

# Canadiens, Acadiens, and Canada: Knowledge and Ethnicity in Labour History

Jacques Ferland

Volume 50, 2002

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/11t50llt01>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Ferland, J. (2002). Canadiens, Acadiens, and Canada: Knowledge and Ethnicity in Labour History. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 50, 101–116.

Article abstract

By distinguishing between Canadian and Acadian workers, on the one hand, and Canada workers, on the other, this essay examines some of the cognitive implications of L/LT's epistemological commitment to a Canada-centered interpretation of labour history, particularly with respect to francophone working-class minorities. It argues that this labour history journal is representative of how emphasis on Canada-based workers and labour yields its own definition of class experience, a geopolitical definition that does not necessarily correspond to the ethnically-grounded "national" aspirations and struggles of French-Canadian and Acadian workers.

# *LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL:* A CANADIAN RETROSPECTIVE — CLASS, GENDER, AND NATION

## *Canadiens, Acadiens, and Canada:* Knowledge and Ethnicity in Labour History

Jacques Ferland

On Saturday, June 1 [2002] in Rumford [, Maine,] at the Eagles Club, there will be an evening of music centered around the fiddle. A local family named Roy, has an incredible group of family performers who are gathering for an evening of music and good times. They are also bringing in some Canadian fiddlers to be part of the event. The Acadian Society has agreed to organize the food for the evening. So, the write up below will describe our efforts. Supper starts at 5pm and music will follow. The entire evening promises to be a lot of fun. If there is anyone out there wondering what the Acadians of Rumford are up to, here is your chance to come and see.<sup>1</sup>

A CENTURY AGO, French North Americans toiled in numerous factory cities and mill towns. They formed, in absolute numbers, the majority of the working-class population not only in the province of Québec but also in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, Biddeford, Maine, Southbridge, Massachusetts, Plainfield, Connecticut, and

<sup>1</sup>Rh a C t  Robbins, managing editor, FAFEMM [Franco-American *femme*] listserv, 30 May 2002.

Jacques Ferland, “*Canadiens, Acadiens, and Canada: Knowledge and Ethnicity in Labour History,*” *Labour/Le Travail*, 50 (Fall 2002), 101-15.

Suncook, New Hampshire.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, they represented the largest ethnic group in numerous New England industrial centres such as Fall River, Lowell, Holyoke, New Bedford, Fitchburg, Salem, North Adams, Chicopee, Marlboro, and Ware, Massachusetts. In these 10 centres alone there lived 120,000 French North Americans born in Canada or of Canadian parents.<sup>3</sup> Many of these workers still called themselves *Canadiens* or *Acadiens* and were referred to as “French Canadians” or “Canada French” in the United States, where they mainly comprised non-unionized workers and mostly stood as “alien” members of American society.<sup>4</sup> With their predominantly rural outlook and agricultural background, they proved profitable to textile manufacturers, becoming the leading ethnic group in the New England mills, and totaling 44 per cent of the entire regional cotton textile workforce.<sup>5</sup> With time, they founded in the neighborhood of 150 *national* parishes, managing somehow to garner the resources necessary for the construction of various ethnic institutions in communities commonly known as *petits Canadas*.<sup>6</sup> Many among these *Canadiens* and *Acadiens* cultivated very close ties with their homeland, bonds that have lasted to this day, involving visiting relatives, reading about French-Canadian protest during World War I in francophone newspapers, sending their children to Québec boarding schools, networking with Québec mutual societies, or just reconnecting with their roots.<sup>7</sup> They still travel to Québec and the

<sup>2</sup>Gerard J. Brault, “An Overview of Studies Relating to Franco-American Communities in New England,” in Claire Quintal, ed., *Steeple and Smokestacks: A Collection of Essays on the Franco-American Experience in New England* (Worcester, MA 1996), 72.

<sup>3</sup>Brault, “Franco-American Communities,” 73.

<sup>4</sup>François Weil, *Les Franco-Américains* (Paris 1989), 164 and 226. Also Yves Roby, *Les Franco-Américains de la Nouvelle-Angleterre: Rêves et réalités* (Sillery, PQ 2000) chapter 2, “Regards de l’autre.”

<sup>5</sup>Philip T. Silvia, “The Spindle City: Labor, Politics and Religion in Fall River, Massachusetts, 1870-1905,” PhD dissertation, Fordham University, 1973, 686.

<sup>6</sup>Paul P. Chassé, “Chronological List of Franco-American Parishes in New England,” in Dyke Hendrickson, *Quiet Presence: Dramatic First Person Accounts — The True Stories of Franco-Americans in New England* (Portland, ME 1980), 39-42.

<sup>7</sup>These ties with French-speaking Canada are found most explicitly through oral history and family histories. See for example Tamara K. Hareven and Randolph Langenbach, *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory-City* (Hanover and London 1978); Felix Albert, *Immigrant Odyssey: A French-Canadian Habitant in New England* (Orono 1991); Hendrickson, *Quiet Presence*; Stewart Doty, *The First Franco-Americans: New England Life Histories from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1938-1939* (Orono, ME 1985); and Normand Lafleur, *Les “Chinois” de l’Est ou la vie quotidienne des Québécois émigrés aux Etats-Unis de 1840 à nos jours* (Montreal 1981). For some insightful observations on this theme see also Michel Guignard, “The Franco-Americans of Biddeford, Maine,” in Quintal, ed., *Steeple and Smokestacks*, 122-144. The late Robert G. LeBlanc, who lost his life on 11 September 2001, published a revealing study on Franco-Americans, French Canadians and World War I: “The Franco-American Response to the Conscription Crisis in Canada, 1916-1918,” *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 23, (Autumn 1993), 343-372.

