

## **Review of *Identity and Justice* by Ian Angus**

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Each year brings its slate of new books on Canadian politics, and over the decades we have accumulated a vast and excellent library on Canadian history. Since the efflorescence of Canadian literature in the 1960s, schools of literary criticism have also proliferated. Perhaps it is in painting and other visual arts that Canada has made its most distinguished contribution, and there is no lack of art criticism and art history to document it. Many other specialized areas of Canadian life (film studies, media studies, law, and so on) have their specialized literatures. But there are not many books, I think, that deal in a philosophical way with what Canada itself is and has been and will be. That is the challenge Ian Angus has taken on in his highly original and absorbing book. It is not a book about Canadian philosophy, but rather a philosophical book that self-consciously situates itself in a particular place, in order to talk about this place. Though many of the issues it treats are inherently universal, it treats them consciously with a special local accent. As a first illustration of this localizing point, we note that Angus does not propose to talk about Canada but only that part of it that he calls "English Canada." And as we shall see in a moment, that focusing is only the beginning of a fissuring that divides and divides, bringing the reader down to the smallest local communities. Thus the main word in his title, "Identity," expresses a challenge, for the reader is made to ask whether there *is* an English-Canadian identity, or whether identity is to be found only in a local community. We shall approach this important but difficult question at the end. My review will follow, more or less, the order of the book itself, looking at Empire, Locality, and Association.

On pages 14-18, Angus reviews four of the most influential definitions of the (English) Canadian identity, not to argue against them but to see what he can appropriate from them and then build upon: the economy of dependency (Innis); the Red Tory (Grant); the vertical mosaic (Porter) and the power of communications (McLuhan). Central to Angus's account of our identity is the conflict between two strands in our history, Empire and Locality.

### **Empire (Chap. 3, and especially pp. 83-86)**

Though Aboriginal peoples occupied the land for centuries, the Canada of modern history was created by European empires: it began as New France (17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries) and mutated into British North America (18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries.) But we must not think that Empire belongs only to our remote past: Empire remained active in the Confederation period and in all the subsequent history. 1867 didn't just cast it off; it also perpetuated Empire (see p. 82: "...the empire and its successors," and pp. 8, 19).

The treatment is particularly focused on Canada's westward expansion after 1867. The struggle of the Métis on the Red River in 1869 is a recurrent example in which the Ottawa government shows the face of Empire, the newly constituted state perpetuating colonialism itself, with imperial pretensions. Angus quotes the 1869 "Declaration of the People of Rupert's Land and the North-West" (pp. 44-45): a people that had no government, had not constituted one, or been consulted, is now confronted by a Canadian thrust "which pretends to have a right to coerce us and impose upon us a despotic form of government" That would certainly be Empire.

Thus Empire shows up most prominently in Canada's westward expansion. The internal relations of the four confederating colonies in 1867 and afterwards did not manifest an imperialist tendency except on one decisive point, their domination of the Aboriginal populations.

On Angus's account, the loyal attachment of Canada to the British Empire seems to have allowed imperialism to seep into the Canadian government: something inherited was then perpetuated, augmented and transferred. Yet here one may pose a question: does this loyalism really make the difference? Let's compare Canada's westward expansion with that of the U.S.A. The Republic wasn't loyal; was it any less an Empire thereby? (And if not an "Empire," perhaps it was something worse!)

What actually constitutes the "imperial" strand of our history? It is more than an expansionist movement to occupy territory. Angus can call the capitalist-driven market an imperial structure (p. 55), because of a monopoly on the social representation of value. On pages 83-86 he sketches an imperialist form of speech-acts, where, it seems, the hegemonic party sets the rules of the game of speech. These further reaches show that he is conjuring with an idea broader and deeper than the usual one that we know from the history of empires.

If this concept is to be used for an analysis of Canada today and not only in the past, we need to know what aspects of our country manifest Empire. Is the national government as such imperial (so that the provincial governments might not be???) Are nation-wide organizations such as political parties, churches, broadcasting networks, even trade unions, to be included here? It does not seem likely that we can call everything that is centralized imperial, and regard all decentralism as anti-imperial. But now we need to look at the other strand that he has set out to make his contrast.

### **Locality; or Inhabitation (Chap. 2 and 4)**

Perhaps the central contribution of this book is the idea of a Canada that is marked by location or inhabitation, standing in sharp contrast to Canada-as-Empire. Angus believes that there are communities that essentially belong to their place, which I might call (though he does not) autochthonous. Though he doesn't dwell on fishery, logging or hunting, it seems that these are paradigm economic activities in a locality. This is very much a B.C. book, and I am led repeatedly to think of the many Native communities that are the glory of his province. Some of the marks of community-as-location are subsistence (p. 55), sustainability (p. 57), the displacement of exchange-value by use-value (p. 55), all ordered in opposition to a hegemony of the market. Locality is *not* confined to the Native reserves; the idea has no confinement to any racial group; it has no necessary connection with primary or extractive industry; locality is a possible community in many different places, and with many different groups. If we grasp the concept itself (or universalize it, as he says) it becomes a way of conceiving the social system of Canada as a whole. There is a contrast between Place, a static concept, and Location, which intends a dynamic of moving towards a place; the phenomenology of place (pp. 26-31) makes this quite clear, and therewith the dynamic sense of "inhabitation," actively occupying a place. This would give a clear foundation to a local application of Identity. There is an anarchist component in this idea, to which we shall return at the end.

