

A photograph of a person wearing a grey turtleneck sweater, holding a handful of blueberries in their left hand. A single blueberry is captured mid-air, falling from their right hand. The background is blurred, showing a dark, textured surface.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND BUSINESS

Markus Kallifatides and Lin Lerpold (eds.)

Sustainable development and business



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This book is dedicated to Marie Ehrling for her long commitment to enabling studies of management practice conducted by researchers at the Stockholm School of Economics. Her commitment to research has also greatly contributed to our mission of science-based education and, thus, our students' education. Marie has also acted as an important executive within the sustainability field. She is deeply knowledgeable of the dynamic nature between business and society, encompassing both challenges and opportunities, some of which this book addresses.

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Stockholm, December 2016

Markus Kallifatides and Lin Lerpold

¹ Up until 2009, the Annual Book was produced by Ekonomiska forskningsinstitutet (EFI), the predecessor to SIR.



A postcolonial critique of the Base-of-the-Pyramid discourse

MARIJANE LUISTRO JONSSON, EMRE YILDIZ AND SOFIA ALTAFI

*'What is benevolence towards the poor
is transformed into knowledge that is applicable to the rich.'*
Michel Foucault, 1975

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in development and poverty issues in business academia. This is captured in the business literature by, among others, the Bottom/Base of the Pyramid (BoP) proposition. The BoP proposition, originally conceptualized by Prahalad and Hart (2002), suggests that there is a fortune to be made for multinational corporations (MNCs) if they start targeting the bottom of the economic pyramid; i.e., the four billion people in the world living on less than two dollars per day. The proposition thereby opened up the domain where MNCs can engage themselves with the poor, primarily by selling BoP-adapted consumer goods.

The original BoP proposition's basic idea of creating these so-called 'win-win' business models has emerged in practice: a significant number of MNCs have started to follow the key commandments of the proposition to effectively tap into the promised 'fortune.' Given its sizable impact on business theory and practice, critiques of this early BoP proposition highlighted its focus on consumerism, its tendency to romanticize the poor, and its overconfidence in market forces (e.g., Karnani 2006, 2007, 2009). In response to this, the BoP proposition evolved to embrace the co-creation of innovative business models aimed to increase the earning capacity of the poor by collaborating with non-profit actors, civil society, and local communities (e.g., London and Hart 2005, 2011; London and Anupindi 2011).

The main purpose of this chapter is to provide a critical reading of the collectivity of these three streams of work, viz., the original proposition, critiques levied against the proposition and the second iteration of the proposition that was developed to redress these criticisms. We employ the word ‘collectivity’ neither loosely nor arbitrarily. Our key argument is that the voices raised within business academia for and against the BoP proposition converge in a similar colonial outlook. In this regard, we share the same ambition with the extant stream of research that scrutinizes the BoP proposition (e.g., Arora and Romijn 2009) and other initiatives for poverty alleviation and development (see e.g., Weber 2002; Fernando 2006; Dichter and Harper 2007; Bateman 2010; Karim 2011).

While analyzing the three constituent bodies of BoP discourse, this chapter builds on a different yet complementary theoretical frame of reference vis-à-vis earlier critical work. Namely, we use postcolonial theory as our conceptual anchor to identify the colonial assumptions of BoP discourse. Guided largely by the foundational work of Said (1978), our aim is to question the ways with which the dominant discourse invents, depicts and directs the so-called BoP and the non-West ‘poor’. To that end, this chapter is organized along the following themes of the discourse, showing (1) the BoP space is invented as an opportunity space by its major proponents, with representations of the ‘poor’ that are imbued with binary oppositions, and (2) prescriptions that consider the BoP an ‘exploitable other’ (i.e., the prescriptions have been disguised under the logic of ‘win-win,’ whereas most of the proposed solutions are indeed primarily serving Western interests while exploiting the people at the BoP). In this manner, we intend to show how the self-serving interests of MNCs and the Western hegemony, rather than an earnest commitment to alleviate poverty, are the dominant factors that have guided and governed the emergence and evolution of the BoP discourse.