Maritimes, but, after two world wars, a great depression and much assimilative pressure, the ethnic identity they share with their Québec and Acadian counterparts has become more affective than experiential.<sup>8</sup>

What is the relevance of this “American” prelude to the state of Canadian labour history and the direction of its leading academic journal, *Labour/Le Travail* (*L/LT*)? Many seem to accept that Canadian labour history pertains to what happened in Canada, as opposed to what was experienced by all Canadian workers. Indeed, other than examining the causes of emigration and studying migratory patterns within Canada itself, Bruno Ramirez is very explicit in arguing that French Canadians who established themselves in New England belong in the history of the US as “Franco Americans.”<sup>9</sup> This is “logical,” in his view, both for practical and conceptual reasons: Americanists understandably command the most expert knowledge of manuscript sources located primarily in the US, and, in any case, “the study of an immigrant population or ethnic minority divorced from the structural and conjunctural realities of the host society is hardly conceivable.”<sup>10</sup>

The difficulty with this logic is how *it* divorces the French North American immigrant experience from its own ethnic concept of “nation” and its leading “national” project, namely to recreate French Canadian and/or Acadian ethnic institutions and cultural life in an urban-industrial setting located in New England. As we know, this transplantation project, shared by virtually all European immigrants, generally proved utopian after the first generation adapted to the assimilative pressures of the US. But the 800,000-900,000 French Canadians and Acadians who left for *les Etats* over the span of one century did not so rapidly sever their ties with French Canada and Acadia.<sup>11</sup> Probably more than any European immigrants, French Canadians managed to persist as a distinct ethnic work-

<sup>8</sup>Many authors differ as to when and why this cultural differentiation took place. Yves Roby, for his part, begins his study of the causes of “runaway assimilation” with the impact of the Great Depression and World War II. Yves Roby, “From Franco-Americans to Americans of French-Canadian Origin or Franco-Americanism, Past and Present,” in Quintal, ed., *Steeples and Smokestacks*, 614-18.

<sup>9</sup>Bruno Ramirez, “Emigration et Franco-Américanie: bilan des recherches historiques,” in Dean Louder, ed., *Le Québec et les francophones de la Nouvelle-Angleterre* (Sainte-Foy, PQ 1991), 8. A similar view is professed by Yves Roby, who asserts that beyond the first “Canadian” generation, these immigrants “did not perceive themselves as forming a distinct nation on American ground.” (my translation) Roby, *Les Franco-Américains*, back cover.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, My translation.

<sup>11</sup>Yolande Lavoie, “Les mouvements migratoires des Canadiens entre leur pays et les Etats-Unis au XIXe siècle: étude quantitative,” in Hubert Charbonneau, ed., *La population du Québec* (Montreal 1973), 78. Lavoie estimated at 825,000 the number of *Québécois* who left the province for the United States. Also, Ralph D. Vicero, “Immigration of French-Canadians to New England, 1840-1900: A Geographical Analysis,” PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1968.

ing-class entity within US society because of their geographical concentration in the Northeast, their urban concentration in an archipelago of *petits Canadas*, their occupational concentration in textile mills, the “wave-like pattern” and duration of their emigration, the proximity of their homeland and a high rate of transiency across the border, their slow rate of naturalization, the expansion of Québec institutions into New England, and so forth.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, an extremely long chapter in the history of the *Canadien* and *Acadien* working-class families in New England consists of their notable aspiration to shelter themselves from the disintegrative effects of “the structural and conjunctural realities of the host society.” However, by some tacit agreement, it seems, Canadian labour historians have been more comfortable with setting their narratives in a context where the “nation” was being built, as a bounded entity, and in so doing they have played a role not unlike English Canada’s textbook writers who populate, construct, and ultimately define their own concept of “Nation” in print, one that excludes a number of “others,” the “Canadien/Acadien” Franco-New Englanders among them.<sup>13</sup>

This paper examines some of the cognitive implications of *L/LT*’s epistemological commitment to a Canada-centered interpretation of labour history, particularly with respect to francophone working-class minorities. It is not my purpose to suggest that, as a publication pertaining to Canada, the journal is exclusive in some fundamental way. To the contrary, it has become increasingly inclusive of the whole Canada-based working-class “experience” with each new volume, as exemplified recently with another gap-filling issue on “Race and Ethnicity” in Canadian labour history.<sup>14</sup> Rather, *L/LT* can be viewed as representative of how emphasis on Canada-based workers and labour yields its own definition of class experience, a geo-political definition that does not necessarily correspond to the ethnically-grounded *national* aspirations and struggles of French-Canadian and Acadian workers.

Desmond Morton’s analytical categories in his “Millennial Reflections” are indicative to an extent of the degree to which country has prevailed over ethnicity and its cross-border, beyond boundary, itineraries. Morton notes that, compared to most other topics such as industrial relations (46 articles), “working lives” (45 articles), politics (45 articles), gender (40 articles), unions (29 articles) and strikes (23

<sup>12</sup>Michael J. Guignard, “The Franco-Americans of Biddeford, Maine,” in *Steeple and Smokestacks*, 122-144.

<sup>13</sup>Among many similar examples, see J.L. Granatstein (York University), Irving M. Abella (York University), T. W. Acheson (University of New Brunswick), David J. Bercuson (University of Calgary), R. Craig Brown (University of Toronto), and H. Blair Neatby (Carleton University), *Nation: Canada Since Confederation* (Toronto 1990).

