

# 'IDEAS VIVAS': QUESTIONING, CRITIQUE AND THE MISSION OF THE UNIVERSITY

## *'Ideas Vivas': interrogarse, crítica y la misión de la universidad*

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The global financial crisis has focused attention on the need to reduce public expenditure; in the UK this has led to drastic cuts across the public sector, including higher education. The crisis, however, raises fundamental questions about the kind of society we want and the kind of education desirable in a modern democratic society. The paper considers the place of critique in the work of Newman and MacIntyre as a fruitful starting point from which to think about the kind of university that would be valuable to a healthy democratic society. For both writers a tradition of questioning is essential in a university education, a tradition that is tied up with the idea of community. Whilst each has a coherent conceptualisation of community, the paper argues that ultimately these are too restrictive and that what we need, instead, is to recognise what is *uncommon*. This may offer greater possibilities for ensuring the place of critique in the university and for keeping alive the kinds of questions that confront us within and beyond our communities. Without a doubt, we are constantly challenged by questions that confront us in our lives and we are constantly put into question over our community. In thinking about the kind of university education we need in a healthy democracy it must be one that keeps alive the tradition of questioning and of critique.

**Key words:** *Newman, MacIntyre, Community, Critique, Thoreau.*

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### Introduction

For European liberal democracies the reverberations of the 2008 global financial crisis continue as national governments and the European Union struggle to restore not only the Euro and the financial system, but also confidence in capitalism itself. In 2011 large scale protests took place across a number of Eurozone countries, culminating in a global day of protest on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2011. These protests were not only against government austerity measures but more broadly against what was seen as corrupt free

market capitalism. In the case of the UK, various demonstrations took place in 2011 organised by trade unions against the Conservative-led coalition government's plans for reducing the public deficit and the introduction of drastic cuts across the public sector, including higher education<sup>1</sup>. 2012 opened with both Conservative and Labour parties eager to win public support for their vision of how to address the problems of free market capitalism. This has included appeals from leaders of both parties for a «moral capitalism» and a «popular capitalism» although what is meant by these terms is by no means clear.

Political debate is focused on economic concerns and reducing expenditure, but the crisis raises a set of prior questions such as what kind of society do we want? What kind of education is desirable in a modern democratic society? The paper explores the ideas of Newman and MacIntyre as a starting point for considering questions concerning the kind of university education necessary to a healthy democracy.

The current global economic crisis recalls the widespread depression and economic collapse that hit Europe in 1920 and 1930s. Writing for a Spanish journal, it inevitably prompts reflections about Ortega y Gasset's contribution to intellectual and political debate in 1930s Spain and the question of how to regenerate the country. Based on a series of lectures given to students in Madrid University, *Misión de la Universidad*, Ortega intended to provoke and encourage debate not only about the future of the university but of Spanish society. Ortega believed that both government and the university were «máquinas maltrechas por la usura del uso y la del abuso» (p. 84).

Although separated by a century, Newman and MacIntyre share a reputation as independent thinkers within the Catholic tradition. In many ways Newman represented a solitary figure, a man out of place before and after his conversion to Catholicism. He continued to challenge church authority when he thought it necessary to do so; he was also highly critical of a particular conception of rationality to which many of his peers were attracted. MacIntyre moved away from Catholicism to embrace Marxism for a period before returning but has remained highly critical of modern liberal capitalist society.

The paper examines their ideas concerning notions of community, tradition and judgement. Section II sets out Newman's thoughts on education and more broadly his philosophical position concerning the nature of

reason and judgement. This is followed by an examination of MacIntyre's understanding of community and the importance he attaches to traditions and continuities of thought; these require a commonality, a shared starting point for rational argument. In the final section I suggest that whilst both Newman and MacIntyre have a coherent conceptualisation of community, ultimately these are too restrictive; they ignore what is uncommon. It is this which may offer greater possibilities for securing the place of critique in the university.

