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Challenging the Problem-Solving
Paradigm**

FREIA

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Preface

This paper was presented by Professor Carol Lee Bacchi, Adelaide University during her weekly visit at FREIA in January 2010. The visit (which also included a visit to Roskilde University) was sponsored by the Doctoral programme Welfare State and Diversity.

Carol Bacchi presented her approach, *What's the problem represented to be?*, which she has developed in two Books, *Women, Policy and Politics*, Sage Publications 1999 and the more recent book *Analysing Policy: What's the problem represented to be?*, Pearson 2009. Bacchi's approach is inspired by Michel Foucault's ideas about problematizations and the central role, they play for public policies, and the paper explores the ideas of Foucault.

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Foucault, Policy and Rule: Challenging the Problem-Solving Paradigm

Carol Bacchi

The purpose of this paper is to encourage a rethinking of the way in which ‘problems’ are commonly conceptualised in policy-making and policy analysis. More specifically, it highlights the emergence and strength of a problem-solving paradigm in a wide range of sites, a paradigm that assumes that ‘problems’ are readily identifiable and objective in nature, a paradigm it sets out to challenge. This paradigm is clearest in the turn to evidence-based policy in many western industrialized states, including the European Union, and in international organizations, such as the World Health Organization. As exemplars consider the *European Commission Fifth Framework Programme* (1998-2002) ‘conceived’, as the Overview description states, ‘to help solve problems’, and the online ‘problem solving network’ for EU Member States, called nothing less than ‘*SOLVIT*’.

The same paradigm appears in many educational institutions which proclaim that their goal and purpose is to produce students who can ‘solve’ ‘problems’. In Australia, for example, most universities list the ‘graduate attributes’ that students can expect to acquire through a university education (Bacchi 2009a: 254-255). Invariably ‘problem-solving’ is put at the very top of the list.

What happens, I ask, to the way in which we think about government policy and about the goals of education policy if we challenge (as I intend to do) the underlying assumption that governments (and people) ‘solve’ ‘problems’? To answer this question I draw upon arguments developed in two earlier books, *The Politics of Affirmative Action: ‘Women’, Equality and Category Politics* (Bacchi 1996) and *Women, Policy and Politics: the construction of policy problems* (Bacchi 1999), and in my more recent publication, *Analysing Policy: What’s the problem represented to be?* (Bacchi 2009a). These arguments rely upon several key concepts: problematization, governmentality, subjectification and contestation, indicating indebtedness to (among others) the French philosopher, Michel Foucault.

From the Politics of Affirmative Action to Women, Policy and Politics

Between 1991 and 1994 I researched and drafted a book comparing affirmative action/positive action policies in six countries, including Australia, the United States, Canada, Norway, Sweden and The Netherlands. The book, called *The Politics of Affirmative Action: ‘Women’, Equality and Category Politics* (Bacchi

1996), pointed out that ‘affirmative action’ had been given very different meanings over time and across space (in different sites). For example in some places it was described as ‘special treatment’ for ‘disadvantaged’ groups; at other sites it was defended as ‘social justice’.

Affirmative action, I concluded, is not a fixed term. It can have a variety of meanings. Moreover, these meanings significantly affect what transpires in terms of social change. Conceptualising affirmative action as ‘special treatment’, for example, has the effect of limiting reform to ameliorative measures such as training or outreach programs, measures designed to ‘assist’ those called ‘disadvantaged’ to compete and integrate. On the other hand, considering affirmative action as a social justice measure creates the grounds for substantive changes to hiring and promotion policies. To capture the variable meanings attached to affirmative action, I described it as a ‘contested concept’, building upon the work of W. B. Gallie and others (Swanton 1985). With this understanding it becomes clear that how affirmative action is *represented* – how it is conceptualised – matters in terms of effects or implications.

In order to identify how different reforms are conceptualised, I determined that it was possible to start with specific policies and examine how they represented a ‘problem’. Continuing with the affirmative action example, the task is to examine the specific forms of change that are advocated in order to identify how the reform is understood and defended. This insight builds on the commonsense understanding that what we propose to do about something reveals what we think needs to change and hence what we think the ‘problem’ is.

This idea transforms the way in which we think about government policy. Commonly governments are seen to be *reacting* to ‘problems’ and trying to solve them. The rethinking proposed here highlights that specific proposals (or ways of talking about a ‘problem’) impose a particular interpretation upon the issue. In this sense governments *create* ‘problems’, rather than *reacting* to them, meaning that they create particular impressions of what the ‘problem’ is. Importantly these impressions translate into real and meaningful effects for those affected.