<sup>14</sup>*L/LT*, 47 (Spring 2001) includes Sarah-Jane (Saje) Mathieu, “North of the Colour Line: Sleeping Car Porters and the Battle against Jim Crow on Canadian Rails, 1880-1920,” 9-42, and Pamela Sugiman, “Privilege and Oppression: the Configuration of Race, Gender, and Class in Southern Ontario Auto Plants, 1939 to 1949,” 83-114.

articles), “ethnic issues” have proved the more specific theme in only 10 cases.<sup>15</sup> By my own count, however, it would be more accurate to speak of at least twice as many pieces with an analytically strong ethnic orientation. The majority of them pertain to newcomers in Canada — particularly Italian, Jewish, Finnish, and Irish immigrants<sup>16</sup> — rather than to Canadian immigrants outside of Canada about whom there are five or six notable articles.<sup>17</sup> Whether they held deep ancestral roots

<sup>15</sup>Desmond Morton, “Some Millennial Reflections on the State of Canadian Labour History,” *L/LT*, 46 (Fall 2000) 35.

<sup>16</sup>The *L/LT* articles on Italian immigrant workers in Canada and its body of literature: Robert Harney, “Montreal’s King of Italian Labour: A Case Study of Padronism,” 4 (1979), 57-84; Bruno Ramirez, “Brief Encounters: Italian Immigrant Workers and the CPR, 1900-1930,” 17 (Spring 1986), 9-27; Franca Iacovetta and Robert Ventresca, “Italian Radicals in Canada: a note on sources in Italy,” 37 (Spring 1996), 205-220; Franca Iacovetta, “Manly Militants, Cohesive Communities, and Defiant Domestic: writing about Immigrants in Canadian Historical Scholarship,” 36 (Fall 1995); and Robert A. Ventresca, “Cowering Women, Combative Men: Femininity, Masculinity, and Ethnicity on Strike in Two Southern Ontario Towns, 1964-1966,” 39 (Spring 1997), 125-158. On Finnish immigrant workers in Canada and their union leadership see J. Peter Campbell, “The Cult of Sponteneity: Finnish Canadian Bushworkers and the Industrial Workers of the World in Northern Ontario, 1919-1934,” 41 (Spring 1998), 117-146; J. Donald Wilson, “‘The police beat them up just to keep warm’: a Finnish Canadian Communist Comments on Environmental Depredation and Capitalist Exploitation in Early 20th century British Columbia,” 44 (Fall 1999), 191-204; and Satu Repo, “Rosvall and Voutilainen: Two Union Men Who Never Died,” 8/9 (Autumn-Spring 1981-82), 79-102. On Jewish immigrant workers see Jacques Rouillard, “Les travailleurs juifs de la confection à Montréal (1910-1980),” 8/9 (Autumn-Spring 1981-82), 253-60; Ester Reiter, “Secular Yiddishkai: Left Politics, Culture, and Community,” 49 (Spring 2002), 121-46; and Ross Lambertson, “The Dresden Story: Racism, Human Rights, and the Jewish Labour Committee of Canada,” 47 (Spring 2001), 43-82. On the German Left see Art Grenke, “From Dreams of the Worker State to Fighting Hitler: The German Canadian Left from the Depression to the End of World War II,” 35 (Spring 1995), 65-106. And, explicitly about Irish immigrant workers see Ruth Bleasdale, “Class Conflict on the Canals of Upper Canada in the 1840’s,” 7 (Spring 1981), 9-40. One should also include relevant essays about ethnicity, immigration and the working class such as Bruno Ramirez, “Ethnic Studies and Working-Class History,” 19 (Spring 1987), 45-48; Franco Iacovetta, Michael Quinlan, and Ian Radforth, “Immigration and Labour: Australia and Canada Compared,” 38 (Fall 1996), 90-115; and Cynthia Comacchio, “‘The History of Us’: Social Science, History, and the Relations of Family in Canada,” 46 (Fall 2000), 167-220.

<sup>17</sup>The *L/LT* articles are Bruno Ramirez, “French-Canadian Immigrants in the New England Cotton Industry: a socioeconomic profile,” 11 (Spring 1983), 125-142; Frances H. Early, “Mobility Potential and the Quality of Life in Working-Class Lowell, Massachusetts: The French Canadians, ca. 1870,” 2 (1977), 214-228; Jean Lamarre, “Modèles migratoires et intégration socio-économique des Canadiens français de la vallée de Saginaw, Michigan, 1840-1900,” 41 (Spring 1998), 9-33; Peter Bischoff, “D’un atelier de moulage à un autre: les migrations des mouleurs originaires des Forges de Saint-Maurice et la segmentation du marché du travail nord-américain, 1851-1884,” 40 (Fall 1997), 21-73; and Yukari Takai,

in Canada or they were newcomers possibly destined to some other location in North America, the “Canadian” workers in *L/LT* are often “Canada” workers who mostly embody this national identity because they are found living and working in Canada. Not surprisingly, the relevant locations for these workers’ aspirations and struggles are primarily provincial, regional, and any local environment therein (148 articles), even though “Canada” offers an equally valid referent (62 articles). Meanwhile, in spite of the historical geographers’ now classic depiction of Canada as a country where people mainly lived within 100 miles of the Canada-US border, Morton found that the US, locally, regionally, and nationally, proved most relevant to the journal only on 10 occasions, mainly in the 1980s.<sup>18</sup> (Indeed, in seeking an *entente cordiale* with labour historians in another country, in 1988 and in 1993, Australia was deemed a more amicable partner than the United States!)<sup>19</sup> And, somehow, everybody knows that Canada was not merely a “host society,” that numerous unions originated in the US, and that Canadian working-class realities, particularly in eastern Canada, have entailed far more movement, dislocation, uprooting, and replanting than what can be contained in this nation-bound narrative. Because this country’s political territory has been stable, in contrast to how some European national territories have been reconfigured by war and diplomacy, scholars have not seriously debated the relationship between knowledge and territoriality. But should researchers devoted to the study of working-class peoples almost invariably identify and characterize “Canadian” workers as those living within a “liberal construct” mainly developed in response to the aspirations of the workers’ employers?<sup>20</sup>

