



Draining off Trade Unions' Role: Gordon Brown's Speech to the TUC Conference 2007

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Abstract

According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (2001) Trade Unions are one of the obstacles to the success of the neo-liberal project carried out by powerful social actors, international institutions and Governments. Analysis of how Trade Unions are construed (Fairclough et al. 2002) by Governments is thus a necessary step in understanding language in new capitalism.

Because of the change of power in Great Britain from Tony Blair to Gordon Brown both Trade Unions and political commentators expected a change in the relationship between New Labour and the workers' organisations. However, analysis of Gordon Brown's speech to the 2007 TUC annual conference shows that those expectations have not been fully met.

The conceptual framework for this analysis is Fairclough's most recent one for Critical Discourse Analysis (2003, 2006), coupled with the Discourse Historical Approach (Wodak and Meyer 2001). Text analysis is carried out using a pragma-dialectic approach to argumentation theory (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992) alongside the tools of systemic-functional grammar (Halliday 2004). The interconnectedness of the linguistic data with other moments of the social practice is also discussed as the study claims a post-disciplinary (Jessop and Sum 2001) perspective.

Keywords: Trade Unions, Gordon Brown, anti-Trade Union discourse, Critical Discourse Analysis

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on one particular aspect of language in new capitalism, namely Anti-Trade Union discourse. Through the study of one particular realisation of this discourse, the speech given to the TUC annual conference in Brighton in September 2007 by the British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, the paper describes what the features of anti-Trade Union discourse are. Departing from the ontological assumption that discourse is both a product of society and a force that contributes to its reproduction and change (Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Fairclough et al. 2002; Fairclough 2003), the paper offers an analysis which discloses the ideology that sustains this discourse. Such disclosure is consistent with the emancipatory agenda which, among other aspects, unifies the different approaches in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), where CDA is understood as both a programme of study (Wodak and Meyer

2001) and as a form of critical social research (Fairclough 2003, 2006). The study is characterised by a post-disciplinary perspective (Jessop and Sum 2001), which follows 'ideas and connections wherever they lead instead of following them only as far as the border of [a] discipline' (Sayer 2001: 88). This is a choice that also influences the structure of the article.

The first paragraph is devoted to the description of the general economic trends in which our text is situated. That is, post-Fordism as a mode of production, accompanied at state level with a Schumpeterian model and its application at the national level by the British New Labour Governments. Anti-Trade Union discourse is here understood as a semiotic moment in the social practice of governing. The traditional speech of Labour Prime Ministers to the annual conference of the Trade Union Congress is considered an institutionalised way of acting discursively and therefore a distinct genre of its own (Fairclough 2006). In paragraph 2.2, then, the features of this particular genre are described before moving to an account of the methodology used for text analysis and, finally, to the actual analysis of the text.

2. Background

2.1 Globalization, partnership and the Schumpeterian Competition State

The Schumpeterian Competition State (SCS) is, according to Jessop (2002), the new form of the capitalist state – a development that answers to the difficulties of Atlantic Fordism as a mode of accumulation in the capitalist system. SCS is also the type of capitalist state that better responds to a Post-Fordist accumulation regime, which has been taking shape since the 1970s when Atlantic Fordism was hit by various critical events (including the oil crisis of 1973 to name just one). Along with the Keynesian Welfare National State (KWNS) of Labour Governments of the 1970s, Atlantic Fordism has been gradually replaced by the SCS and the post-Fordist mode of production through the development of neo-liberal policies, mostly based on monetarist measures and other Ricardian policies, during the Conservative Governments. The subsequent New Labour Governments have worked in continuity with the Conservative ones, giving birth to what has been called neo-liberalism with a Christian socialist face (Jessop 2002, 2003).