## Newman

Newman's views about university education, as expressed in *The Idea of a University* and *Historical Sketches*, are very much informed by his own university experience at Oxford, first as a student and later as a tutor, and by his conversion to Catholicism. His views are premised on the view that the university is a place reserved for a male elite; the university teaches universal knowledge and its students become gentlemen, «made through their learning of the universe» (Newman, volume 3, *Historical Sketches: «Rise and Progress of Universities»*, p. 6). For Newman intellectual development and the cultivation of the mind are central to a university education; the university is an intellectual community, where the student is exposed to traditions of thought and the teacher nurtures an enquiring intellect. For Newman the ideal university is a place

in which the intellect may safely range and speculate, sure to find its equal in some antagonistic activity, and its judge in the tribunal of truth ... where the professor becomes eloquent, and a missionary and a preacher of science, displaying it in its most complete and most winning form, pouring it forth with the zeal of enthusiasm, and lightening up his own love of it in the breasts of his hearers (p. 11, *Office and Work of Universities*, 1856).

Whilst Newman argues that knowledge is important for its own sake it does have a practical use: the purpose of a good liberal education is the cultivation of the public mind. We can also find this articulated in Ortega y Gasset's, *Misión de la Universidad*, where he argues that the university must be a place to cultivate the mind. A university, he states, must be a place where «a good student can *really* learn” by which he means that she learns «con holgura y plenitud» (p.117). Such thoroughness and understanding is essential in order for the student to become a good professional and to be able to live her life well<sup>2</sup>.

In *Discourse VII* (p. 125), Newman describes the art of the university as «the art of social life, and its end is fitness for the world». For Newman learning is a social practice. Real learning arises not from an encounter with a book but in the encounter with others; the university is more than an intellectual community; it is a «living community», which comprises emotional and spiritual, as well as, intellectual dimensions. The idea of community runs through Newman's thoughts about education. It follows from this that the university must be caring and compassionate. Drawing on his experience of the Oxford college system, he makes a clear distinction between the college and the university: whereas the college is concerned with the student and their emotional and spiritual wellbeing, the concern of the university is with the intellect; or in other words, the college nurtures virtue and the university nurtures the intellect. He concedes that the college does have a role in the moral and religious formation of students but this does not apply to the university; it is separate from the intellectual development of students. Newman did not, however, think that a university education, by itself, makes a person a moral or virtuous person. Although Newman did not hold the view that a university education should be religious, his religious views, not surprisingly, have a strong bearing on his ideas about

education. The university is likened to the church —a living community with a living tradition<sup>3</sup>.

The relationship between his educational and religious thinking is well articulated in Gerald Loughlin's (2011) article in which he considers the place of wonder in Newman's account of university and the importance of this in thinking about the contemporary university and the diversity of modern society. As an Aristotelian, Newman views wonder as a first step to knowledge; all sciences begin in wonder and all sciences, including religion, begin in faith. And so for Newman the university is itself a place of wonder. Loughlin focuses on Newman's educational writings rather than his philosophical work, where questions about faith and reason are addressed directly<sup>4</sup>. These are to be found in his major work, *An Essay In Aid of A Grammar of Assent* (GoA). Newman's ideas here, however, are not confined to matters of religion; they raise broader questions about knowledge and understanding that are, as we shall see, particularly relevant to a university education.

Newman is concerned with the question of how he can believe something that he does not understand. He believes that there are different kinds of reasoning, rejecting what he saw as the limited view of reason found in Cartesian rationalism or Lockean empiricism which was prevalent among many of his peers. On Newman's account, there are areas of life such as faith that do not conform to any formal empirical method. Religious belief involves practices but these cannot be proved either logically or empirically. For Newman, this does not mean, as many of his peers would argue, that religious belief is not rational. Faith is an intellectual activity but reason is not dependent solely on the intellect. Judgement is also necessary and is involved in the formation of beliefs; such beliefs are not the results of any logical deduction or empirical analysis. He argues that any systematic enquiry necessarily

assumes something; in other words, unless we assume something we are not able to reason. There has to be a starting point before any deduction or analysis can take place. Here Newman uses the idea of the «illative sense» by which he means the capacity to make judgements. It is an intellectual skill that is shaped by experience.

For Newman validity of proof is determined by a person's illative sense; it cannot be determined by any scientific method. Following Aristotle, he rejected the idea that mathematical rigour should be the standard used in every field of enquiry. It is not possible, as argued by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that an educated person can come to a judgement using a common measure; there are different degrees of accuracy depending on the field of enquiry. I shall come back to the idea of common measure in the final section.

