

CHRONIQUE D'AMERIQUE

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*How I
learned
my labour
classix*
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I've often thought of writing a book called *Mon Cours Classique*.

In Quebec until 1970, until the school reforms, the *cours classique* was the schooling a young man went through in his teenage years, if he was lucky. If his family was well off. If he was going somewhere.

The idea was that there were certain basics to a culture, to understanding how a way of life worked. That Latin was one of them, that Greek was another. That such an entry into life could not do without the philosophy of Athens. That it must also know how the fathers of the church had revised and adapted this philosophy. And that it must hear a bit of what modern thinkers were saying, too, but always within the faith, within reason, with respect for the past.

It was both liberating and taboo-rich, the *cours classique*. My *cours classique*? It would be a little different. It would be all the readings and conversations by which I learned what Quebec considered its basics. Its nuts, its bolts, its loves, its hates, its fundamental *Québécoiserie*.

The thing about the kind of *cours classique* is that it is often still going on twenty years after you undertake it. Only now, for instance, is it becoming clear to me how labour and the labour movement fit into the classics of Quebec.

That there was a labour culture in English Canada I knew when I arrived. Knew it even more clearly, I guess, than if I had come from a working-class family and grown up in a union.

Since it was the *lore* of the unions that had been passed on to me, there must

be a *lore*, there must be things in the labour movement visible to people. A movement. A movement shared by the mothers, by every-

This labour culture in English-Canada is a conversation about a young man who has a university. Now we were on the same paper, this young man who was curious about his family, her roots. He's a labour leader. He could not have been. The son of a small business. Never expected to be in a union outside a narrow

And yet this tiny texture, had a way of strolling through the Ottawa Auditorium in my adulthood, in the convention of the Party. From a known sweaters and jeans

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What struck me was *made it through*. I was folksy, and here it was the voices of college later. From the Old over to the New. The

At that time in Quebec breaking of the ice, questioning, the people and unions were working masses of French-Quebec and across Quebec and across working people, and took them back to the working class of their church, their

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be a lore, there must be a way of seeing things in the labour movement that was visible to people beyond the ranks of the movement. A way of seeing things shared by the movement, by its sympathizers, by everyone on the left.

This labour culture was a small thread in English-Canadian life. I recall a conversation about a cousin of mine with a young man who had met her at university. Now we were reporters on the same paper, this young man and I, and he was curious about my cousin's family, her roots. I said: "Her father? He's a labour leader." The young man could not have been more astounded. The son of a small businessman, he never expected to come upon a trade union outside a newspaper story.

And yet this tiny labour culture had a texture, had a warmth. I remember strolling through the corridors of the Ottawa Auditorium just on the eve of my adulthood, in 1960, at the founding convention of the New Democratic Party. From a knot of young people in sweaters and jeans a song was going up:

*We're gonna roll
We're gonna roll
We're gonna roll the union on . . .*

What struck me was that the song had made it through. It was all 1930s and folksy, and here it was coming out in the voices of college kids a generation later. From the Old Left, it had flown over to the New. There was a culture.

At that time in Quebec—1960, the breaking of the ice in Quebec, the questioning, the preparation—labour and unions were very important. The masses of French-speaking people in Quebec and across America were working people, and their own culture took them back to before the formation of the working class. To their village, their church, their square dances.

They needed something to take them forward into the machine age, and trade-unionism played this role. It kept the collective values, but translated them into industrial terms.

All Quebec intellectuals paid homage to the work the Confédération des Tra-

vailleurs Canadiens et Catholiques had done at Asbestos and Louiseville, and the work the United Steelworkers of America had done at Murdochville. For those who were active in socialist groups, or officials of the unions themselves, this homage was woven into their work, their daily reflexes.

But the homage spread out from there.

On television the Plouffe family lived the working life; in the theatre, Marcel Dube's characters talked of the exploitation they felt in the shop and the need they felt for a union. I can still hear the father of Florence saying things like this in an amateur production of the play in Sherbrooke, leaning on the kitchen table, his grizzled jaw all forlorn.