In fine, this chapter aims at making a number of key contributions. First, we intend to show how familiar and accepted arguments in extant BoP literature amount to a homogenizing, reductionist and exploitative compendium of canon on non-Western peoples. More importantly, we will show that this canon is not a disinterested body of knowledge. Instead, it is used as a basis for rendering Western presence and action in non-Western geographies and towards non-Western people as a ‘just’ and ‘noble’ enterprise. Second, we focus not only on the first and second waves of BoP propositions as they

developed and emerged in business academia, but also, and even more importantly, on the critiques levied against these propositions. Not only does this deepen our understanding of the BoP proposition as such, but it also defamiliarizes the reader with the current approaches that define the BoP literature on poverty alleviation. Furthermore, our critical approach to the BoP proposition from the postcolonial vantage point is instrumental in deciphering how the discourse's cultural, social, psychological and historical representations of the 'poor' are shaped by and for the interests of the West. This is very much in line with the project set forth by Prasad (2003: 32), who sees significant value in using postcolonial analysis to unveil the 'persistent imprint of colonialist ways of thinking and behaving' in different management disciplines, which can in turn provide 'a new orientation to current management practices as well as research.'

In keeping with the aims that we have set out for the chapter, we first provide the theoretical bases upon which the ensuing analysis will be constructed. This is followed by a section where we set the scene by presenting our methodological considerations, including motivating our choice of texts to analyse. Thereafter, we present and expound upon our critical treatise of the dominant BoP discourse. We end the paper with our concluding remarks.

Postcolonial theory

As an overarching theoretical framework and analytical tool, postcolonialism¹ problematizes Western representations of non-Western peoples and geographies, with a critical emphasis on the West's monolithic and power-laden creation of knowledge pertaining to the non-Western world. In essence, postcolonial theory 'seeks to critique and analyze the complex and multifaceted dynamics of modern Western colonialism' (Banerjee and Prasad 2008: 91) by pinpointing and problematizing 'the colonial encounter for people's lives both

¹ To avoid unnecessary confusion, a semantic clarification is in order. As noted by Young (2001) and Prasad (2003), there are fine distinctions between the terms 'post-colonial,' 'postcolonial,' 'postcoloniality,' and 'postcolonialism.' Several scholars use the term *post-colonial* (with a hyphen) as a temporal expression referring to the formal end of colonization and what comes after, whereas they use the term *postcolonial* (without the hyphen) to refer to a way of thinking about colonialism and its apparatuses and consequences. Further, *postcoloniality* entails the more concrete aspects of economic, political and cultural conditions of postcolonial times. *Postcolonialism*, on the other hand, is an analytical framework used to criticize the conditions of postcoloniality.

in the West and the non-West' (Prasad 2003: 5).² The postcolonial implications of colonial encounters between the West and 'the Rest' have been extensively studied by different scholars, who share similar concerns over the textual representations of the non-West by and in the Western world.

Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak are often considered the 'holy trinity' of postcolonial thought. That said, however, the analytical nuances and differences among them ought not be overlooked (for a concise overview, see Özkazanc-Pan 2008). While acknowledging the importance of Spivak's focus on gender, race and the subaltern as different forms of space in which counterhegemonic discourses can be created, as well as the significance of Bhabha's psychoanalytic lens on and deconstructive approach to the dominant discourse(s), in this paper, we will zero in on the analytical perspective of Edward Said and the specific postcolonial theoretical lens introduced by him. Our choice for using the Saidian account of postcolonialism is primarily due to its direct applicability and close relevance to the specific discourse we intend to critique.

Postcolonial theory, developed by Said (1978) in his path-breaking book 'Orientalism,' systematically examines the power relations between the colonizer (West) and the colonized (Orient). Postcolonialism is thus developed in response to the essentialist assumptions of Orientalist logic and discourse that are applied in studying, managing, depicting, and explaining 'the Oriental'. In this manner, the theory problematizes several aspects of Orientalist discourse. First, Said argues that the Orient is 'a European invention' (1978: 1). Second, while appropriating its subject matter, Orientalist discourse almost always builds on binary oppositions (i.e., centre vs. periphery, civilized vs. savage, developed vs. undeveloped, masculine vs. feminine) wherein an innate ontological inferiority of the Orient vis-à-vis the Occident is posited. As a result, Orientalism depicts and represents the constructed Orient by emphasizing its 'eccentricity, backwardness, indifference, feminine penetrability, and supine malleability' (Said 1978: 206).