New Labour Governments, despite their continuous reference to a 'third way' in the guidance of the economy, as opposed to both socialist and neo-liberal Governments, 'administered the Thatcher-Major legacy' (Jessop 2007, personal communication) while conducting the country in the transition from neo-liberalism to the so called knowledge-based economy. This is a movement based on the rhetoric of globalisation and public-private partnership as a means to guide the economy, but which does nothing more than hide the true partnership at work, which is the one that exists between the Labour Government and the global financial capital (that has to be looked at as opposed to both labour, and to productive, national capital) based in the City of London (Jessop 2002, 2003).

Gordon Brown's address to the annual conference of the British Trade Unions in Brighton was a particularly awaited one because it was the first of his mandate and some Trade Union leaders were expecting a u-turn in the relationship of the party with its biggest constituency. Another important background factor to the speech was the want to understand how the former Chancellor of the Exchequer would tackle the threat, advanced by many newspapers, of new seasons of discontent among workers, especially in the public sector¹.

Reporting on the event, Seumas Milne, for *The Guardian*, refers to the appraisal of the speech by Paul Kenny, general secretary of the General Municipal and Boilermakers' Union (GMB), in the very title of his article: *Rhetoric and Reality*. Indeed the trade unionist is reported as pointing out a discrepancy between what the Prime Minister has said during the speech and the reality of the *pay squeeze* in the public sector, not to mention the continuity of the Government in charge in refusing to fully adhere to the European Social Charter, which commits continental executives to respect some basic Trade Union rights².

Milne points out that the Prime Minister has 'pressed every labour movement button he could lay his hands on' but 'despite the warm words, the reaction of the floor was at best muted' and he reports that while Brown was speaking some delegates were showing placards asking for fair pay for the public servants.

2.2 The genre and its features

Genres are institutionalised ways of acting semiotically (Fairclough 2006). The genre 'Prime ministerial speech to TUC' has never been studied in depth, but some general characteristics can nonetheless be individuated. The address of the prime minister to the annual conference of the Trade Union Congress can be placed in two complementary governmental practices. On the one hand, through this semiotic device the Labour Prime Minister in charge shapes public opinion. On the other hand, PMs use the address to create party internal consent for their policies, as Trade Unions, since the creation of Labour in 1900, constitute the largest section of the party.

Nonetheless, the discourse community (Swales 1990) directly addressed by Labour PMs is the congress audience made up of Trade Unionists. Thus, one of the characteristics of the genre is a direct appeal to the delegates from the PM and the Government. Consequently, TUC speeches are always in the first person; sometimes referring to the Prime Minister alone (first person, singular), and sometimes to the Government (first person, plural).

The purposes of the speech are various. For example, it is intended to reaffirm party identity and commitment to the general political project, inscribe past Governments' actions in the wake of that project and, finally, to garner support for future policies. These intentions are normally realised in this order.

3. Methodology

The present study is part of a larger investigation into anti-union discourse. The methodology used here is based on the more general methodology used in this wider research programme (see Ortu 2008). However, only the methods appropriate for the analysis of the particular text dealt with here will be described.

First, with the practice of triangulation (Reisigl and Wodak 2001), which argues for a fourfold notion of context that has to be studied with a continuous movement between the four levels, I have been able to identify three macro-topics³ within the text: (i) construal of the economic and institutional landscape (ii) construal of Trade Unions' fundamental values; and (iii) construal of Trade Unions' action.

In the text under analysis the fundamental value subtly undermined by Brown is that of participative democracy, as opposed to representative democracy. Linguistic evidence of this is found through a social actor analysis using Van Leeuwen's classification (1996).

The macro-topic of the economic and institutional landscape is realised within the text in the description of the globalised economy and in its particular articulation of the knowledge economy, a construal that is entirely coherent with Brown's declination of the third macro-topic. Indeed the PM's attempt to impose upon Trade Unions a new role in society, that of providing new skills to workers, and thus construing Trade Union action, descends directly from such a construal of the economic situation.

