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may not have a political aristocracy—if we exclude the Kennedys, Bushes, and Clintons. But what we find increasingly is a return to the classical notion that elites were most fit to govern since their wealth naturally precluded them from the vices of greed and gain.

Today, we have policies dictated by the wealthy to favor the wealthy. It's worth pointing out that this problem is far from being a partisan matter—even if it's one most closely associated with the GOP, *i.e.*, Senate Democrats and Republicans have collaborated to preserve the loophole enabling hedge fund and equity managers to treat their fees as long-term capital gains rather than ordinary income. Let's not forget either that both parties agreed on the no-strings-attached bailout and our currently watered down version of say-on-executive-pay.

Finally, it has also become more difficult for the middle and working classes to attend college—just as in the 18th century. Back then, the aristocracy sought to keep the rest as ignorant as possible—or to put it in Paine's words, "it is only aristocratical and monarchical government that requires ignorance."

Indeed, the fact that Ivies and other highly selective universities privilege sons and daughters with primary alumni connections by as much as 40% while setting aside places for the children of politicians, entertainers, moguls is nothing short of Burkean. This culture of coddling the elites is similarly evident in rampant grade inflation at these institutions where lax 18th-century standards at Oxbridge are matched by lax standards today at the Ivies.

The fact is that we haven't really emerged from the backwardness of Paine's 1% England. Perhaps as Occupy Wall Street continues its dialogue, Americans will feel more convinced more than ever of the necessity for change.

Frances A. Chiu is an Assistant professor at the New School for Public Engagement. She has published for peer-reviewed journals as well as The Occupied Wall Street Journal and Occupy.com. She has a blog, <http://historyisonourside.wordpress.org>. Her Paine panel paper is on the TPF website, www.thomas-paine-friends.org.

Why Thomas Paine Still Matters (Michael De Dora)

In my brief remarks at the Left Forum 2012, I discussed why Thomas Paine's work is still politically relevant, and how it might help us navigate today's political environment. Here is a brief summary of the three broad points I tried to make.

1. I believe our commitment to create a more reasonable society must somehow copy Paine's talent for translating complex issues to the common person. In promoting reason and secular government, we must involve the layperson, and to do this, we must find ways to relate scientific and philosophical

theories to everyday language and life. Paine knew the importance of involving the majority of society in fights that concern their well-being, but which had been contained to inner political circles. That is why he dedicated so much of his life to bringing public understanding relevance to critical issues.

Simply put: we can continue to contain important conversations to the same rooms and talk amongst ourselves; or we can take it to the public and implore them to get involved alongside others to press our representatives and change the political landscape.

2. On that subject, we can blog and talk all we want, and we ought to. But we cannot limit ourselves to the social. We should also be getting our hands dirty. During the Revolutionary War, this might have meant picking up a gun. Fortunately things have changed. Today it means filling out action alerts; writing and calling your elected officials; attending public forums; organizing and attending rallies and protests; writing letters to the editor; and more.

You might think this is relatively inconsequential, but that is not true. The more that elected officials hear from us, the more they will have to consider our points of view. And the more that others see that you are engaged, the more likely it is that they will get involved as well. Which means that politicians might have to consider our viewpoints sooner than they thought.

3. Paine recognized that one of the most important aspects of a democratic society is free inquiry, the idea that we ought to be able to question everything – from the basis of the recent economic crash to fundamental moral values held by most of society. Now, speaking out is almost guaranteed to bring criticism and scorn. This was the case for Paine. Many of his friends, including Samuel Adams and Benjamin Rush, stopped speaking with him because they thought his "The Age of Reason," which was critical of religion, was too offensive. Paine died in the West Village, New York City, alone and broke.

But while stories like this are sad, they shouldn't stop us from speaking out. Indeed, Paine knew the duty to inquire carried with it certain stresses. As he once wrote: "Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must, like men, undergo the fatigue of supporting it." Thomas Paine clearly had the courage to face such fatigue – and so should we.

*Michael De Dora works at the Center for Inquiry (CFI) as director of the organization's Office of Public Policy and its representative to the United Nations. Michael received a master's degree in political theory from Brooklyn College, and a bachelor's degree in rhetoric and communication from SUNY-Albany. He maintains a blog, *The Moral Perspective*, and contributes essays to Massimo Pigliucci's blog, *Rationally Speaking*.*