One of the key points emphasized in postcolonial theory is that the invention of the Orient is not an intellectual enterprise for its own sake, nor is it a genuine attempt to know and understand the other. By creating the belief that

² Even though other variants of postmodernist/poststructuralist schools of thought have been criticized for being Eurocentric and relying on Western terms and modes of thought even while criticizing the very modernity that emerged therein, postcolonialism stands apart from these traditions, for it takes into account native and marginalized voices (Özkazanc-Pan 2008).

the Orient is a polar opposite and ontological inferior of the Occident and that the Oriental is a subject race that ought to be educated, civilized and subjugated, Orientalism justifies and legitimizes the ground for Western presence and colonialism in the Orient (Prasad 2003). Thus, Orientalism serves Western colonialism by crystallizing the inferior identity of a homogenous non-West and thereby rendering it a 'moral obligation' for the West to enter, civilize, improve, and help the people living there. In other words, postcolonialism explicitly maintains that the Western pursuit of knowledge is neither disinterested nor objective: academic and literary work on non-Western geographies and cultures conducted by those in the West always serves the West, allowing military, political and economic interventions in the East to be justified (Özkazanc-Pan 2008). As such, the production and dissemination of Orientalist knowledge established the moral grounds for Western presence in the non-West.

Another important aspect of postcolonialism is its sensitivity to the issues of cultural and economic domination: economically developed nations constantly set the standards and constitute the model against which others should be evaluated. As noted by Westwood (2006: 96), by dividing 'the world into modern, developed, industrialized and the pre-modern, under-developed and pre-industrial parts,' neo-colonialist discourse builds on a 'universalistic trajectory of development and salvation and constructs essentializing and exoticizing representations of the other' in order to vindicate the imposition and implementation of Western solutions and projects in non-Western worlds. This universalizing and homogenizing viewpoint of contemporary colonialist discourse has paved the way for perspectives that build on postcolonialism while problematizing the indiscriminate adoption and emulation of Western norms, standards and practices (e.g., Escobar 1995; Parekh 1997).

Postcolonial theory has been employed in critical management literature (e.g., sustainable development in Banerjee 2003; knowledge transfer in Mir et al. 2008; stakeholders in Parson 2008; culture in Fougère and Moulettes 2011) to expose neo-colonialism, the continuing hegemony of Western colonialism, and power relations between the dominating West and the non-West (e.g., international business in Westwood 2006; economic development in McKenna 2011; internal colonialism in Banerjee 2011; leadership in Nkomo 2011).

The BoP discourse

THE BOP PROPONENTS

The BoP concept was first conceptualized by C. K. Prahalad and Stuart Hart in an article published in 'Strategy+Business' in 2002, where they proposed that there is a fortune to be made by MNCs targeting the world's four billion impoverished people. This text has been described by Hart as the 'path-breaking article [that] provided the first articulation of how business could profitably serve the needs of the four billion 'poor' in the developing world' (www.stuartlhart.com 20 January 2011).

The initial article was followed by Prahalad's bestseller *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Eradicating Poverty Through Profits*, which first was published by Wharton School Publishing in 2005 and came out in a fifth anniversary edition in 2010. The book presents the suggested profitable 'win-win' BoP proposition, including letters from CEOs supporting the approach and cases of successful BoP engagements. It has been cited at least 5 555 times³, translated into at least 12 languages, selected as one of the best books of the year 2004 by The Economist, Fast Company and Amazon.com, and praised by high-profile figures such as Bill Gates and Madeleine Albright. In short, no other BoP publication has received this type of positive attention.

The BoP proposition suggests that MNCs should collaborate with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and local entrepreneurs as business partners to target the vast, untapped, primarily rural markets in developing countries – the estimated four billion people in the world who live on less than 2 USD per day and comprise the so-called bottom/base of the economic pyramid. Through these 'win-win' deals, the well-being of the BoP, or the 'poor', is argued to be increased, while at the same time generating profits for the private sector.

Prahalad's article (co-authored with Hart) and his sequel book, which we analyze in the next section, gave rise to a number of studies in the management literature that linked the BoP proposition with business models, innovation, collaboration, and strategy (e.g., Hart and Christensen 2002; London and Hart 2004, 2005; Christensen et al. 2006; Kramer and Porter 2006; Anderson and Markides 2007; Hütte 2008; Kandachar and Halme 2008). This sudden surge

³ Based on citation in Google Scholar as of October 2016.

of studies pertaining to the then-novel concept of BoP can be viewed as the first wave of BoP literature.