It is important to mention that the kind of representation of issues discussed here does not refer to *deliberate* misrepresentation, though doubtless at times members of governments portray issues in particular ways for political gain. However, in the form of analysis I am proposing, we are working at a different level of analysis – identifying how ‘problems’ are given a shape through the ways they are spoken about and through the ‘knowledges’ that are assumed in their shaping (see below).

I apply this rethinking of policy analysis in *Women, Policy and Politics: the construction of policy problems* (Bacchi 1999). There I take the basic idea – that how policies represent issues matters – and apply it to a range of policies (pay equity, education, domestic violence, sexual harassment, child care and abortion) and, more broadly, to the question: how is ‘women’s inequality’ represented as a policy ‘problem’?

Rethinking ‘women’s inequality’: discovering ‘what’s the problem represented to be?’

Let us stay with the project in *Women, Policy and Politics* for a moment because it helps to illustrate how I was thinking about the issue. Note I did not ask ‘how are women unequal?’, or even ‘which policies will make women equal?’ It had become apparent to me that a different kind of question needed to be asked: *How is ‘women’s inequality’ represented as a policy ‘problem’ in the major policies set up to ‘deal with’ the issue?* Or, to put the question as a more general proposition: *what’s the ‘problem’ represented to be?*

That is, based on my conclusion that affirmative action accrues different meanings in different sites and that these meanings have important implications or effects, I could see that ‘women’s inequality’ was also understood quite differently in different contexts. Again, as with affirmative action, I found that the best way to uncover the different meanings attached to ‘women’s inequality’ was to look at specific proposals and to interrogate how they represented the ‘problem’. Let me offer a few examples to illustrate how this rethinking works.

A common reform proposal to improve women’s representation in positions of influence and in better-paying jobs is to offer them training programs. Following the logic of the question ‘what’s the problem represented to be?’, if ‘training programs’ is the proposal (‘the solution’), then clearly it is assumed that women’s *lack of training* is ‘the problem’.

As another example consider the currently, much discussed ‘obesity problem’. If the proposal is for some sort of activity or exercise regime for children, the assumption is that the ‘problem’ is children’s *lack of activity*. By contrast, if there is a proposal to ban advertising of fast foods during prime-time children’s television, the ‘problem’ is represented to be aggressive, and perhaps unethical, advertising.

Different proposals, therefore, create competing representations of the ‘problem’. This proposition does not mean to imply that we are left to flounder in a world of representation. As mentioned above different representations of a ‘problem’ (problem representations) have different effects, which need to be

assessed and evaluated. In my analysis, I direct attention to three interconnected forms of effects: discursive effects (what is discussed and not discussed); subjectification effects (how people are thought about and how they think about themselves); and lived effects (the impact on life and death). For example training programs for women put the focus on women as the ones who need to change, limiting consideration of the nature of work environments (discursive effects). In effect they create women as the ‘problem’, affecting how women think about themselves and how others think about them (subjectification effects). As a result some women distance themselves from the reform because it seems to stigmatise them as inadequate or as gaining special privileges, placing significant constraints on the possibility of meaningful social change (lived effects).

Since the way in which the ‘problem’ is represented – how the issue is problematized – is so important to the ways we live our lives, I conclude (rather provocatively) that we are governed through *problematizations*, rather than through policies. Our critical focus should be directed, therefore, to problematizations and the problem representations they contain. My 1999 book introduces a methodology, called ‘what’s the problem represented to be?’, dedicated specifically to this task.

To be clear, a ‘what’s the problem represented to be?’ approach to policy analysis does not deny that there are a full range of troubling social conditions that ought to be dealt with. However, it insists that calling these conditions ‘problems’ or ‘social problems’ fixes them in ways that need to be interrogated. Even those who wish to contest a particular understanding (or construction) of a ‘social problem’ – asserting for example that binge-drinking is a result of a Western drinking culture rather than a result of the behaviours of ‘irresponsible’ young people – often still assume that at some level a ‘problem’ (of binge-drinking, obesity, drug addiction, welfare dependence, etc.) exists. By contrast a ‘what’s the problem represented to be?’ approach challenges this presumption and directs attention to the ways in which particular representations of ‘problems’ play a central role in how we are governed, in how we are *ruled*.

Foucault, governmentality and subjectification

The objective in studying forms of rule is to reflect on how specific regulations and practices affect our lives, and where they come from (how they are justified). Since, as discussed above, we are governed through problematizations (not policies) the best way to understand the terms in which rule takes place is to study (open up for interrogation) problematizations.