To insert into the narrative the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth-generation French Canadians and Acadians who successfully transplanted their culture in the US entails far more than can be addressed adequately in this paper. Clearly, though, such a cross-regional and cross-national perspective tends to shift emphases in several new directions. For instance, the massive out-migration of French Canadians in the late 19th century stands virtually as a counter weight to Canada’s entire industrial workforce. With their aggregate population of 205,741 individuals born in Canada and 128,014 “Franco-Americans” born in the US, there were over 330,000 French North Americans in New England, in 1890, at a time when Canada’s indus-

---

“Shared Earnings, Unequal Responsibilities: Single French-Canadian Wage-Earning Women in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1900-1920,” 47 (Spring 2001), 115-132. The Ramirez and Comacchio essays, in 16 above, also make reference to the lives of Canadian immigrants in the USA.

<sup>18</sup>Morton, “Millennial Reflections,” 35.

<sup>19</sup>Among other achievements, this collaboration resulted in the joint edition of *Labour/Le Travail*, 38 (Fall 1996) and *Labour History*, 71 (November 1996).

<sup>20</sup>Ian McKay, “For a New Kind of History: a Reconnaissance of 100 Years of Canadian Socialism,” *L/LT*, 46 (Fall 2000), 69-80.

trial workforce increased from 248,000 workers in 1880 to 351,000 workers, 10 years later.<sup>21</sup> To be sure, a great proportion of these emigrants consisted of young people but, then, so did their own immigrant labour as they massively coalesced around New England textile mills.<sup>22</sup> After having witnessed how labour history has revised the origins of Canada's industrial revolution to a much earlier period than the early 20th century, *L/LT* readers might be shocked by the widely held view among Franco-American authors that their ancestors sought work in New England because there was no industrial employment in their own country or that Canada was mainly an agricultural economy. But the fact remains that, already by 1890, French Canada's army of 100,000 US industrial workers was only slightly less than the 116,753 "workers" reported for the whole province of Québec in the 1891 census. This census was, however, notorious for its inclusion of handicraft production and domestic hand looms as industrial work, notwithstanding our appreciation of the transformative influence of the National Policy.<sup>23</sup> And with a total net emigration of 875,000 people from Canada to the US, for the last two decades of the 19th century, one faces the very distinct possibility that, during Canada's "Age of Industry," as many "Canadian" industrial workers toiled in the US than as those who stayed in Canada.<sup>24</sup>

Did these Canadian immigrants merely replicate in the US the existing occupational structure found in Canada? More likely, as in the case of French Canada, chain migration, "chain employment," and access to a far less limited domestic market magnified the importance of those sources of employment that proved most accessible to unskilled rural families. As a result, textile industries, second only to "timber, lumber and wood products" in Canada itself, became an even more typical source of industrial employment for Canadians. By its sheer demographic size in the Northeast, this textile industrial workforce virtually dwarves occupations and sectors highlighted in the earlier days of *L/LT*, historical actors and experiences characterized by specific union activities and an often masculine working-class culture. Indeed, by combining Canada's 72,672 textile workers in 1910 with the 44 per cent of all cotton textile producing positions French Canadians had secured for themselves in New England, and the additional thousands who worked in New

<sup>21</sup>Data on New England's French North American population are drawn from Leon Trudell, *The Canadian Born in the United States* (New Haven, CT 1943), 77. Data on Canada's industrial workforce derived from Granatstein, et al., *Nation*, 84.

<sup>22</sup>For data on the occupational concentration of French Canadians in the state of Massachusetts, as compared with the Irish Americans, see Weil, *Les Franco Américains*, 45-52.

<sup>23</sup>Weil, 48; and Jean De Bonville, *Jean-Baptiste Gagnepetit: Les travailleurs montréalais à la fin du XIXe siècle* (Montréal 1975), 29.

<sup>24</sup>Michael S. Cross and Gregory S. Kealey, eds., *Canada's Age of Industry: 1849-1896* (Toronto 1982). Typically the leading actors in this literature on Canada's early process of industrialization are not so much Canadians as they are Canadian places — Toronto, Montréal, the Maritime provinces of Canada.



England's woolens, worsted, and silk mills, it is safe to state that, for every one of the 130,000 unionized workers in Canada — in transportation, mining, metal working, paper and printing, the building trades, etc. — there existed at least one corresponding “Canadian” textile hand. Once again, this is not to suggest some deficiency in *L/LT*'s coverage of textile workers, for that surely is not the case.<sup>25</sup> Rather, along with bush work and wood work, this more comprehensive narrative reveals the more typical working-class universe of French Canadians and Acadians, where they were most likely to “respond” to industrialism, and how they were most often perceived by society as a whole.