The main point of reference in analysing linguistic data in CDA has been Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday and Matthysen 2004), an approach concerned with the relationship between language and other aspects of social life. Owing to this methodology, an operationalisation of the research questions into the following linguistic categories (suggested in Fairclough 2003) is possible.

- **Classification:** the way in which relations of equivalence and difference are built inside the text, which shapes the way 'people think and act as social agents' (Fairclough 2003: 88). Instances of classification are identifiable in texts by the building of semantic relations of contrast between clauses and sentences. Relations of equivalence are built in texts by means of additive and elaborative relations.
- **Appearances vs Reality:** the opposition between the construal of reality through ideological representations and the reality itself. Such ideological representations are uncovered through the study of transitive structures used in the text and the reconstruction of arguments, both evaluated using knowledge of the researcher and other specialists in the field on the matters under discussion (Iețcu 2006, van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992).

Argumentation is here used to denote the practice, or 'social activity' (van Eemeren et al. 1987: 2), of advancing reasons in order to convince others of one's standpoint. *Argument* is the product of such practice, the *standpoint* is

the opinion that needs support and *premises* are the instances of information used to support the arguer's opinion. *Topoi* are rhetorical moves which justify the transition from the premises to the opinion of the arguer. In simpler terms *topoi* can be thought of as the mechanisms that make the premises and the standpoint appear reasonable.

The text is treated as dialogic since the very presence of an argument implies that the author thinks that there is or there may be some disagreement with his/her standpoint (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992: 13).

Argumentations are reconstructed by reducing them to a logical minimum (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992), i.e. to a form which fulfils the needs of a logically valid argument. Only the fundamental information is retained, while the unexpressed premises are added and put in parentheses. Unexpressed premises are sometimes the place where *topoi* are hidden. Whether they are *topoi* or not, the unexpressed premises are pieces of information that the arguer believes can be taken for granted: shared, common knowledge on which the arguments rest.

4. Analysis

4.1 Globalisation and the historic goals of the labour movement: A forced marriage

Brown's construal of globalisation marks a change in the official New Labour discourse:

It is this challenge how all of us in Britain raise our game, to meet and master the new forces of globalisation in the interests of working people in this country, and that is what I want to speak about this morning: the task of the future.
(Brown 2007)

Indeed while Tony Blair's discourse was one in which measures such as flexibility and the loss of workers rights were an inevitable Darwinian adaptation to the globalised economic environment, and globalisation was seen as an unchangeable monolithic reality, Brown's construal of the reality is rather more positive. This becomes evident when examining the transitivity structure adopted here. The people of Britain, 'us in Britain', is the actor of the material process of 'rising the game'. The coordinate causal clause has as its goal 'the forces of globalisation', which are to be mastered by the same actor according to its own interests. What is most important is that globalisation becomes a mere circumstantial element and is used as a participant in the clause only with reference to its forces. Thus globalisation is not conceived of as an immanent reality. On the contrary its existence has its roots in the forces that make it possible and which are under people's control. The idea is that if we are confronted by forces we may well turn them to our advantage. This particular construal of globalisation, it must be emphasised, does not detract from it the idea of the process as a natural event, but its fragmentation into forces makes a great deal of discursive choices, and thus actions, possible. At this point an internal classification takes place: those forces need to be defined. Are they positive or negative, where are they

pushing us?

This is my central message today. All of us must prepare and equip ourselves for this **global era. We must maximise its opportunities for working people and seek to minimise its insecurities.** Nothing should stand in the way of us building jobs and prosperity not just for some but for all British working people. If we do so **and mobilise the talents of all our people,** then I believe that Great Britain can be the great success story of this **new global age.** (Brown 2007)

The global era is represented as being made of opportunities as well as insecurities and in Brown's speech these are the forces of globalisation. Such a concept of globalisation, as a reality made of opportunities and insecurities, opens the path for a discourse based on the need to make the most of the situation and avoid the detrimental factors in it. The attitude towards globalisation suggested, 'maximising the opportunities' and 'minimising the insecurities', is then summarised in the need to 'mobilise the talents' of the working people of the country. This is a topic central to Brown's speech which is analysed in more depth in paragraph 4.3.