Foucault said late in his life (1988 [1984]) that the notion ‘common to all the work I have done since *Histoire de la folie* [*History of Madness* 2006/1961]’ to be ‘that of problematization’. Basically Foucault wanted a way to access the ‘thinking’ that went into governing – how people were thinking about an issue. He decided that the best way to do this was to examine the way/s in which particular issues were conceived as ‘problems’. Specifically, Foucault wanted to uncover the *grounding precepts or assumptions* that people took for granted and did not question, the meanings that needed to be in place in order for particular proposals to make sense and to find support. He was typically interested in ‘how’ questions, rather than in ‘why’ questions – how it was possible for certain policies to be put in place:

A critique does not consist in saying that things aren’t good the way they are. It consists in seeing on what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking, the accepted practices are based. (Foucault 1994: 456).

Crucially the meanings that interested Foucault were tied to a range of ‘knowledges’, such as psychology, law and medicine. For example, as noted above, the proposal that women need training in order to ‘succeed’ creates women’s *lack of training* as the ‘problem’. This way of thinking relies upon a particular understanding of people as able to learn and acquire ‘skills’. Such an understanding constitutes a form of knowledge based on psychological theories of development, theories that we in contemporary western industrialised states currently take for granted. In Foucault’s view, such ‘knowledges’ are contingent and contestable.

Adopting this perspective, when we study policy from a Foucauldian perspective, we are not studying government in the narrow institutional sense. Rather, we are studying the full array of social knowledges that underpin the thinking in government policy. Foucault (1991) coined the term ‘governmentality’ to talk about this broad understanding of how rule takes place. He identified background ‘motifs’ (governmental rationalities or *governmentalities*) in the ways in which rule was justified. These styles of rule reflected forms of problematisation. Some of the ‘motifs’ he studied included sovereignty, discipline, and ‘bio-politics’.

Foucault’s major argument about the dominant *contemporary* ‘motif’ is that, currently, rule takes place *through* subjects or, more specifically, through the production of *governable* subjects. The term ‘subjectification’ captures how this production of subjects takes place, as described briefly below.

Policies – called ‘practical texts’ in Foucault (1986: 12-13) – create ‘subject positions’ that political subjects either take up or refuse to take up. Taking up certain ‘subject positions’ means adopting particular ways of thinking about oneself and becoming that (type of) person. This proposition involves a dramatic rethinking of who we are and how we think about ourselves. It suggests that policies, through the subject positions they create, shape our subjectivities (to an extent):

A governmental analytics invites readers to think about individual subjects as being produced in specific social policy practices, for example, as worker-citizens in workfare programs, as parent-citizens, in child and family services or consumer-citizens in a managerial and marketized mixed economy of welfare. (Marston and McDonald 2006: 3)

This suggestion is linked to Foucault’s idea of power as productive. Put simply, Foucault argued that it is inadequate to think about rule as repressive (as stopping us from doing a range of things). Rather we need to think about how we are encouraged to be certain kinds of people and to *do* certain sorts of things. Therefore, power relations influence our subjectivity, how we think about ourselves. This, he argued, is how rule really takes place:

The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike, and in so doing subdues or crushes individuals. In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, come to be identified and constituted as individuals. (Foucault 1980: 98)

Studying policies and their problem representations takes on a whole new significance, therefore. A focus on problematisation allows us to identify the ‘motif’ that shapes current forms of rule and how we are produced as particular kinds of subject within that motif. Returning once more to our example of training programs for women, I mentioned above that, when women’s lack of training is identified as the ‘problem’, women become the marked category. Consequently some women may decide to distance themselves from the reform fearing its stigmatising effects, and may indeed internalise the message that it is they who lack some ability or skill. In this way the subject position of ‘untrained worker’ in the policy can affect some women’s self-perception, leading them to see themselves as responsible in some way for their ‘failure’ to ‘succeed’.

It is important to note that political subjects may either take up or refuse ‘subject positions’. Some women may be highly sceptical of the suggestion that it is their lack of skill that explains their failure to get a job or to be promoted. The idea of

subjectification, therefore, is not deterministic. In fact, the emphasis is upon plural meanings and contestation.

