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The Specific Intellectuals: Foucault, Thoreau, and Berkeley

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Among the more troubling characterizations of modern life are Michel Foucault’s portrayals of European society and Europe’s historical responses to homelessness and immigration. In essays and in interviews (The Foucault Reader [Random House, 1984]), the philosopher portrays for us a world distinguished by secrecy, isolation, surveillance, control measures, and incentives geared to promote specific conceptions of health and beauty. For all the historical detail he gives and for all the approbation he implies, the philosopher seems awkwardly resistant to expressing his own proposals and visions. Most readers of Foucault are ferried to the conclusion that all we do is caught within the advance of established power. But a careful reading of Foucault turns up at least one hopeful proposal for the academic community: *that experts pursuing specialized, local areas of knowledge may create new relations of power rather than advancing the all-pervasive, established power.*

Foucault (1926–1984) remains complex. Whether the philosopher, prior to his death, pursued and embodied his own vision of “the specific intellectual” is a matter of biography. Whether he modeled the classic commitment to solitary, intellectual authorship or, like many activists, subordinated publication in favor of community discussion and collaboration is worth debating. But what Foucault leaves for us is a proposal we should wholeheartedly explore. Among our conversations about the mission of the university and the service of its various members as scholars and researchers we ought to be conversations about our participation as envisioned by thinkers like Foucault. As time-honored publication becomes complicated by digital technology and online forums, as needed standards of quality and worth appear malleable, and as we grow anxious about where and why to research and publish, the service of scholars and researchers may find genuine purpose and audiences in non-profit organizations, in town committees and associations, and in areas otherwise isolated and ignored by the public. This insight gains support from the thought of the French philosopher Foucault, but also from the compositions and legendary quests of philosophers drawn from New England history.

The insight that genuine knowledge is especially particular and discovered locally, among needy people and by perceptive persons, is an insight won, at times, through setbacks and encounters with established power. In New England history, few persons better express this insight than the nineteenth-century author Henry David Thoreau (1817–62), who voyaged through the town of Bridgewater a half-dozen times on the train from Boston to New Bedford, Massachusetts. We recall Thoreau for successfully finishing the dismal “1000-credit” course of study given, at the time, by Harvard College. We admire Thoreau for abruptly resigning his first

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Michel Foucault (1926–84)
Among our conversations about the mission of the university and the service of its various members as scholars and researchers ought to be conversations about our participation as envisioned by thinkers like Foucault.
Dames of America, the clergyman’s charity came back to life and lives today in rural Rhode Island: a unique site for the history of philosophy.

Those of us who conduct scholarship and research and who wish to offer contributions to the pursuit of knowledge may evaluate academic projects according to a moral test: *Does my proposed contribution bring people together; or, Is my proposed contribution assuming an orientation outside of human life?* If Foucault is right, often we assume the tempting view that knowledge exists and is to be exercised outside the problems and questions of life. Foucault’s vision of experts inhabiting hospitals, prisons, and schools in order to gain knowledge and transform power is a good and daring one. Analogously, in nineteenth-century New England, Thoreau wrote in “Resistance to Civil Government” (1849) that the proper place of the just person in an unjust Massachusetts town is the jail. Famously, the author tells us one night of jail allowed him to discover decency, friendliness, and fresh perspectives on the town he otherwise doubted.

If our academic projects are…

directed toward and conducted in service to non-profit organizations, town bodies, and taken-for-granted institutions and if our compositions are collaboratively authored, then our scholarly contributions become eminently more useful.

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