Although, as we saw earlier, Newman's university was a male elite, and the teaching of universal knowledge was Western in conception, it would be wrong to dismiss his work as irrelevant particularly the importance he attaches to the centrality of judgement. For Newman judgement is not only important in matters of faith and religion but in all intellectual enquiry. It is not simply a matter of acquiring theoretical knowledge; it is about how that knowledge is embodied in the learner and in a particular time. The learner is not a solitary figure; she is a member of a community engaged in a social practice, one based on a tradition, open to critique and change, or as we have seen above, what Newman terms a living tradition. An understanding of the discipline and its intellectual tradition is required. Being part of a learning community is to be committed to something and this requires a kind of humility, a virtue that is most commonly associated with religious practice but is equally appropriate to a university education. It also involves skills of thinking and judgement but not in the sense of skills as individualised and

autonomous list of competences as found in current political and educational discourse and its emphasis on generalizable and transferable skills (See also Harris, 2011).

## MacIntyre

The idea of community is also central in MacIntyre's work and as with Newman, is informed by the Aristotelian tradition. In *After Virtue*, he argues that the tradition of the virtues needs to be restored because it is essential for the individual and for the community; without the virtues no community can flourish nor can there be an adequate conception of the common good. MacIntyre suggests that modern society's preoccupation with individual actions has been to the detriment of social practices. It is, he posits, social practices that are essential to our ethical lives. A common tradition and a common endeavour are central, therefore central. These characteristics are found most typically in religious-based communities as well as the medieval university, but are, he laments, absent in modern culture.

In *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990) MacIntyre contrasts the modern age with the medieval which was characterised by a shared understanding about the nature of enquiry. For Aquinas, for example, membership of a moral community and a tradition were a condition for rational, moral and theological enquiry. Following Aristotle, Aquinas believed that the ends of education could only be developed with reference to the final ends of human beings. It is this rejection of Aristotelian teleology that MacIntyre believes is critical. For MacIntyre the loss of a shared moral reasoning means that there cannot be any common agreement on what is the common good.

In the modern university there is, he argues, no longer a sense of common purpose or commonality; this has profound consequences

for the quality of intellectual and political debate and is the reason why the university is unable to contribute significantly. MacIntyre points to the specialisation and expansion of subjects which has led to the disintegration of the curriculum and the fragmentation of enquiry<sup>5</sup>. There is no longer a shared understanding or anything that brings academics together to engage in debate and to discuss different arguments. There is, he argues, no longer any conception of the disciplines as each contributing to a single shared enterprise. This is crucial for him because it is ultimately tied up with contributing to the understanding of ourselves and of our place in nature. Ortega was also concerned with our place in nature, describing the idea of life as the «dynamic dialogue between the individual and the world». The primary function of a university education, he argued, must be the transmission of culture, where culture is understood as «el sistema de ideas vivas desde cuales el tiempo vive» (p. 126).

MacIntyre claims that the research university is in danger of losing the ability to think about the ends of the university or to be self-critical (2009). Unfortunately he does not comment on the rise of inter-disciplinary activities which have grown as a result of that very specialisation which he criticises. Putting this to one side, however, what is important to consider here is the idea that the university has become a place for *anything* and not a place for *something*. The latter is reflected in a view of the professor, especially a professor in the humanities, as offering not only an account of the way things are but a profession of belief in *something*. The use, in recent years, of the university mission statement as a marketing tool, reflects the priority given to the need to attract potential consumers rather than as an expression of its mission, or indeed its vocation<sup>6</sup>.

For MacIntyre, and Newman, the university is a place where fundamental questions are asked, where there is a tradition of questioning and a

disciplined asking of questions. As MacIntyre argues in, *After Virtue*, one important feature of a living tradition is that it is «an historically extended, socially embedded argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition» (p. 222).