As Milne pointed out in his *Guardian* article, Brown resorts to the more traditional aims of the Labour Party and Trade Unions together and tries to make the idea pass that there is no contradiction between those aims and the adaptation to the new economic order which he defends. The mediating effort is discursively performed as follows:

Some people argue that in this fast moving world of change we have to sacrifice our enduring values and give up on full employment and universal public services. But when people ask me about this world of fast moving change, of greater opportunity and yet greater unsecurity, and they ask: can we, the British people, in this generation, meet and master the new challenges and still achieve **our goals of full employment, defending and strengthening public services,** ensuring hard working people in Britain are better off in living standards, in **pensions and in services,** my answer is that if we work together and raise our game, if we do not resist change but embrace it as a force for progress and if we equip ourselves with investment, science, enterprise and flexibility, and most of all if we upgrade our education and skills, then we can not only meet and master these realities of global change but also ensure more British jobs, higher standards of living, and **better public services,** including an **NHS that improves** every year, **free at the point of need.** (Brown 2007)

The very presence of 'full employment' construed as a goal as well as the strengthening of public services represents a marked difference from past Governments since Margaret Thatcher. But the attempt by the Prime Minister to conjugate those goals coming from the past with the demands of the new capitalism is a hard task and he needs to use an argument to convince his audience:

Standpoint: WE CAN MASTER THE GLOBAL CHANGE AND TAKE ADVANTAGE OF IT

1 IF WE WORK TOGETHER TO RAISE OUR GAME

2 IF WE DON'T RESIST CHANGE BUT EMBRACE IT

3 IF WE EQUIP OURSELVES WITH INVESTMENT, SCIENCE, ENTERPRISE

AND FLEXIBILITY
4 IF WE UPGRADE OUR EDUCATION AND SKILLS

The missing premise that makes the argument work here is that global change is an unchangeable reality. Jointly the argument is made to work by what I shall call the *martial arts topos*: *if you cannot resist a force you have to use it to your advantage*. Thus Brown's argument will only work if the conference delegates all share the same vision of what the present and the future are. His appeal to the past is a rhetorical device that many of the Trade Unionists in the audience may not be prepared to let themselves be persuaded by. Indeed, Brown's reference to 'some people' at the beginning of the extract is not directed outside the assembly, but inside it. Most Trade Unionists do think that globalisation threatens the goals of full employment and universal public services. The argument is directed to them.

Brown resorts to history too in order to shed a negative light on the past Conservative Governments but also to introduce an old topic dear to the Labour Governments of the 1960s and 70s: 'wage discipline'.

The reference to the past is to 1992, the year of the so-called *Black Wednesday* when a devaluation of the pound was necessary in order to prevent an unmanageably high inflation rate.

This week will see the 15th anniversary of the most humiliating day for British economic policy in modern history, the Black Wednesday, of 15% interest rates, the exit from the ERM, the mortgage misery, the record repossessions, the negative equity, the 3 million unemployed, all the disasters that befell us 15 years ago. (Brown 2007)

The first aim of Brown with this reference to the past⁴ is to criticise his opposition David Cameron (who according to Brown was economic advisor of the government at the time of the crisis), and to suggest that Cameron would make the same mistakes 15 years on. Further on Brown manages to build the link between that past mistake and the present economic policy of his Government by stating that:

If we were again to allow, as they did, inflation to get out of control by repeating **as some would** the same mistakes of 15 years ago, we would be back to Britain's same old familiar Conservative pattern of spiralling prices, high unemployment, a mortgage crisis, and public spending cuts. (Brown 2007)