That same year, in Sherbrooke, I read the anthology of articles on the Asbestos strike by Pierre Trudeau and his friends, and realized how vital it was to the thinkers of the middle class that manual workers were moving, acting, daring, on social-justice issues, with modernist positions. Without them, the intellectuals would have felt all alone in their protests.

In Sherbrooke in the early 60s I heard chatter and speeches by Gus Steenland, Jean Marchand, Michel Chartrand, Curtis Lowry, Lewis Craig, Jean Marc Kerouac, the personnel of this labour culture in the Eastern Townships. They gave the culture faces, words, intensity. "Social justice" is an expression I remember coming into my vocabulary then, and I remember feeling it was a Catholic term, one I'd never have learned from the labour tradition I'd known in Ottawa. I went to Asbestos and drank beer in a tavern there; I saw the great hills of asbestos dust from the open pit.

I saw the jumble of factories in the valley at East Angus, and I remember the way Lewis Craig, on his way to becoming mayor of the town, named his profession. He named it in English, though he was a francophone: "Je suis *papermaker*."

But I could also sense the fragility of these linkages. A funny thing about the Trudeau-edited book: though often mentioned, it was a rare book. It wasn't in print. You had to get it from university libraries or from bookstores in Montreal with old warehouse stocks.

And a thing that strikes me now, about the artistic extension of the union tone. About the very art that most potently carried the union culture in my place of origin. About song. . .

Song was then transforming itself in Quebec. In Sherbrooke it was at the *Boite & Chansons* that this was happening. But almost never did one of the chansonnier's songs mention unions.

Quebec working people were always fighting their battles in these songs. The singers were often themselves members of the Union des Artistes, which had shaken up show business in Montreal since 1959 or so. Claude Gauthier sang:

*So one day Old Six-Foot-Tall
Shaved the foreman's upper lip
With a quick axe stroke.*

But those who roared the choruses were the kids of the *cours classique*. They did not often think directly in trade-union terms. These songs would found a whole incredible sector of French mass culture in the 1970's. Robert Charlebois would sing:

*My eyes clamped tight with sleep
Punchin' in at the factory gate*

The punch card would be in this poetry. But not the union card. And yet the union struggle continued all through the 60's, all through the 70's, and all through the 80's, to be central to the ferment in Quebec.

An image from the early 70's remains with me: a trip from Quebec to Montreal with a couple in their mid-thirties whose whole youth had been in the union movement. "We also did a lot of work on the south shore with young couples, teenagers. We set up courses on preparation for marriage. We answered questions about birth control and sex . . ."

The movement as an entire framework for life. A culture. To wear oneself out for this aim. The lines at the corners of pretty young eyes.

And back in Montreal in the literary part of my *cours classique*, I read Emile

Zola's *Germinal*. A novel little read in English, but which was always mentioned to me by French-speaking friends when I spoke to them of workers and work. In it, a middle-class novelist tries to come to terms with the heart of the union life: what, in working people's existence, draws them together, unifies their action and demands; and what pulls them apart, pulls them into themselves, into their private loves and angers and glasses of gin. One of the few famous works of literature to do that, and one of the few pictures of children working in the mines in the 19th century which wonders who these children were, and in what ways they might have been proud of working in mines.

I had a book in mind then, that I've just brought to completion.

Métallo, the story of the Steelworkers, at Murdochville in 1957, and after, of their legendary (I say "legendary" still hoping it is true) leaders, Pat Burke, Théo Gagné, Emile Boudreau. Never did I doubt this book would be pertinent. Rather, I feared someone else's writing it first.

I was so sure the story belonged on the curriculum of the Quebec *cours classique*! Two workers were killed in the Murdochville strike, and the people of Steel—the *Métallos*—were later to be among the most enthusiastic partisans of independence in the Quebec working class. In them there was a meeting of the CIO tradition from the U.S. and the Canadian Depression; and the Christian currents I had discovered in Sherbrooke. How could such a story not be a winner?