Analysing Policy and the problem-solving paradigm: evidence-based policy
Women, Policy and Politics makes the point that the ‘what’s the problem represented to be?’ approach can be applied to *any* policy area (Bacchi 1999: 12). It also raises the suggestion that, as a way of thinking, the approach encourages a rethinking of forms of social science explanation. The argument here is that, since theories posit explanations, they contain problematisations that need to be interrogated. Applying the ‘what’s the problem represented to be?’ approach to social science theories opens them up to critical scrutiny in useful ways, probing their grounding assumptions. The ambit of the approach continues to expand. Most recently I offer it as a method to interrogate concepts (Bacchi 2009b). Once we stop thinking about categories, concepts, theories and ‘problems’ as fixed and determined, it becomes ever more useful to analyse critically the forms of problematisation upon which they rely.

The new book, *Analysing Policy: What’s the problem represented to be?* (Pearson Education 2009a) pursues this agenda. It offers a step-by-step guide to how to apply the approach. There are now six questions and an important injunction at the bottom of the list to apply the questions to one’s own policy proposals (and theories) – recognising that we may well have taken on board some of those taken-for-granted presuppositions (‘unexamined ways of thinking’) which concerned Foucault (see above). There is now also an acronym (WPR approach) (Bacchi 2009a: 2).

What’s the problem represented to be?: An approach to policy analysis

1. What’s the ‘problem’ (e.g. of ‘problem gamblers’, domestic violence, pay inequity, health inequalities, etc.) represented to be in a specific policy?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the ‘problem’?
3. How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’? Consider three kinds of interconnected effects: discursive effects, subjectification effects, lived effects.

6. How/where has this representation of the ‘problem’ been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?

Apply this list of questions to your own problem representations.
(adapted from Bacchi 2009: 2)

Analysing Policy has a second objective. In the period between publication of *Women, Policy and Politics* (1999) and the new book, I encountered again and again the term ‘problem-solving’ in a number of different contexts. I identify two principal sites where this occurs: the evidence-based policy movement, and the production of ‘problem-solving’ subjects through education policy. I talk about this persistent and ubiquitous invocation of ‘problem-solving’ as a paradigm or a ‘motif’ of governing, a form of governmentality. Given my long-standing conviction that we need to think about *how ‘problems’ are represented*, I decided to apply the WPR approach to this paradigm and identified a number of unquestioned assumptions with, potentially, some very worrisome effects.

I talk about the evidence-based policy *movement* a good deal in *Analysing Policy*, mainly because I kept running into it wherever I looked, in health policy, in criminal justice policy, in education policy and in media policy (Bacchi 2009a: 137-138; 105-107; 210-212; 252-253). Certainly evidence-based policy is not a movement in any conventional sense of the term. I call it a ‘movement’ because of its strength and proliferation world-wide.

The idea of evidence-based policy can be traced back to evidence-based medicine (EBM), developed in the 1960s and 1970s. Associated with Archie Cochrane (1962), David Sackett (1997) and Iain Chalmers (1989), evidence-based medicine makes the case that Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) offer a bias-free method for judging the effectiveness of health interventions. In 1993 the UK established the Cochrane Collaboration as an international venture to pursue this agenda.

As Marston and Watts (2003: 147) describe, ‘the logic of EBM’ proceeded to ‘spread out of acute medicine into allied health professions and the related areas of social work and human service practice’. In 1999 the Campbell Collaboration was established, extending the medical model to *social science research*. Its international secretariat is currently based in Oslo, hosted by the Norwegian Knowledge Centre for the Health Services.

Elsewhere (Bacchi 2008) I have written about the complex array of influences that promoted evidence-based approaches to policy-making. The goal in this paper is to focus on the assumptions and presuppositions underpinning the

initiative (Question 2 in a WPR analysis) and the accompanying effects, with a primary focus on subjectification effects (Question 5 in a WPR analysis). Let us start with examining the assumptions.

Evidence-based policy relies upon a correspondence paradigm of knowledge, accepting the possibility of direct access to 'reality'. The paradigm is positivist. It assumes that 'knowledge' is neutral, ignoring the connections between 'knowledge' and power. Hard science is set up as the standard against which other forms of research get evaluated.

There is a further assumption that policy-making is a rational, decision-making process. Parsons (2002: 45) describes evidence-based policy as a 'return to the old time religion: better policy-making was policy-making predicated on improvements to instrumental rationality', 'a return to the quest for a positivist brick road'. He sees links between evidence-based policy and the popularity of auditing, monitoring, performance measurement, strategic planning, best practice, risk management and quality management systems, all buzzwords of our time. The emphasis, as Parsons says, is on professionalization (of the public service) with an accompanying decrease of commitment to democratisation.

