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Construing Trade Unions:
the Anti-Trade Union Discourse of the British Governments

In an article written nearly two years before his death in 2002, Pierre Bourdieu, philosopher, sociologist and critical mind of the Western world, turned his eye to a phenomenon which he named “The New Planetary Vulgate”. In the article – published in Italian by the monthly magazine Le Monde Diplomatique and in English in the academic journal Radical Philosophy - Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant deal with the question of language in society in a way that may seem superficial to a specialised audience like that of discourse analysts. Nonetheless, they demonstrate how the importance of semiosis does not pass unnoticed to sensitive observers of the world.

The 'literary occasion' for this work sparks exactly from the reading of the article referred to above, where the idea of a society that looks at trade unions as obstacles to be removed is advanced.

This is a society characterized by the deliberate dismantling of the social state and the correlative hypertrophy of the penal state, the crushing of trade unions and the dictatorship of the 'shareholder-value' conception of the firm, and their sociological effects: the generalization of precarious wage labour and social insecurity, turned into the privileged engine of economic activity1.

[emphasis added]

Trade unions, as the organisations for the protection and advancement of the interest of working people, have had a paramount role in the history of Western capitalist societies in general and in the British one in particular. Their development goes hand in hand with that

1 Radical Philosophy, 105 (January/February 2001), p. 2-5. The article is a translation of the article appeared in “Le Monde Diplomatique” 554, May 2000, pp. 6-7. It has been chosen as it is deemed to be more reliable translation than the one possibly done by the author.
of the economic and political changes that have shaped contemporary societies. Their double role as economic and political actors makes them one of the forces which drive, and at the same time are subject to the changes which mark the passage from one model of economic and political order to the other. One such change, or I would better say process, is that of the creation of a global capitalist economy, hereafter referred to as *neo-capitalism* (Bourdieu 2000; Jessop 2002).

The role of trade unions as social actors in the neo-capitalist world order is shaped through discourse, mostly through the ideas about them that powerful actors both in the economic and in the political sphere manage to make hegemonic. This makes the study of the construal of trade unions be inscribed in the general aim of the study of human conditions in this particular economic and political context, as Norman Fairclough makes clear in his “Manifesto for Critical Discourse Analysis” (Fairclough 2003). Here, Critical Discourse Analysis (hence CDA) is described as a research programme that, like all instances of critical social research, aims at better understanding how societies work and produce both beneficial and detrimental effects, and how the detrimental effects can be mitigated if not eliminated (Fairclough 2003: 203). Indeed, in line with Bourdieu, the manifesto states that neo-liberal discourse aims at removing the obstacles to the transformations of neo-capitalism and trade unions are listed among other obstacles such as public services.

The ultimate objectives of the approach described so far are making the hidden connections between discoursal practice and social change manifest and consequently setting an agenda that may empower the weaker part in the processes of social change. The role of discourse

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2 The group of the fallible ideas that inform construction (Fairclough, Jessop and Sayer 2002).
analysis is thus that of driving emancipatory change; the focus is on people being spurred into action and being given the discursive instruments to act.

In the light of these considerations, the research presented here aims at exposing the force of discourse in the progressive weakening of trade unions so as to provide a valid instrument for counteraction. These issues will be dealt with in more detail in the first chapter, dedicated to the theoretical framework, the methodology and the objectives of the study.

Since the problem at the heart of this study is in fact a social process, that is something that evolves over time, the adoption of a historical perspective seemed to be appropriate when the organisation of the findings had to be decided.

The second chapter deals with the anti-union discourse as developed during the winter of 1978-79 through the analysis of the words of Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan and of the leader of the opposition Margaret Thatcher. The first document to be taken into account will be Callaghan's speech at the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in September 1978.

Following the course of history, Chapter three shows how the anti-union discourse was developed during the first Conservative Government led by Margaret Thatcher as well as by her secretaries of labour.

The analysis of the 18 years of conservative rule will be divided into two chapters. Thus, Chapter 4 will deal with the discourse as developed during the year-long miners' strike and will continue with the analysis of the second term in office of the so-called Iron Lady.

The fifth and final chapter will try and describe how the discourse
against trade unions was interpreted by the New Labour prime ministers, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. In this way the analysis will close the circle of these thirty years of history by trying to detect how the threatened new “winter of discontent” influenced the current (2007) Prime Minister's relationship with trade unions. The virtual circle will also be closed from the point of view of the social practices under scrutiny. Indeed as the first document analysed is James Callaghan's speech to the Trades Union Congress conference of 1978, the final one will be another speech by a (New) Labour Prime Minister (Gordon Brown) to the TUC conference held in September 2007.