A common tradition and holistic view of enquiry that characterised the medieval world is problematic today where, on the one hand, the university can be found all over the world, and on the other, modern democracies are pluralistic with different traditions and views of the world existing in very close proximity to each other. In relation to the latter, Newman's idea that the university provided universal knowledge is no longer a realistic goal for a university, although, as Jaroslav Pelikan (1992) argues, this does not mean that it could not be a goal for the university community worldwide if we believe that the university has a responsibility to the wider world. It does not follow from what has just been said that continuities of thought that derive from a common tradition lead to conformity or to a closing down of thought. A common tradition is, rather, a condition for agreement and disagreement within and across traditions. And this is essential to a healthy democracy because we need to ask ourselves constantly what kind of society we want. The human being is faced with her life as a question, although in a world dominated by the culture of performativity and the one-track thinking that it induces, we can lose sight of the question of being. It is, however, a question that is ultimately unavoidable and is one that, following Aristotle, has been central to Newman, MacIntyre, and Ortega y Gasset; it is a question that a university education must be concerned with.

Today it is difficult to see how we can foster the kind of community that Newman and MacIntyre envisage for a number of reasons. Newman's view of the collegiate university where students felt at home is unrecognizable today. In the case of the UK, among the 100

institutions of higher education, only a handful of these are collegiate universities. The student body is no longer a small, male elite; it is large and extremely diverse, and in many universities there are significant numbers of students who are the first in their family to enter university. There is also greater diversity amongst the staff body, and a growing number of temporary and contract staff, and as such the university community is more transient than in the past. Newman's view of the university as a living community, one that is concerned with the intellectual, spiritual and emotional needs of students, bears little resemblance to the student-centredness that informs current political or educational discourse. For example, widening participation and the introduction of fees, both of which were brought in by the previous Labour Government, have led to more concern for student-centred learning. Universities cannot afford to turn away students, nor can they ignore their views expressed through, for example, their representation on university committees, the creation of a student senate in some universities, and the National Union of Student Student Satisfaction Survey. The Coalition Government's 2010 White Paper *Students at the heart of the system*, for example, is primarily concerned with greater transparency and accountability and better systems to ensure quality of teaching and learning; the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of the university as a living community, as envisioned by Newman are nowhere to be found. The political discourse is driven by the desire to settle things and is based on the belief in the need to have a common measure.

The centrality of judgement has been lost in the preoccupation with assessment and quality assurance systems which exist across the education sector in most countries. These systems, however, distort conceptions of professional practice. The nature of study is also distorted as we are held captive by the need to feed the system with more and better data and a never ending supply of evidence of

performance. Learning and knowledge are both individualised and reduced to what can be easily measured and standardised<sup>7</sup>. What is lost sight of is the relationship between the teacher, student and subject. The mysteriousness of this relationship is captured quite powerfully in George Steiner's historical study, *Lessons of the Masters*. The teacher-student relationship is, he argues, one that involves trust and vulnerability. Such a view is almost unrecognizable today, indeed it would be regarded as undesirable; the teacher has become a kind of technical operator (See also, Harris, 2011).

There are few communities other than religious communities that have the kind of coherence implied in MacIntyre's conceptualisation of community. His idea of community is, I would argue, too comprehensive and restrictive, placing as it does great emphasis on social cohesion. (See also, Harris, 2012). In questioning the merits of such a comprehensive conception of community, I do not wish to undermine the importance that MacIntyre and Newman attach to the place of critique in the university. I want to argue for a different way to think about community which may offer more realistic possibilities for ensuring the place of critique in the university. It will be necessary to change the idiom, beyond the philosophical literature related to the university as commonly understood. Rethinking the university as a community will depend upon some broader rethinking of the community at large. What is the kind of community to which human beings should aspire? This question of community—of how we should live with others and how, through this, we can live best ourselves—is at the heart of the problematic that draws Thoreau to the woods. His sojourn is not an escape to the countryside; it is not a rural idyll. His sojourn is, rather, an experiment in living, in placing ourselves in the world and seeing the world differently, designed to wake up his neighbours.

Unlike Newman and MacIntyre whose writing derives from a Catholic European tradition of

thought, Henry David Thoreau is from a Non-conformist Protestant background. A contemporary of Newman his writing reflects his disappointment with what Americans have done to the idea of America, taking America as a perfectionist idea, in a way perhaps similar to Israel. In *Walden*, Thoreau ponders the possibility of living; he presents a vision of the good society in which learning is realised as part of a mature and healthy civilization. He is concerned ultimately with the question of meaning and understanding the world in which, and as we shall in the passage below, the idea of the uncommon holds a central place.