In the passage, then, it is made clear that Conservative economic policy lead to an economic crisis and that another Conservative Government would take us the same way again. But Brown is also introducing the topic of inflation and, as is clear in the passages that follow, he deals with the issue in a way which is not very different from all the Governments in the last thirty years (including James Callaghan's Labour Government). Indeed the responsibility for inflation is still placed on the uncontrolled, or in words more familiar to Brown 'undisciplined', raise of salaries. The canvass, in which 'discipline' is the *fil rouge*, is evident here:

It is because we must never return again to **those days when reckless promises** that you could simultaneously cut taxes, raise spending, cut borrowing, were made and then **inflation was allowed** to get out of control

causing 3 million unemployed, £16 billion public spending cuts, half a million reposessions, that we the Labour Government will always put **stability** first; no loss of **discipline, no resort to the easy options, no unaffordable promises, no taking risks with inflation.**

So let me be straightforward with you, **pay discipline** is essential to prevent inflation, to maintain growth and to create more jobs, so that we never return to the Conservative pattern of boom and bust ever again, and because this Government will take **no risk** with the economy we will only **make promises we can afford.** (Brown 2007)

Brown construes the economic choices of the past Conservative government as characterised by 'reckless promises'. It is worth noting how different his use of the 'no return to' phrase (here used to criticise the Conservative Governments of the past) is from that of his predecessor Tony Blair, who used it to criticise Trade Union action in the same years (Ortu 2008: 155). To go on with the classificatory effort undertaken the proposition can be synthesised in a less complicated clause complex: 'It is because we must never return to those days when [...] inflation was allowed to get out of control [...] that the Labour Government will always put stability first'. Stability is thus the antonym of the days of inflation, and as the days of inflation were characterised by 'reckless promises', stability, by contrast, is characterised by discipline, careful options, affordable promises and no risks with inflation. All the characteristics of stability presented above are then enshrined in just one policy measure: 'pay discipline', as stated in the second paragraph of the passage above. Thus with this paragraph Brown seems to invite a new round of measures almost as corporatist as the ones used by Labour Governments of the 1960s and 70s, but with no guarantees such as the *social contract*. The message is quite clear and it was meant for those in the public sector who were preparing for industrial action: 'we will only make promises we can afford'. Clearly increased salaries for public sector workers were not going to be affordable.

4.2 Trade Unions as actors, the final step into representative democracy

A representation according to which Trade Unions are not independent actors with a will of their own, but simply institutions that represent the sum of the individual wills of their members, is an attack to union fundamental values because it denies the formative value of the assembly of workers where a distinguished will, a collective will, is developed and becomes the Trade Union's will. Such a construal of Trade Unions is the fruit of a long battle undertaken by British Governments starting with Mrs Margaret Thatcher, who was the first to draw a parallel between democratic procedures for the choice of Governments in liberal democracies and the decision-making process inside Trade Unions. The translation of such a construal in her anti-union legislation has been the decisive step in the final inculcation of the concept in the public sphere (Ortu 2008: 102). There is not such thing as collective will or power, just the sum of individual wills and powers. Brown's speech demonstrates how this concept has entered the British common sense.

The occurrences of *Trade Union* in the text are 14. Most of the times the word is a pre-modification of 'movement', thus configuring a 'categorisation' of the

social actor through 'relational identification' (Van Leeuwen 1996: 56). Indeed the true actor in the clause is the 'movement' as the short examples reported below show:

-Thank you, Alison, as President of the Congress, and Brendan and the General Council for your leadership week in and week out of the **Trade Union movement** of this country.

-I will never forget that the **Trade Union movement** of this country...

-men and women who year in, year out, give their energy, devotion and commitment to sustain and in every generation to revitalise **the Trade Union Movement**.

