Frank Füredi, Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Kent—Canterbury, has written a survey of the decline in direction and leadership as it has been felt by Western ruling and intellectual elites starting with the backdrop of 1914’s Great War. Although not the initial cause, he views the First World War, whose centennial is currently upon us, as the watershed moment for what Füredi contends is a real and perceived loss of authority. Füredi suggests that the ideal of democracy has only just managed to survive the century, and that ‘intellectual attention’ needs to focus on this political principle in order to begin to solve the problems that have beset the planet since WWI (Füredi, p. viii). However, rather than trying to re-invigorate the values of humanism, universalism, progress, and democracy, as Füredi suggests, maybe it is timely to begin a thoroughgoing historical, economic, and sociological re-contextualization of Enlightenment principles, which, crucially, resists a postmodernist methodology.

In its historical context, the ideal of democracy emerged in the Enlightenment, with an early radical advocate being Baruch Spinoza, who referred to the establishment of state power based on genuine and participatory consent as that ‘perfectly absolute dominion, which we call democracy’ (Spinoza, p. 385). It is important to remember that Spinoza was writing in the Netherlands at the time of its so-called Golden Age in the 17th century, a period of world economic superiority based on the...