### **A university education valuable to a healthy democracy**

«It is time that we had uncommon schools, that we did not leave off our education when we begin to be men and women. It is time that villages were universities, and their elder inhabitants the fellows of universities, with leisure —if they are indeed so well off— to pursue liberal studies the rest of their lives. Shall the world be confined to one Paris or one Oxford forever? Cannot students be boarded here and get a liberal education under the skies of Concord? Can we not hire some Abelard to lecture to us? Alas! what with foddering the cattle and tending the store, we are kept in school too long, and our education is sadly neglected» (*Walden*, p. 99).

What are we to make of this? What does Thoreau mean? We need to take each sentence and consider his words carefully. «It is time that we had uncommon schools, that we did not leave off our education when we begin to be men and women.» In this first sentence he alludes to democracy and the desire of the democrat to provide common schools, but Thoreau also exploits the multiple connotations here. He suggests that it is not merely the common or familiar in a human life, or community, that is

important but the uncommon, something that reaches towards the exceptional and the excellent —towards perfection. This will not amount to a consolidation or securing of the bonds of community but rather will reach beyond; there is a sense of the transcendent. Thoreau also challenges the commonly held view of the school as a place for socialisation and for shaping children into adults. For Thoreau this distinction between children and adults will not do because we do not know what an adult is: we must not assume that we have exhausted the possibilities of the human. We cannot go to sleep but must remain awake to our place in the world.

«It is time that villages were universities, and their elder inhabitants the fellows of universities, with leisure —if they are indeed so well off— to pursue liberal studies the rest of their lives.» In this second sentence Thoreau's use of the word «leisure» is particularly significant; in Greek this is expressed as *schole*, the root of «school». He again rejects the view of schools as places of socialisation, laying way for the affirmation of liberal studies. Thoreau, however, is not against a training in practical skills as his living in the woods makes clear where he builds his hut and hoes his beans. He wants to see the practical or vocational extend into the liberal.

The third sentence, «Shall the world be confined to one Paris or one Oxford forever?» returns to the theme of egalitarianism but also makes fun of the snobbery that is found in the institutions he names. «Cannot students be boarded here and get a liberal education under the skies of Concord?» He suggests that the open air (as opposed to the «ivory tower») of America (as opposed to the great European cities) implies an enquiry that is open, unfettered. This may also be a new kind of community, that is, a new concord, as implied by his local town's name. The last two sentences contain a deliberate bathos in mentioning the rather unglamorous tasks of «foddering the cattle and tending the store» in

the same breath as Abelard. He is also suggesting here that there is no tension between a liberal education and a vocational education and that both are needed. The bathos lays the way for an implicit contrast between «school» and «education», which we can easily enough expand upon.

As becomes clear when reading this passage although Thoreau refers to the university he is

not concerned with institutionalised learning but rather learning throughout a person's life, an education that never ends; this requires that we remain awake and do not go to sleep. We are constantly challenged by questions that confront us in our lives and we are constantly put into question over our community. In thinking about the kind of university education we need in a healthy democracy it must be one that keeps alive the tradition of questioning and of critique.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The British Labour Party failed to win the General Election of May 2010 and this was due in part to the global financial crisis. The Conservatives failed to win an outright majority and formed a coalition with the Liberal Democrats.

<sup>2</sup> On Ortega's account the university, especially that outside Spain, tried to teach too much, describing it as 'un bosque tropical de enseñanzas' which is in danger of blocking out the horizon. He goes on 'el horizonte de la juventud, que debe estar claro, abierto y dejando visibles los incendios incitadores de ultranza' (pág.115).

<sup>3</sup> Unlike the Archbishop who had hoped that Newman's lectures on the Idea of a University would encourage people to see that education should be religious, Newman was more interested in the education of Catholics than with the conversion of Anglicans.

<sup>4</sup> Loughlin draws attention to the difference between Newman's theory and practice of teaching. He seemed to be comfortable only with students like himself, eager to learn, and was less successful or comfortable with those who required more discipline.