Finally, in evidence-based policy there is a grounding assumption that the 'problems' being 'addressed' are readily identifiable and uncontroversial: all we need to do is 'solve' them. Different policy options, it is suggested, can be tested much in the way of a scientific experiment to see which one works best (has the best 'outcomes'). 'What works' is the catchphrase that best describes its declared intent (*What Works Clearinghouse* 2005).

Turning to effects (Question 5 in a WPR analysis), the privileging of hard science as the model in evidence-based policy means a privileging of quantitative research methods. This is accompanied by a devaluing of other forms of research, such as ethnographic studies. A second effect, as Parsons (2002) identifies above, is the enshrining of a top-down managerialist form of governance, displacing 'lay knowledges' (Popay *et al.*, 2003). Further, the focus on 'what works' encourages a utilitarian, and mainly economic, view of the purposes of research. To get funding research has to be judged to be 'relevant'. This trend is most obvious in the UK's Research Assessment Exercise (Ball 2001: 267) and in the Australian 2007 proposal for a Research Quality Framework, on the UK model (Australian Government 2006).

These models for research have subjectification effects. Recall that subjectification effects refer to the ways in which political subjects are encouraged to think about themselves and about others. The political subjects of interest here are both researchers themselves and 'citizens' more generally.

In my research for *Analysing Policy* I found that more and more researchers were falling into line in adopting the evidence-based paradigm. It was no longer a matter of quantitative versus qualitative studies, with the latter devalued. *Qualitative* theorists in health, education and criminology were arguing that they too could set up social experiments to test interventions and to find out ‘what works’. For example, tests were conducted on whether or not parenting classes correlated with lower juvenile crime rates, and whether or not improved lighting on streets correlated with lower crime rates (Bacchi 2009: 106).

To explain this rapid diffusion of evidence-based policy, elsewhere I (Bacchi 2008) draw attention to the institutional practices in which researchers participate, especially funding regimes which determine that researchers will be acknowledged and rewarded (in terms of funds but also in terms of ‘brownie points’ and promotions) for undertaking evidence-based research. Stephen Ball (2001: 266) comments on this subjectification effect. He describes how funding-driven research makes researchers ‘think about ourselves as individuals who calculate about ourselves, “add value” to ourselves, improve our productivity, make ourselves relevant’ (see also Davies 2003).

Researchers are encouraged to deliver on requests for ‘solutions’ to pre-given ‘problems’, rather than to consider if these are the questions that ought to be addressed. There is a growing conviction that governments ought to be the ones to set the ‘problems’ to be studied, a trend described as ‘user-driven’ policy (Bacchi 2008). In this understanding research comes to be understood in an *instrumental* way, as serving the needs of government objectives. Research that is judged to be *relevant* is research that fits the goals of ‘productivity’ and international competitiveness, research that is valued as ‘a means to economic and social development much more than as a cultural end in itself’ (Solesbury 2001: 4).

This top-down managerialist approach to policy-making encourages ‘citizens’ to think about government as the ‘proper’ domain of ‘experts’, producing them as (more easily) governable subjects. As Elizabeth St. Pierre (2006: 259) puts it, scientifically-based research (SBR) is a form of governmentality, ‘a mode of power by which state and complicit nonstate institutions and discourses produce subjects that satisfy the aims of government policy’.

We need to remember that this kind of analysis does not imply that there is a plot going on here, with governments setting out to produce citizens as ciphers who rubber-stamp their policies. The processes of subjectification are much more complex than this simple explanation suggests. In addition, the process is not set in concrete. It is possible to contest and to refuse available subject positions.

Analysing Policy and the problem-solving paradigm: producing ‘problem-solving’ political subjects

The second place where the problem-solving paradigm appears is in the growing conviction that the best way to train political subjects to think critically is to teach them to ‘solve’ ‘problems’. Above I mentioned that the graduate attributes listed for most Australian universities place ‘problem-solving’ at the top of the list of desirable attributes to acquire through a university education.

Clearly I think otherwise. The intellectual journey I have traced today leaves me convinced that it is more important to encourage students to *interrogate the content and nature of the ‘problems’* they are asked to ‘solve’. I put forward a counter-discourse or counter-paradigm, which I call ‘problem questioning’. There are links in my thinking to Deleuze’s (1994) proposal that people ought to demand a ‘right to the problems’ and to Meyer’s (1995; see Turnbull 2007) work on ‘problematology’.