It's true there were problems. By the time the Common Front of public-service employees was in its bitter strike with the Parti Québécois government in 1983, it was clear that the national-liberation current in Quebec was at odds with the workers'-liberation current. There was also an editing-out of the international and Canadian unions from most intellectuals' picture of unions; a retaining of only the CSN, the all-Quebec central. This was a turning away from the real union scene. And yet it is true: the "Sayessen", in its

posters, its prose, its face to the world, has a sense of culture, and the internationals have almost none. Their cultural tradition exists in spite of their leaders and their officiality, in the smiles, shouts and quirks of their members. (These are what I have tried to put into *Métallo*.)

Then there's the question of unionism's place in the present-day social ladder. This is not really clear yet to either unionists or their observers. What is clear is that early on, the movement was felt as the voice of the poor. The voice of people who had left school young and who worked with their hands — mostly, but not solely, men. (There were always the seamstresses.) And that now unionization has rushed massively up into white-collar regions, without really fleshing out its presence among the poor. So that unionism is now the voice of a certain middle region in the society, with the manual-intellectual thing as a vague surviving barrier *within* the movement. And the poor spoken for by others.

And then, I would say, there's the quite justified doubt in the mind of today's activist for a new society about whether the unions and their leaders are really awake. Whether they understand that even a booming and well-paid industrial machine pollutes. Whether they grasp their need for allies in other parts of society, and other parts of the world.

But then, the Quebec teachers' union, the CEQ, did gather thousands of workbooks and pencils for Nicaragua....

Perhaps the word "central" is the key.

Union culture has never been central in English Canada. The Winnipeg General Strike, Ginger Goodwin, the On To Ottawa Trek, Resor's Siding, Joey Smallwood against the loggers, the jailing of Grace Hartman, British Columbia's Solidarity . . . You must be a special kind of Canadian to feel these things strongly. They are not part of the agreed heritage, not household words.

Quebec, from about the time that René Lévesque picketed with the Radio-Canada producers in 1958, to about the time that René Lévesque ruled the province in 1978, was different. Its labour tradition was within its larger tradition. Within it, and near its centre. Quebec—rebellious Quebec—was nothing without Michel Chartrand's speeches. The FLQ era was nothing without the La Granade shoe factory and the Lapalme mail truckers. The age of the "Emelles," the Maoists, was nothing without the Robin Hood Flour picket-line shootings. Quebec feminism wasn't much without the millions of

women who joined unions in the 1970s. Liberation was not liberation without a union component.

And now, with the culture changed, with a large French business class as surely created by the changes as any other new force, with the independence idea shelved, the unions are . . .

Well, look at them at Pointe-au-Pic, where one of their militants died at the hands of a policeman, without, I fear, really rallying a broad group of citizens to the cause of the hotel workers there.

They're isolated.

The Quebec labour tradition was married for a decade or two to a mainstream husband who only half-understood her. Now the divorce has been completed. She must now find new companions. Fight her way back into the mainstream with new companions, perhaps non-francophone companions. The couple had only one solid child, and that is the Myth of the Asbestos Strike, 1949. This event is the object of novel, play and essay. But only rarely (as Trudeau's infuriating importance in the Myth shows) from her own proud, autonomous, self-reliant perspective.

She's feeling as the English Canadian unions have always felt, with their warm, singing-through-the-years tradition, and their little-known roles.

Her legends are now scarcely legendary.

And as I prepare *Métallo* for the press, I feel I'm not studying the *cours classique* any more. I'm teaching it.

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THE MUSIC OF GORDON MONAHAN

The Canadian composer Gordon Monahan works with constant attention to the same way that produces pitch. The properties of pure influenced acoustic object of his thinking over the past eight of each piece lies a simple and straight by a broad spectrum from physics and popular music and Monahan's concert three pieces in part *Mechanics* (1981-8) *Piano* (1984-86), and (1981-87). The recording two pieces was released at the Music Gallery constitutes a concert otherwise fluid practice

Young Gordon was born in Ontario in 1956 and moved to Ottawa. He began playing at eight, and at twelve where he played eleven recorded. He later attended the University of Ottawa, transferred to Mount Allison University in Sackville, N.B. to study music. At Mount Allison he founded a campus theatre company