-Thank you for the work you have done not just for the **Trade Union movement** but for our country ... (Brown 2007)

All these quotes come from the first lines of the speech, but the same realisation is also found further in the text:

For all its two centuries, the **Trade Union movement** of this country has been about enhancing the dignity and the work of labour. (Brown 2007)

Through relational identification, Trade Unions are represented in the text, but they are not explicitly participants in processes, either activated or passivated. This means that a very important aspect of the identity of Trade Unions, namely the possession of a will distinguished by that of the sum of individual wills of their members⁵, is eliminated as a semiotic choice from discourse.

The second more numerous categorisation of Trade Unions through relational identification has the concepts of learning and education as the bearers of the functional role in the sentence:

...as a tutor in **Trade Union learning**.

When I and others taught **trades union education** at Loader College in ...

...the Department of Employment under Norman Tebbit cut back the **Trade Union learning** budget, ...

...unstoppable momentum of **Trade Union learning** in Britain which has grown from strength to strength.

So you will understand why I am pleased to offer my personal congratulations to all those TUC award winners today for their work in **Trade Union learning**...

(Brown 2007)

Another instance is found further in the text:

This is why your work in **Trade Union learning** becomes central. (Brown 2007)

Here the work of the Trade Unionists present in the audience is the carrier of the attribute of 'centrality' and it is both pre- and post-modified by the possessive pronoun, behind which the true actors (that is Trade Unionists) are hidden, as well as by the circumstantial element in which Trade Unions are referred to. Overall, the result of the representation is that of putting learning

and education in focus, while Trade Unions are there just as a kind of trademark attached to it. The only exception to this pattern is that in the third example where the participant is the 'budget' and Trade Union learning is simply the characteristic attached to it. The organisations for the advancement of workers' interests and rights are treated as a brand that can be attached to things in order to make them more agreeable, more left-wing, in a moment in which some unions are still discussing the possibility of diverting their political funds to parties other than New Labour. The substance, though, does not change: the role of Trade Unions as both economic and political actors is totally ignored and demoted. This last part of the analysis anticipates the theme of the present study: the attempt of the Prime Minister to impose a new role on Trade Unions, a role that is not that of fighting to gain rights for the workers in economic terms, but that of contributing to their employability through training.

4.3 Trade Unions' new role: Enhancing the dignity of labour through education

Brown introduces his core concept in the speech by making a reference to his professional past, as a Workers Education Association tutor, and tutor in Trade Union learning. Brown marks an important turn with respect to Blair's position towards the policy measures of the Thatcher Governments.

When I and others taught trades union education at Loader College in Scotland and when, as a result of numbers signing up, the Department of Employment under Norman Tebbit cut back the Trade Union learning budget, I do not think he had any idea of the unstoppable momentum of Trade Union learning in Britain which has grown from strength to strength. (Brown 2007)

By referring to Norman Tebbit, the Employment secretary probably least favoured by Trade Unionists, Brown attempts to get his audience 'on side'. The reference to the Thatcher years sheds a negative light on what happened, indeed the main clause marks the Department of Employment (with the specification that it was under Norman Tebbit) as the actor of the negative process of cutting back Trade Union learning funds. Furthermore, the evaluation of the policy measure is attributed to ignorance in the clause following the main one, where Brown states that the secretary did not have 'any idea'. But it is not made manifest what he had no idea of. For example, of how important learning was for the economy, or of how good tutors and teachers were, or of the demand for such kind of education (he was not aware of the 'unstoppable momentum of Trade Union learning'). This is a very important passage in Brown's speech. In short it can be said that he is trying to align Trade Union education with an anti-Conservative ideology. The use of the noun 'momentum' activates meanings such as 'force', 'impulse' and 'energy' as a search in WordNet shows:

Sense 1

momentum, impulse -- (an impelling force or strength; "the car's momentum carried it off the road")

-> force, forcefulness, strength -- (physical energy or intensity; "he hit with all the force he could muster"; "it was destroyed by the strength of the gale"; "a government has not the vitality and forcefulness of a living man")