In recent years, the focus of the BoP proposition has moved away from a consumption-oriented, fortune-finding, top-down approach, to a more inclusive, production-oriented, fortune-creating and bottom-up approach (e.g., London and Hart 2005, 2011; London et al. 2010). Acknowledging the modest success of the original iteration of BoP, this modified version of the proposition emphasizes the importance of collaboration among different sectors to enhance the link between profits and poverty alleviation (London and Anupindi 2011). Since Prahalad's death in 2010, Stuart Hart and Ted London have become established as the foremost figures in the second-wave BoP literature. Their book entitled *Next Generation Business Strategies for the Base of the Pyramid – New Approaches for Building Mutual Value*, published in 2011, revisits and redefines the BoP proposition, as well as sets a new agenda for translating the concept into practice. This is included in our analysis since it represents the evolving research frontiers and progression of the discourse, roughly a decade after its initial inception.

THE BOP CRITIQUES

The BoP proposition also stirred up heated debates and evoked critical voices, both within and outside of the management field. Among others, a recognized critic of the BoP is Aneel Karnani. He has authored a series of articles published in various mainstream management journals arguing that the BoP proposition is built on flawed assumptions about the 'poor', and that it underemphasises the critical role and responsibility of the state in poverty reduction work. The current analysis focuses on three of his more recent articles: 'Help, don't romanticise the poor' (2008, *Business Strategy Review*), 'Romanticising the poor' (2009, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*), and 'Failure of the libertarian approach to reducing poverty' (2010, *Asian Business and Management*).

SYNTHESIS

In the previous section, we presented an overview of selected articles and books that have been instrumental in shaping the BoP discourse. Penned both by proponents and opponents of the BoP concept, this body of scholarly works initially appears to contribute to a stimulating debate and to provide varying prescriptions for best practices to alleviate poverty. Despite their

surface differences, however, these articles build on similar latent assumptions and support for the common agenda of global capitalism.

Amidst the exchange of opposing views, no one questioned the morality and history of MNCs profiting from the BoP. Due to its recent conceptualization, the BoP was treated as an emerging market opportunity, represented with little or no emphasis on these people's and nations' past experiences with being subjected to exploitation. Thus, an influential discourse was born out of the creation of the BoP Orient, which unfortunately continues to propagate colonial assumptions and its exploitative effects. After providing a brief account of our methodological approach, we will further analyze these relations by specifically examining the prescriptions presented in the BoP discourse.

Methodology

Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) differentiate two approaches in studying a discourse: as a study of the spoken and written text in its distinct social-action context, and as a study of how it discursively constructs and maintains a social reality. We take the latter approach as we seek to identify how the various literatures supporting and criticizing the BoP concept are instrumental in forming and articulating the prevailing world order, which is built on similar grounds as those of colonialism.

In our textual analysis, all co-authors have conducted deep readings of the different texts and iterated between the empirical settings and postcolonial theory. Throughout our analysis, we have leaned on Alvesson and Sköldberg's (2000) reflexive approach, taking care to remain cognizant and vigilant of the political, ideological and ethical nature and implications of our research.

Critical analysis of the BoP discourse

THE INVENTION AND REPRESENTATION OF THE BOP

The Orient is itself a constituted entity, and (...) the notion that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically 'different' inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture or racial essence proper to that space is (...) a highly debatable idea (Said 1978: 322).

Before digging into our critical treatise of the prescriptions developed and criticized by BoP discourse, it is important to briefly touch upon how the BoP space is invented and represented by this discourse. In terms of invention, the discourse adopts a generic and homogenizing tone. A starting point and central assumption of the BoP proposition is the potential size of the BoP market, estimated at four billion people in the world who live on less than two dollars per day.⁴ Even though estimations vary somewhat (for a critique, see Karnani 2007), according to Prahalad (2010), the BoP nevertheless represents ‘a *large number*, and (thus one that is) *worthy of our attention*’ (Pralhad, 2010:xxvii-xxviii, emphasis added). Thus, since it is a ‘multitrillion-dollar market’ in which ‘the bulk of the world’s population growth’ occurs, the BoP is worthy of ‘our’ attention (Pralhad and Hart 2002). To put it differently, the BoP attains significance only after one realizes the aggregate number of people living there, and the extent of the business opportunities therein. Apart from this collectivity that bestows him/her with economic significance, the uniqueness and individuality of each person living at the BoP is nullified and rendered unimportant.