The basic wage work unit of this French North American working class is also more family-oriented than the individualized workers often featured in *L/LT* and many other labour history journals. Its disproportionately female composition serves to qualify the notion that women's industrial work was a more minor dimension of their multiple roles in urban society than wage employment was for their male counterparts.<sup>26</sup> Rather, as Thomas Dublin points out in his comparison with earlier generations of female textile hands in Lowell, Massachusetts, “[t]he French Canadian and Greek mill operative in 1900 was, in fact, ‘an arm of the family economy’ ... in ways that simply had not been the case for Yankee women workers fifty or sixty years earlier.”<sup>27</sup> Overall, French North American women were more likely to concentrate their wage work in textile mills than their Irish North American counterparts. In 1900, women comprised one third of the “French Canadian” in-

<sup>25</sup>In addition to the previously cited works by Ramirez, Early, Rouillard, and Takai, on textile and clothing workers, see the following *L/LT* articles: Gail Cuthbert Brandt, “Weaving It Together’: Life Cycle and the Industrial Experience of Female Cotton Workers in Québec, 1910-1950,” 7 (Spring 1981), 113-126; Jacques Ferland, “Syndicalisme ‘parcellaire’ et syndicalisme ‘collectif’: une interprétation socio-technique des conflits ouvriers dans deux industries québécoises (1880-1914),” 19 (Spring 1987), 49-88; Jacques Ferland, “In Search of the Unbound Prometheus’: A Comparative View of Women’s Activism in Two Québec Industries, 1869-1908,” 24 (Fall 1989), 11-44; Robert McIntosh, “Sweated Labour: Female Needleworkers in Industrializing Canada,” 32 (Fall 1993), 105-138; Ellen Scheinberg, “The Tale of Tessie the Textile Worker: Female Textile Workers in Cornwall During World War II,” 33 (Spring 1994), 153-186; and Mercedes Steedman, “The Promise: Communist Organizing in the Needle Trades, the Dressmakers’ Campaign, 1928-1937,” 34 (Fall 1994), 39-73.

<sup>26</sup>See for example Bettina Bradbury, “Gender at Work at Home: Family Decisions, The Labour Market, and Girls’ Contributions to the Family Economy,” in Bettina Bradbury, ed., *Canadian Family History* (Toronto 1992), 191: “Yet, the figures of labour-force participation rates for the two wards studied here, suggest strongly that girls and women seldom entered the workforce in proportions equivalent to their brothers or boys the same age, and that over their life courses their participation was totally different.”

<sup>27</sup>Thomas Dublin, *Transforming Women’s Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca and London 1994) 232. Dublin is quoting from Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (New York 1978) 109.

dustrial workforce in Massachusetts and they very seldom sought individualized employment as domestics, in other “services,” or in clerical work.<sup>28</sup> Because of their predominant involvement in cotton textile production, they also faced a somewhat different sexual division of labour than the male-centered or female-centered working lives often depicted in *L/LT* and in influential monographs such as Joy Parr’s study of Penman’s in Paris, Ontario.<sup>29</sup> As Tamara Hareven noted with respect to Amoskeag, the largest mill in North America with 17,000 employees: “A good number of the jobs within the textile mill, such as weaving, doffing, spinning, carding, and tying-over, were performed by men and women interchangeably. In most cases, no clear-cut division between male and female work according to specific skills had been established....”<sup>30</sup> French-speaking “Canada’s” girls and women who toiled in labour-intensive weave rooms in the early 20th century had aggregated in one of the most sexually mixed workplaces of the Machine Age, an environment where brothers and sisters, *cousins* and *cousines* could easily become co-workers, thus further contributing to the persistence of French-Canadian and Acadian family ties over time.<sup>31</sup>

Partly because of the vast contribution of female and male youth engaged in industrial work long before adulthood, this working-class ethnic minority also ranked as a more sickened, physically damaged people than most other ethnic and racial groups in North American society. As they were being mobilized for the US armed forces during World War I, “French Canadians” were singled out in Army Medical Department statistics for displaying “the poorest overall health in general: a high incidence of stunted growth, tuberculosis, and nervous and mental defects.”<sup>32</sup> One may find an explanation to such a dismal health record in government factory investigations at the beginning of the 20th century. They disclose that, among all ethnic groups working in New England textile mills, French North

<sup>28</sup>Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor, *34th Annual Report* (Boston 1904) 14, as quoted in Weil, *Franco-Americans*, 49.

<sup>29</sup>Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns 1880-1950* (Toronto 1990). However, it is always possible to focus exclusively on the female component of this mixed workforce, as illustrated recently by Yukari Takai, “Shared Earnings, Unequal Responsibilities: Single French-Canadian Wage-Earning Women in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1900-1920,” *L/LT*, 47 (Spring 2001), 115-132.

<sup>30</sup>Tamara K. Hareven and Ralph Langenbach, *Amoskeag. Life and Work in an American Factory-City* (Hanover, NH 1978), 116-117. I have also emphasized this point in my MA thesis and published work. Jacques Ferland, “Le rôle des déterminismes sociaux dans le développement des forces productives de l’industrie textile du Canada - 1870 à 1910,” MA thesis, McGill University, Montréal, 1982.

<sup>31</sup>Weave rooms, however, certainly were not a gender neutral environment. All maintenance, mechanical work and supervisory functions remained male preserves.

<sup>32</sup>F.M. Binder and D.M. Reimers, eds., *The Way We Lived. Volume II: 1865-Present*, Fourth Edition (New York 2000), 122. Derived from Meirion and Susie Harris, *The Last Days of Innocence: America at War, 1917-1918* (New York 1997).