=> brunt -- (main force of a blow etc; "bore the brunt of the attack")
 => momentum, impulse -- (an impelling force or strength; "the car's momentum carried it off the road")
 => energy, vigor, vigour, zip -- (forceful exertion; "he plays tennis with great energy"; "he's full of zip")

Thus 'momentum' is a positive dynamic concept, made all the more resounding by its clearly Latin root and by its premodification by the adjective 'unstoppable'. The choices made by the Prime Minister here cannot be considered neutral. He wants to give to the new role he is proposing for the unions the same high profile as more traditional roles of Trade Unions. This parallel is taken up later in the speech:

For all its two centuries, the Trade Union movement of this country has been about enhancing the dignity and the work of labour. Today we are finding a new role which makes the task we undertake more relevant, more urgent and more demanding than ever. To enhance the dignity and value of labour in the 21st Century it is undeniable that we need to enhance the skills of every worker in this country. (Brown 2007)

Brown is aware of the fact that he is in front of a hostile audience likely to scrutinise his words, but he needs his concept of the new role of Trade Unionism to be accepted. In the passage above he therefore resorts to argumentation. The scheme of the argument above is thus:

Standpoint:THE ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS NOW IS THAT OF ENHANCING THE SKILLS OF WORKERS
 1 TRADE UNIONS' AIM HAS ALWAYS BEEN THAT OF ENHANCING THE DIGNITY OF LABOUR
 2 ENHANCING THE DIGNITY OF LABOUR MEANS ENHANCING WORKERS' SKILLS
 2.1 [IF TU WANT TO GO ON IN THE PURSUANCE OF THEIR AIM THE WAY TO DO IT IS BY ENHANCING WORKERS' SKILLS]

As happens quite frequently, the missing premise (the one in parenthesis) is the focal point of the argument. Indeed here Brown represents reality in a way that leaves the unions unable to counter his argument. The fact that it is not expressed but implied prevents Trade Unionists from saying that the furtherance of the rights of workers are the only mission of Trade Unions, not education according to the needs of capital. After the new definition of the role of Trade Unions has been communicated to the audience, the argument works thanks to the *topos of function* that exploits the shared idea that *if an entity has a function it should perform it*. But Brown goes on with other semiotic resources to convince the Trade Unions that their new focus should be placed on training and education through the use of a classification that is intertextual and is showed in the following extract:

So the new role for Trade Unions is to **bargain for skills**, to **campaign for skills**, to invest for skills and for the **fair rewards of skills**.

I shall call the strategy used here an 'interdiscursive classification'. Here the Prime Minister is not using an internal structure to give new meanings to words through the creation of relations of equivalence or difference between

them. Rather, he is importing words and their meanings from one discourse to another, in order to give them new connotations. The words 'bargaining', 'campaigning' and 'fair reward' are taken by the most traditional Trade Union discourse, and implanted in his discourse on skills. *Bargaining, campaigning* and asking for *fair rewards* generally called *fair pay* is part of the traditional activity of Trade Unions in their day-to-day job. They are so important as to be quite frequently accompanied by concepts such as freedom, or attributed to the collective strength of workers ('free collective bargaining' is one of the rights stated in ILO treaties⁶), which also recognises to unions the right to campaign and of the workers to get a fair pay for their work.

In Brown's discourse, bargaining is not for working conditions or new contracts but for skills. Campaigning is not for social justice or to keep public services, but for skills, and finally the traditional workers' slogan 'a fair day's pay for a fair day's work' seems to be substituted by 'a fair reward for fairly useful skills'. By using those concepts as attributes of his skills mantra Brown openly tries to tie the two discourses – Brown's discourse on skills and Trade Union's traditional discourse - and the action of the unions in so doing.