Initially, it may appear that London and Hart do not indulge in the widespread tendency towards homogenizing BoP populations, asserting instead that the BoP is heterogeneous in numerous dimensions, through the following validation:

(I)n the WRI/IFC report, the BoP is segmented into \$500 PPP⁵ income increments that are shown to have markedly different characteristics across regions, countries and industry sectors (London and Hart 2011: 7).

Although their acknowledgement that any nuanced differences exist in the BoP population ought to be welcomed, the differences they concede are still based on income differentiation, a criterion which can lead to faulty conclusions. Applying these types of quantitative, purportedly objective measures can result in a lack of reflectivity. Explicitly acknowledging income-based differences does not wholly eliminate the risk of subtle, implicit homogenizing tendencies, specifically when it comes to heterogeneity along dimensions

4 Another commonly used definition of the BoP are the 4 billion people with incomes below USD 3 000 in local purchasing power, rendering a per day income in current USD of less than USD 3.35 in Brazil, USD 2.11 in China, USD 1.89 in Ghana and USD 1.56 in India. In this BoP definition, these people together are estimated to constitute a USD 5 trillion global consumer market (Hammond et al. 2007).

5 Purchasing Power Parity

other than daily income. The diversity and heterogeneity of BoP populations are discarded and subsumed under pre-existing Western codes and categories (Westwood 2006), which in this case are ‘regions, countries and industry sectors.’

By focusing entirely on its collectivity, the BoP is conceptualized as a homogeneous entity. Cultural differences and heterogeneities among these four billion people are often regarded as a ‘challenge’ (Prahalad 2010: 51). Thus, heterogeneity of culture and language in the BoP is depicted as a hurdle that should be overcome in order to ensure successful conveyance of ‘our’ ideas and solutions across geographies. Prahalad and Hart further claim that the opportunity presented by the collective economic worth of the ‘poor’ is not the only factor that should motivate Western MNCs:

We have seen how the disenfranchised in Tier 4 can disrupt the way of life and safety of the rich in Tier 1 – poverty breeds discontent and extremism. Although complete income equality is an ideological pipe dream, the use of commercial development to bring people out of poverty and give them the chance for a better life is critical to the stability and health of the global economy and the continued success of Western MNCs (Prahalad and Hart 2002: 4).

In other words, in addition to offering new opportunities for MNCs, the BoP constitutes a problem that needs to be taken care of since it poses a threat to ‘our’ safety and way of life.

Further, the BoP is depicted as a group comprising passive people with low self-esteem stemming from their ‘ontological inferiority’ vis-à-vis the West. For instance, in their book *Next Generation Business Strategies for the Base of the Pyramid*, Prahalad and Hart (2011) characterize the passivity of BoP populations as an opportunity, one that is waiting to be discovered and served by observant and nimble business actors who have the ability to achieve legitimacy and recognition if they reach a global scale.

(M)any of these first-generation BoP ventures have yet to achieve substantial scale. A number have failed, others remain local or regional in character. (...) Serving the BoP (...) involves more than simply providing low-cost products and extended distribution reach to a hitherto untapped market – one that is passively waiting to be discovered by observant entrepreneurs and business leaders (Prahalad and Hart 2011: 3).

In line with the above, Prahalad posits that the dearth of ‘self-esteem’ among the ‘poor’ is a significant causative factor of their impoverished state. The MNCs, according to Prahalad, are not only able to provide BoP consumers with products and services at affordable prices, but can also help:

[BoP consumers] get recognition, respect, and fair treatment. Building self-esteem and entrepreneurial drive at the BoP is probably the most enduring contribution that the private sector can make (Prahalad 2010: xvii).

The above remarks implies that people at the BoP, by default, have low self-esteem and lack pride, and assumes away the structural, institutional and historical causes of poverty. Further, unless ‘we’ do something about it, there is no reason to believe that men and women at the BoP already possess or will be able to develop confidence or self-esteem. The discourse leaves the impression that MNCs can grant ‘the poor’ with ‘integrity’ they would otherwise lack, which makes it a just and noble undertaking for the West to penetrate and serve the BoP. This is very much in line with the rhetoric of the imperialist ‘civilizing mission’, within which the relationship between so-called ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ people is predicated upon the former’s self-proclaimed sense of duty to help the latter (Said 1993).

