-styles across national boundaries has served to weaken the perception of the national community as a cultural and moral unity.

The reasons why social democracy is in retreat, then, must be seen as part of a larger set of problems now facing any political project that is understood in terms of self-governing national communities. If social democracy is under pressure, so is democracy of any other kind. We should not be surprised to find that reassertion of the importance of imaginary cultural and moral unities is a common response to the perceived incapacity of national governments either to provide economic security or to control the influx of alien persons and lifestyles on the other. The implications of that reassertion for democratic communities based on the liberal virtues of toleration and the rule of law are only too clear.

In Eastern Europe the problems are more serious in almost every respect. Established mechanisms for regulating national economies have, for all their manifest failures, nevertheless had considerable successes of a kind. They have now been dismantled or left to collapse, with the result that governments are unable to provide even a degree of economic security that is regarded as insufficient by many in the West. In many cases, too, both the territories and the populations to be incorporated by particular national governments are in dispute. To raise the spectre of democracy under these conditions is not only to promise a capacity for political and economic management that governments will not be able to provide. It is also to throw the explosive question of the determination of the relevant national communities into an already unstable political arena.

One kind of socialism (communism) has collapsed while the other (social democracy) has mostly been abandoned by parties that claim to operate in its name. The new constraints on the capacities of governments to manage affairs within their own national communities are as ominous for democracy as a whole as they are for the broad traditions of social democracy—and it is in this sense that 'socialism' and 'democracy' sail in remarkably similar vessels. If most of its officers and crew have now abandoned the one, on the grounds of what they describe as political realism, what are we to make of those who continue to promise safe passage in the other?

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