<sup>5</sup> In, *La Rebelión de las Masas*, Ortega talks of the barbarism of specialisation.

<sup>6</sup> In 1988 in Bologna 388 European university rectors gathered to celebrate the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the oldest university in Europe, the University of Bologna. This event is often regarded as the starting point for the Bologna Declaration and subsequent developments such as the drive to create a single European Area of Higher Education. The Magna Charta which the Rectors signed on that occasion set out a number of principles which they stated 'must now and always support the vocation of universities'. The fourth states that:

*A university is the trustee of the European humanist tradition; its constant care is to attain universal knowledge; to fulfil its vocation, it transcends geographical and political frontiers, and affirms the vital need for different cultures to know and [to] influence each other.*

<sup>7</sup> World league tables for universities and international surveys that measure educational performance such as the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and Trends in Mathematics and Science, (TIMS). There is pressure on countries to take part in such international surveys in order to be regarded as a 'serious' player. Also, it is important to note that the policy of establishing a European Space of Higher Education has migrated to Latin America

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## Resumen

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### *'Ideas Vivas': interrogarse, crítica y la misión de la universidad*

La crisis financiera global ha centrado su atención en la necesidad de reducir el gasto público, lo que en el Reino Unido ha supuesto recortes drásticos en el sector público, incluida la educación superior. Sin embargo, la crisis plantea cuestiones fundamentales sobre la sociedad que queremos y la educación deseable en una sociedad democrática moderna. Este artículo considera el papel de la crítica en la obra de Newman y MacIntyre como punto de partida fructífero para pensar sobre el tipo de universidad que puede ser valiosa en una sociedad democrática saludable. Para ambos escritores, la tradición de interrogar e interrogarse resulta clave en una formación universitaria, una tradición que está ligada a la idea de comunidad. Mientras que cada uno tiene un concepto de comunidad coherente, este trabajo argumenta que, en el fondo, esto es demasiado restrictivo y que lo que necesitamos, en cambio, es reconocer que es lo infrecuente. Posiblemente esto facilita mayores posibilidades para asegurar un espacio para la crítica en la universidad y para mantener vivo el tipo de preguntas que se nos presentan dentro y fuera de nuestras comunidades. Sin duda, estamos constantemente desafiados por las preguntas que surgen en nuestras vidas y que ponen en tela de juicio a nuestra comunidad. Al pensar en el tipo de educación universitaria que necesitamos en una democracia saludable, deberá ser aquella que mantenga viva la tradición de la interrogación y de la crítica.

**Palabras clave:** Newman, MacIntyre, Comunidad, Crítica, Thoreau.

## Résumé

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### *'Ideas Vivas': questionner, critique et la mission de l'université*

La crise financière mondiale a focalisé son attention sur la nécessité de réduire les dépenses publiques, qui, dans le Royaume-Uni a conduit à des coupes drastiques dans le secteur public, y compris l'enseignement supérieur. Cependant, la crise soulève des questions fondamentales au sujet de la société que nous voulons être et l'éducation souhaitable dans une société démocratique

moderne. Cet article examine le rôle de la critique dans le travail de Newman et de MacIntyre comme un point de départ fructueux pour réfléchir au genre d'université souhaitable dans une société démocratique salubre. Pour les deux auteurs la tradition de questionnement et d'interrogation est la clé d'une formation universitaire, une tradition qui est liée à l'idée de communauté cohérente. Bien que chacun dispose d'un concept de communauté cohérente, ce travail soutient que cela est bien trop restrictif et que, par contre, nous avons besoin de reconnaître ce qui est peu ordinaire. Peut-être ceci contribuerait à assurer plus de chances d'avoir un espace de critique à l'université et pour maintenir vivantes le genre de questions auxquelles nous devons faire face à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de nos communautés. Sans doute, nous sommes constamment mis au défi par les questions qui se posent dans nos vies et qui remettent en question notre communauté. Quand nous pensons au type d'enseignement universitaire dont nous avons besoin à une démocratie salubre, ça devrait être celui capable de garder vivante la tradition de questionnement et de critique.

**Mots clés:** *Newman, MacIntyre, communauté, critique, Thoreau.*

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