Americans were the most prone to rely on child labour *within the mills*. In other words, the issue of “Franco” child labour could prove somewhat more complex than the rather linear interpretation whereby children were sent to factories because families were “dirt” poor. All other economic realities being equal, on the eve of World War I, a child raised in a French North American working-class family was more likely to serve as cheap labour in a textile mill than his or her Irish, Portuguese, Greek, or Polish counterpart (who might also have been working but elsewhere than in the mills).<sup>33</sup> Family histories pertaining to child labour such as those collected by Hareven in Manchester, New Hampshire, do not stress the moral dimension of this issue as much as in contemporary accounts of labour reformers, who were concerned with a variety of adverse consequences of children working from a young age. Rather, they point to a family-centered perspective and strategy derived from “traditions of mutuality and shared labour that infused the culture and family lives....”<sup>34</sup>

To a significant extent, the *Canadiens* and the *Acadiens* had not only transplanted their parish institutions in New England but also the work ethos of rural Catholic families. In the case of French North Americans, this family-oriented work ethos often involved bigger families than in the rest of society. Over the *longue durée*, Allan Greer noted, “[t]he real peculiarity of French Canada’s demographic history lies in the fact that birth rates remained high long after the pioneer conditions of abundant land had disappeared.... [R]ural Québeckers kept having babies with little sign of contraceptive practices right up into the twentieth century.”<sup>35</sup> Beyond the rhetoric of the “revenge of the cradles” lies a more popular form of solidarity which assumes different ethnic and racial expression — *la familiari* in Italian immigrant communities, the clan or the band among Native Americans, and *la parenté* in French North America. “To a remarkable degree,” writes Franca Iacovetta, “southern Italian families preserved traditional cultural forms and familial arrangements and thereby resisted disintegration.”<sup>36</sup> The same “remarkable” attribute of persistent family-oriented strategies is not difficult to find among French North Americans in New England’s industrial heartland. Other than signaling, from a class perspective, the child abuse inherent to “raw” capitalism, and from a gender perspective, a dialectic at work between patriarchy and capitalism, family-oriented work in French North America further mirrors a strategy of

<sup>33</sup>Suzanne Moulton, “From Sweepers to Spinners: Franco-American Child Labor in the Textile Industry,” University of Maine, Franco-American Luncheon Series, April 2001. Suzanne Moulton’s data is derived from a detailed US Senate Investigation on child labour in the United States, during the first decade of the 20th century.

<sup>34</sup>Cynthia Comacchio, “The History of Us,” *L/LT* 46 (Fall 2000), 205.

<sup>35</sup>Allan Greer, *The People of New France* (Toronto 1997), 23.

<sup>36</sup>Franca Iacovetta, “From Contadina to Worker: Southern Italian Immigrant Working Women in Toronto, 1947-62,” in B. Bradbury, ed., *Canadian Family History*, 297.

preservation particularly critical for this working-class minority because of its added linguistic and cultural dimensions.

Acadian and French Canadian immigrants also shared a similar *mentalité* in their relative lack of normative contemporary labour attributes such as the sub-culture of craft work, trade-oriented unionism, and urban political “machine” building. Even in their second and third generation in the US, they were seldom found at the forefront of labour unrest, political life, and union activities.<sup>37</sup> To accept as premises that, over the span of one century, French-speaking Canada provided the industrial heartland with an enormous reserve army of cheap labour, often with strike breakers, mainly with rural, hinterland families willing to toil under less rewarding conditions than mainstream urban workers, carries with it a significant implication concerning unionism and labour history as a whole. Union strategy and recruitment practices in Québec, and beyond, consisted not only in protecting members and their families against the deprivation of capital but also against French Canadian family-oriented labour itself, often referred to as “cheap” or “yellow” labour, and the survival strategies of an impoverished rural population. For this reason, it can be misleading to represent union development as a practical alternative open to all members of the working class.<sup>38</sup> In their more defensive postures, unions could prove exclusive, paternalistic, even xenophobic actors, such as during the 1880s when French Canadians were dubbed the “Chinese of the Eastern States.”<sup>39</sup>

By necessity, if not by choice, and then, because of the culturally-constructed “traditions” of their community leaders, French North American factory hands and common labourers turned to the more broadly inclusive institutions of the parish for support, protection, education, social services, associational life beyond the family, and spiritual relief from the harsh realities of existence. In the past few decades, labour historians have given ample testimony to the effect that, notwithstanding their parish institutions and cultural insularity, French North American textile workers could and did join unions, engage in spontaneous and organized

<sup>37</sup>William Ripley, “Race Factors in Labor Unions,” *Atlantic Monthly* (March 1904), 302; Shirley Zebroski, “The 1903 Strike in the Lowell’s Cotton Mills,” in Mary Blewett, ed., *Surviving Hard Times: The Working People of Lowell* (Lowell, MA 1982), 45-62; Donald Cole, *Immigrant City: Lawrence, Massachusetts (1845-1925)* (Chapel Hill, NC 1963), 184; Tamara K. Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time: The relationship between the family and work in a New England industrial community* (New York 1982), 287-340; Hareven and Langenbach, *Amoskeag*, 295-306; François Weil, *Franco-Américains*, 71-81; Doty, *First Franco-Americans*, “Afterword.”

<sup>38</sup>However, a union’s exclusive recruitment practices does not preclude the occurrence of numerous spontaneous strikes, often headed by women, as I have endeavored to document in the textile mills of the province of Québec. See the two articles cited above, in footnote 25.