The attempt to give the educational role of Trade Unions the quasi-epic flavour of the battles of the past is even surpassed in Brown's speech. In the second part of his address the mission is attributed not only to Trade Unions but to an entire generation - 'this generation'. After reminding the audience that in order not to succumb to change it is necessary to 'embrace it as a force for progress', the Prime Minister states:

That means to achieve it we must embrace a new **mission** for this generation: to **unlock all the talent** of all the people of this country of Britain. (Brown 2007)

Thus, what was before 'the new role' of enhancing the dignity of labour through skills is now the even more resounding 'mission' of 'unlocking talents'⁷. What Trade Unions are called to do, in Brown's construal, is not 'transferring skills' but freeing something which has been kept captive.

In this way the importance of the task is set and the Prime Minister is ready to get to the point of what he believes is the very measure which should convince Trade Unionists that it is worth backing the Government in charge, as well as a possible New Labour Government in the case of an early general election (quite probable at the time of the conference), namely the expansion of the Trade Union Learning Fund.

To expand union learning in the workplace and to meet our ambition, which is one million adults in learning, we are going to raise the money available from the Union Learning Fund from £12.5 million this year to £15.5 million next year. (Brown 2007)

The idea that the state has to supply capital with 'ready-to-use' workers and that it is the Trade Union movement that has to manage the supply of training is a curious blend of modern and ancient concepts. Indeed the idea that the contemporary economic order needs flexibility also for what the skills at work are concerned is a contemporary one, linked to the discourse on globalisation, whereas the role of Trade Unions as suppliers of such skills is a recovery of the

role of medieval guilds, from which modern Trade Unions derive. Brown's construal of training and the fact that it has to be oriented towards the need of entrepreneurs is a demonstration of the still monetarist tradition prevailing in British Government policies. Indeed it signals that Brown believes that 'the state cannot reduce the rate of unemployment by stimulating effective demand [but only with] action on the *supply side* by improving employers' incentives to employ workers' (Callinicos, personal communication). Linked to this is a fact that can only be made manifest by taking a Marxist perspective on the matter: the fact that the supplying of the needed skills is asked of public bodies and not of the firms themselves means that the employers 'will gain extra surplus value if they are able to prevent an increase in productivity from simply raising real wages' (Callinicos, personal communication).

5. Conclusion

The analysis has shown that Brown's construal of Trade Unions, as performed through his articulation of the three macro topics taken into consideration, aims at undermining their role as social agents for the emancipation of the working class. An institution which collects individual wills and represents the majority of votes, that has as its primary goal the training of workers and that cooperates with the government in order to compete in the world market is simply not a Trade Union (at least not by ILO standards). But this is only clear to us thanks to a post-disciplinary approach and a thorough analysis of the discursive strategies used by the Governments in order to tame the Trade Unions and transform them from an obstacle in the way of neo-liberal policies (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001). The success of such strategies will depend on the further inculcation and enactment (Fairclough 2003) of the discourse, as well as on other forces that contribute to shape our society, not least the current economic crisis.

¹ The Guardian *Brown Faces Summer of Discontent as Strikes Loom*, May 16th 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2007/may/16/publicservices.uk>, The Guardian, *Public Sector Unions Warn Brown over summer of discontent*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2007/may/17/uk.society>, The Guardian, *Is Brown Facing a New Winter of Discontent?*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2007/aug/30/tradeunions.ukcrime>.

² http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/seumas_milne/2007/09/for_anyone_who_withnes sed_a.html

³ The term topic is here used in the general, day-to day sense, as synonym of subject or theme.

⁴ The Prime Minister at the time was the Conservative John Major.

⁵ The construal of Trade Unions as a simple sum of individual wills traces its origins from the late seventies, especially from the anti-Trade Union discourse of conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (Ortu 2007).

⁶ Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87), and the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98).

⁷ Taken out of the context and put under the microscope, the definition may sound rather too resounding, but it must be pointed out that this part of the speech is a reprise of the skills mantra after an important digression on the visit of Nelson Mandela to Great Britain.

The reference to the important civil battles undertaken by the South-African leader is a partial excuse for the pompous style used in this sentence.

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