The book did not have occasion to treat heavy industry or international trade, problems that Proudhon and Kropotkin struggled with, though probably not very successfully. Is

there any possible way of seeing them too as essentially local? Nothing could illustrate Angus's contrast better than the oil industry's proposal to build a pipeline through Native territories in B. C.

To accommodate the realities of the modern age, the book also introduces movements like environmentalism (p. 48), feminism (pp. 49-50) and in general critical social movements, arguing that they find their true expression in this kind of localism. But I wonder how all these things can be brought into connection! The movements in question seem inherently universal—why is it their destiny to become local? How could fraternity arise between, say, Native groups in their locality and such critical social movements?

Footnote 21, page 95, cites Heidegger's account of place or locality, as we know it from the essay, "Building Dwelling Thinking." Where Heidegger contrasts location (*Ort*) with space (*spatium*), this would seem to exemplify the present contrast of location with Empire, i.e., finding an imperial, commanding reach that is implicit even in the very concept of space.

So the book is proposing two essentially conflicting forms of the Canadian reality.

### **Identity: National or Local?**

Here we touch the philosophical foundation of the argument. The English-Canadian quest for identity is well known and seems to be one motive driving this book. The main theme in the introductory pages is that there is an intellectual tradition that has often been articulated by scholars and writers working in English Canada. We share in a definite culture that may have some affinities with that of Quebec—and other affinities with the cultures of the U.S.A. and Great Britain—but that has an identity of its own. This cultural-literary identity seems to point to a *national* identity, one that has had difficulty expressing itself within the conditions of our history (pp. 37-40). We belong to Canada and speak of it, but in our discourse there is a "slippage" whereby it is actually English Canada that we mean. Since this peculiar fragment, English Canada, is tied within Canada to Quebec, we do not speak directly of what we mean. It is clear to everyone nowadays that Quebec is a nation (and of course Parliament has said so). But what about the rest of us? Do we constitute another nation?

Does the title of his book mean an identity of English Canada as a whole? Or does it mean manifold identities that are dispersed and local? If it is the former, then I understand the predilection for an English-Canadian nationhood. But on the other hand, identity may be more intensely correlated with a particular location. Page 33 quotes Northrop Frye's *Bush Garden*, but I note that in that text (pp. xxii-xxiii) Frye argued that identity was not the same as union, for identity in Canada was always local whereas union was national.

The counter-sketch to Empire here was Locality. But this sketch is not advocating separatism. In some way, Locality is to be universalized. This is the grounding for the principle of association (chap. 4), a descendant of Proudhon's doctrine of federalism (pp. 73-5). Agreements between communities would be like treaties, not contracts, not subject to the supervision of a hegemonic state (i.e., Empire).

This is contrasted with an imperial version of Federalism. Canadian history has brought us its own kind of federalism, understood as a theory of divided sovereignty, where the central government is sovereign in its own sphere (e.g., defense, currency) and provinces sovereign in theirs (e.g., health, education). Federal and provincial regimes are both aspects of the State; "State" in Canada does not mean only the Ottawa regime. Proudhon's federalism seems to

have had a completely different meaning, for he seems to have gone as far as to renounce the entire idea of a central state. Does the theory of locality want to assign sovereignty to the communities? These communities would seem to be on a smaller scale than a Canadian province, closer to what the Europeans called the “commune.” Or does Angus want to dissolve somehow the very structure of sovereignty itself, whether provincial or national? The last step would be pure anarchism.

But perhaps there is really a more complex interaction here. Is it possible that English Canada need have no identity at all, or possess only a very weak one? That would seem to be one implication of the principle of locality, that Identity is to be found only locally.

What if we take seriously the circumstance that Canada, as such, is *not* a nation? Canadians now seem to be less ready to apply this term to their country than they were in decades past, in part because of recognizing that the country is a broad federation containing a Quebec nation and a number of aboriginal First Nations. So there is one possibility: that “English Canada” should now be constituted as a nation, standing beside a Quebec nation. But another possibility, assuming no separatism, is that the federation should continue, with a Quebec nation sharing in the constitution along with a *post*-national, multicultural entity living on without a strong identity, “the English-speaking part of Canada” that is not a nation. Is this in fact possible? From a logical point of view, such an arrangement would grant a certain validity to the identity of “English Canada,” but it would recognize equally a non-identity of “English-Canada,” a fusion, then, of identity with non-identity. Whether such a form of life could be effective across a whole country is, I grant, subject to some doubt. But such a “union of identity with non-identity” could well express the actual character of “the English-speaking part of Canada,” and it might express something of a theme in our literature and culture.

## Works Cited

Angus, Ian. *Identity and Justice*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2008.