<sup>39</sup>This nativist “crisis” has been given considerable attention in Franco-American history. For an overview, see Weil, *Franco-Américains*, chapter 4, “Crises et croissance, 1880-1910.”

strikes, show solidarity across ethnic boundaries, and thus express class consciousness.<sup>40</sup> Still, in this process of ethnic reconstitution known as the *petits Canadas*, as opposed to class formation, they rendered themselves more pertinent to ethnic history than to labour history. In fact — and Bruno Ramirez only alludes to this interesting reality — Franco-American authors themselves, historians and non-historians, have stuck to a different body of literature — a distinct narrative — from that of labour history in their far greater emphasis on the *communauté* and its *survivance*, which somewhat displaces factory work and the labour movement.<sup>41</sup> Québec economic and ethnic historian Yves Roby has also virtually dismissed labour history as a relevant field of study in his influential work on Franco-Americans, emphasizing instead a middle-class “radical” discourse about a *patrie*, a *pays natal*, a fortress, and an invisible barrier against assimilation and “foreign” infiltration.<sup>42</sup>

The now muffled social stigma associated with Franco “white trash” identity throughout New England often puzzles American outsiders accustomed to viewing anything “French” as the source of *haute couture*, *joie de vivre*, diplomacy, and gastronomy. By way of contrast, New England “Francos” have offered the world their rough culture of *tourtières*, *cretons*, and *boudin*, their “heavily accented” French language, beautifully “imperfect” literary figures Jack Kerouac<sup>43</sup> and Grace Metalious and, for the military experts, mainly “grunts” who do not always exemplify a polite conception of professional propriety! Living at the margin of mainstream society and remaining relatively far from the core of the labour movement itself, these immigrant workers are still remembered for their cultural insularity within the celebrated melting pot US “middle class.” To this day, notwithstanding labour history’s chronicle of union activities and strikes, the steeples overshadow the smokestacks in Franco-American local, regional and continental history.<sup>44</sup> In her introduction to *Steeple and Smokestacks*, Claire Quintal illustrates this shift in emphasis when she writes:

<sup>40</sup>Most notably are Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960* (Cambridge, MA 1989); Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Worker City, Company Towns: Iron and Cotton Worker Protest in Troy and Cohoes, New York, 1855-84* (Urbana, IL 1978); and John T. Cumbler, *Working Class Community in Industrial America: Work, Leisure and Struggle in Two Industrial Cities, 1880-1930* (Westport, CT 1979). More ambiguously, Hareven, *Family Time* and Cole, *Immigrant City*.

<sup>41</sup>Ramirez, “Emigration et Franco-Américain,” 6-7.

<sup>42</sup>Roby, *Les Franco-Américains*, chapter 4, “L’emergence d’un discours radical (1865-1900).”

<sup>43</sup>Clark Blaise, “Création d’une conscience: notes pour une saga franco-américaine,” in Dean Louder, Jean Morisset and Eric Waddell, eds., *Vision et visages de la Franco-Amérique* (Sillery, PQ 2001) 24-5.

<sup>44</sup>A very good, finely crafted, example of Franco-American local history by local authors is the collective Nos Histoires de l’Île Group, *Nos Histoires de l’Île: History and memories of French Island, Old Town, Maine* (Orono, ME 1999). Much literary production authored by

We need not here insist upon the importance of religion in the lives of French-Canadian immigrants. Religion was the great supporting pillar of *la survivance* on American soil.... *Survivance* had been maintained in Canada against overwhelming odds, ever since the defeat of the French by the British in the mid-eighteenth century. That determination to remember the role played by the French in the development of the North American continent, that sense of obligation to their ancestors, of not letting go of something for which so much had been sacrificed, that need to survive, for their sake, as a distinct entity, has to be understood if one hopes to comprehend the attitudes, the actions, and the reactions of these immigrants.<sup>45</sup>

Significantly, no extensive reference is made to the “smokestacks” in Quintal’s introduction. They serve as background for the more meaningful narrative, in Franco-American authored works, of religious, linguistic, and cultural survival in insular communities centered on the “national” parish.

*Survivance* has long been and remains the chief organizing principle in Franco-American authored and edited historical literature. It is especially revealing to compare the major themes of this 682-page anthology with Morton’s categories for *L/LT*. Even though the locus remains the textile factory cities and other mill towns, as a whole, Quintal’s contributing authors devote marginal attention to class-directed culture and politics, to unions, labour unrest, and industrial relations. They write about “Emigration,” “Franco-American Communities,” “Religion,” “Education,” “Literature, Journalism, and Folklore,” “Franco-American Women,” “Franco-Americans Today,” and “The View from Within.”<sup>46</sup> Needless to say, because of this emphasis on the relatively classless values of language, faith and kinship, parish institutions, clerical hagiography, traditional folklore, and representation of momentous conflicts as primarily involving Franco parishioners opposed to Irish Catholic ecclesiastical leaders, this sort of history does not figure very prominently in *L/LT*! But in view of their astonishing community-building achievements throughout New England, how could there persist any doubt as to French Canada’s and Acadia’s working-class ability to organize collectively? Indeed, could the 150 [mainly working-class] *national* parishes founded in New England also be viewed as a “union,” a religiously-based union, and the corresponding institutions as a “movement,” a French Canadian institution-building movement, in the same comprehensive vein

---

Franco Americans in New England has been published by the Institut Français/French Institute of Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts, from which production, in large part, Claire Quintal derived the anthology *Steeple and Smokestacks*. Continental perspectives on French America mainly feature the themes of “mobility, identity, and minority experience across the continent,” such as in Dean R. Louder and Eric Waddell, eds., *French America* (Baton Rouge, LA 1993) (previously published in French as *Un continent perdu, un archipel retrouvé* (Sainte-Foy, PQ 1983) and Dean Louder, Jean Morisset, Eric Waddell, eds., *Vision et visages de la Franco-Amérique* (Sainte-Foy, PQ 2001).