My particular concern is *the kind of subject produced in problem-solving modes of governing* (evidence-based policy; problem-solving approaches to education). This *problem-solving subject*, I suggest, is closely related to the enterprising, entrepreneurial subject identified by other Foucauldian scholars, the political subject Olssen (1996: 340 in Apple 2001: 414) calls ‘manipulable man’. Rose’s characterization of this subject resonates with Ball’s (2001) description of subjectified research scholars, quoted above:

Personal employment and macro-economic health is to be ensured by encouraging individuals to ‘capitalize’ themselves, to invest in the management, presentation, promotion and enhancement of their own economic capital as a capacity of their selves and as a lifelong project. (Rose 2000: 162)

Miller and Rose (1990) describe the process by which this political subject is produced:

programmes of government ... operate through subjects. They offer particular conceptions of the capacities and attributes of those to be governed and construct certain ways for people to conceive of and conduct themselves. (Miller and Rose 1990 in Du Gay 1997: 295)

There are links between this entrepreneurial subject and Reich’s (1991) ‘symbolic workers’. Symbolic workers are those who manipulate symbols, e. g. data, words, audio and visual images, and who can be either professionals or technicians. They are a highly mobile group whose ‘skills’ are in demand internationally, a group trained in ‘know *how*’ rather than in ‘know *what*’: ‘The skills people need to develop have to do with *problem solving* and identification,

developing critical facilities, understanding the value of experimentation and the ability to collaborate' (Morrison 1991: 5; emphasis added).

It is no longer precise skills that are valued, therefore; rather, it is adaptability. People are told that they need to learn *how to learn* so that they will be flexible enough to keep pace with rapidly changing economic factors (Alheit and Dansien 2000). This emphasis on making workers 'flexible' assumes, of course, that workers have to fit the needs of employers. The work place is taken as given and *inflexible*.

Marginson (1997: 225) offers insights into the 'new human capital' which says that students and subsequently workers need to be trained to 'up-skill' when the labour market requires it. Adjusting to shifting work 'opportunities' is portrayed as just one more 'problem' they need to be trained to solve – through multi-skilling, for example:

When governments imagine students to be financial investors in their own economic futures, and consistent with this vision, provide student financing in the form of student loans repayable after education, forcing students to take into account their future earnings when choosing their course, more of those students *become* self-managing investors in themselves. (Marginson 1997: 225; emphasis in original).

These are subjects who are encouraged to think of themselves as (personally) responsible for all the ills ('problems') in their lives, subjects who must continually reinvent themselves through lifelong learning if the labour market requires it (Bacchi 2009: 222-227). They are the ones who are to 'solve' the 'problems' set by others, rather than challenging specific ways of thinking about the world and social relations. As I have already suggested, such subjects (who largely blame *themselves* for all the ills in their lives) are (more easily) 'governed'.

Ways forward

Throughout I have suggested that the subject positions created in policies like evidence-based policy and problem-solving approaches to education can *either be taken up or rejected*, that there is constant contestation about the nature and effects of these policies. Marginson (1997: 225) makes exactly this point: 'These economic behaviours are never as complete as the theory imagines. The student subjects also have other identities and behaviours, and no one is ever completely "governed"'. This is what Foucault (1981: 13) means when he says we can challenge who we are asked to become: 'Critique doesn't have to be the premise of a deduction which concludes: this is what needs to be done. It should be an instrument for those who fight and refuse what is'. To repeat a point made

several times already, the picture is not a deterministic one. As Paul Du Gay (1997: 296) notes:

Because programmes of government are dependent upon the ways in which individuals conduct themselves, their success is not automatically guaranteed. The relationship between government and governed therefore depends upon what Foucault termed ‘an unstable conjuncture’ because it passes through the manner in which individuals are willing to exist as particular subjects.

However, my feeling is that we are more likely to contest or reject specific images of ourselves if we have been encouraged to think about them. I am concerned that the commonsense assumption that it is useful *to learn to solve problems*, as if it is clear what these are, is near hegemonic. I am concerned that this motif of governing produces subjects content to ‘solve’ ‘problems’ set by others instead of challenging the ways in which these issues are understood. My hope is that I have opened a small niche to encourage you to think differently.

I end with three small requests: first, to pause and reflect whenever you read or hear the word ‘problem’ being used uncritically, as if it is obvious that there is a ‘problem’ and what the ‘problem’ is; next, pause and reflect whenever you find yourself using the term ‘problem’ in exactly those ways; and finally, notice when problem-solving is offered as the most effective form of intellectual exercise and consider what happens to this proposition when you ask ‘what’s the problem represented to be?’

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