<sup>45</sup> Quintal, *Steeple and Smokestacks*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Quintal, *Steeple and Smokestacks*, table of contents.

one speaks of a women's movement or an African American movement? And why should survival and persistence in the face of xenophobia, nativism, and assimilation in predominantly working-class *petits Canadas* simply be called hagiographic history when it could be viewed as a facet of Canadian labour history outside of Canada? Historians and their intellectual constructs, such as the concept of "Franco-Américanie," have placed this more ethnically oriented narrative by Franco-American authors beyond the pale of both Canada and of labour history. But, beyond academic categories and fields of expertise, the story remains the struggle of a working-class ethnic minority from Canada, known as "Canucks" and closely tied to the *Canadiens* and *Acadiens*, to persist as a distinct cultural "entity" in the US.

Labour historians, like other social historians, are trained especially to grapple with change over time. Arguably, ethnic historians, along with ethnohistorians and all students of ethnicity, are intellectually more inclined to detect and to emphasize persistence. Naturally, students of the history of French North America are free to contribute their own *genre* to working-class studies, a *genre* that would be less categorical in its identification of French North American workers between the 1830s and late 1920s, either as "French Canadians" or as "Franco-Americans," simply because they crossed the border. This sort of intellectual *rapprochement* between Canadian workers in Canada and those in the US might entail its own conceptual precepts such as the "making" of ethnic working-class minorities still deeply rooted in, and committed to, the cultural values of their Canadian ancestors, as transmitted not only by a clerico-conservative elite but also by elders and embedded in the language they first learned from their own mothers and co-workers as much as from the nuns. Is this not implied in Canada where labour historians refer to Italian workers in Toronto as "Italians" and not as "Italo-Canadians"?! This more representative model of French-speaking Canada's cross-border working-class "experience" might further entail added emphasis on a more *affective*, and less material, grasp of historical process. In addition to the bread and butter issues, hourly rates, and the "structural and conjunctural realities" Francophone Canadians encountered in the host country, this working-class ethnic minority actually valued, and continues to value, its oral culture and rural traditions. Strike lore and episodic organization struggles figure no more forcefully than "pre-industrial" songs, dances, and *soirées du bon vieux temps*. Distinct ethnic rituals such as the equinoxial Saint-Jean Baptiste celebration, the decorum of great religious ceremonies such as *la messe de minuit* and *les Pâques*, kin networks that have long transcended national and regional boundaries, even recipes and other cultural markers such as how to weave a *catalogne* like *memère*, are thus critical markers of ethnic and class identity.

To characterize such persistence as being antithetical to the labour movement, if not as the reactionary construction of a conservative nationalist elite sanctioned by ultra-conservative Church officials, amounts to alienating this French-speaking

minority, past and present, from its own conception of collective struggle. It has the same effect on Franco-Americans today as when they are informed by Québec scholars that they became “assimilated” a few generations after their departure. Like World War I veterans, it is all too often suggested, what remains of French Canadian and Acadian identities is now on the verge of extinction: they are “Americans” *tout court*; their current cultural actualities merely represent trivial artefacts devoid of any meaningful “scientific” or material substance. Holding on as a distinct ethnic population within an increasingly anonymous, homogeneous modern society, these workers clearly have not been deficient in the assertion of their own rights and, in itself, this history of survival, of “survivors,” has become a central theme in their collective identity. As has been the case within the African American movement, the Native American movement, and the women’s movement, the greater the fragmentation of their collective history into academic categories and intellectual segments, the less meaningful it becomes to their own movement as an ethnic working-class minority in northeastern North America and beyond.



# TELOS

## A Quarterly Journal of Critical Thought

Since May 1968, *Telos* is committed to the development of an *American* Critical Theory and the analysis of cultural and theoretical issues from a broad geopolitical perspective.

Number 121

Fall 2001

### Articles

**Henry McDonald:** Wittgenstein and Cultural Studies

**Aryeh Botwinick:** Post-Shoah Political Theology

### Special Section on:

#### European Responses to Sept. 11

**Russell A. Berman:** Responses to Sept. 11

**Luciano Pellicani:** Islam and the West

**Alain de Benoist:** The 20th Century Ended Sept. 11

**Jean Baudrillard:** The Spirit of Terrorism

**Alain Minc:** Terrorism of the Spirit

**Marco Tarchi:** War as a Tool of Liberal Hegemony

**John Milbank:** Sovereignty, Empire, Capital and Terror

**G. L. Ulmen:** The Military Significance of Sept. 11

### Reviews

**Julia Kostova:** The Fate of Bulgarian Jews

**Joshua Gunn:** On Mythic Mimesis

*Subscriptions include 4 issues per year and cost \$40 for individuals and \$95 for institutions. Foreign and Canadian orders add 15%. Checks/Money Orders must be in US funds, drawn from US banks. Back issues cost \$14 each (\$30 for institutions). No Credit Cards. Back issues available: 13, 17-18, 20-51, 53-120. For subscriptions, back issues or information, write to:*

*Telos Press Ltd,*

*431 E. 12th Street*

*New York, NY 10009*

*phone: 212-228-6479 fax: 212-228-6379*

*e-mail: telospress@aol.com*