While proponents of the BoP concept positioned BoP populations as potential market players, critiques of the concept began to voice their skepticism that BoP populations could ever be resourceful entrepreneurs and pragmatic consumers. In a series of articles, Karnani creates an alternate account of the BoP, depicting these populations as ignorant individuals with miserable lives and bleak futures and further positing that these inherent shortcomings are in large part to blame for their poverty.

A survey of research on the consumption choices made by ‘the poor’ showed that they spend a ‘surprisingly large’ fraction of their total income on alcohol, tobacco and entertainment (be it televisions, weddings or festivals).

(...) But, it is problematic that ‘the poor’ do not spend enough on their own nutrition, health and education. In spite of being poor, they could invest more in their own future because they ‘could easily save more without getting less nutrition by spending less on alcohol, tobacco, and food items such as sugar, spice and tea’, according to the research. (...) The rich also often make choices not in their self-interest, but the consequences are not severe in their case. Selling to ‘the poor’ can, in fact, result in reducing their welfare (Karnani 2008: 50).

Given their bleak lives, it is understandable why they spend so much on alcohol and tobacco. These addictive substances often enter lives as analgesics from extreme labor. In addition, poor people often encounter stressors – including hunger, pollution, crowding and violence – that lead them to act in ways that may alleviate suffering in the short term, but hinder economic prosperity in the long-term. Even if such behavior is understandable, that does not reduce its negative consequences (Karnani 2010: 10).

The poor, of course, have the right to consume, and even abuse, alcohol. However, it is not in their self-interest to do so, at least not at the levels that many drink (Karnani 2010: 11).

In this evaluation of the self-interest of BoP populations, Karnani assumes that if an individual quits smoking/drinking and/or stops wasting his/her money on ‘distracting’ entertainment, s/he could easily climb out of the poverty trap. However, in formulating this alternate account of the BoP mindset, Karnani falls back on many of the same colonial assumptions employed by BoP proponents, rather remarkably positing an even more permanent and profound ontological inferiority of the ‘poor’. This is evidenced by his attribution of Western behaviors and consumption standards to BoP populations, devoid of historical context and heedless of systemically asymmetric power relations. Thus, according to this account, ‘the poor’ are impoverished and inferior because they do not behave in the same manner as do people in affluent societies, thereby validating and more deeply inscribing the binary divide between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ ‘rich’ and ‘poor.’ Furthermore, Karnani does not find it necessary to address the factors that have led to ‘the poor’ being poor and the rich being rich; he takes it for granted that the state of being either rich or poor is an exogenous given. Likewise, colonial discourse is predicated upon the assumption that ‘the Orient’ and ‘the Occident’ are ontological binaries, which therefore ‘do not participate in the same humanness’ (Prasad 2003: 11).

Further privileging Western consumption standards, Karnani categorizes cultural and traditional practices such as festivals and ceremonies as nothing more than mere distractions and unnecessary expenses; their cultural value is afforded no significance in his analysis:

The world’s poorest people also spend a surprisingly large part of their budgets on ceremonies and festivals – which, in the absence of television and movies, are

often the best distractions available. In Udaipur, India, for example, more than 99 per cent of extremely poor people – that is people living on less than \$1 per day – had spent money on a wedding, funeral, or a religious festival in the previous year (Karnani 2009: 41).

The total omission of cultural reference points is equally in evidence when Prahalad and Hart (2002) provide an example of how Western MNCs can benefit from ‘useful’ principles and knowledge residing at the BoP. Specifically, they note that:

Being respectful of traditions but willing to analyze them scientifically can lead to new knowledge. The Body Shop’s creative CEO, Ms Roddick, built a business predicated on understanding the basis for local rituals and practices. For example, she observed that some African women use slices of pineapple to cleanse their skin. On the surface, this practice appears to be a meaningless ritual [sic]. However, research showed active ingredients in pineapple that cleared away dead skin cells better than chemical formulations (pp. 12–13).

Could there be a more direct and explicit endorsement of the commoditization of local rituals? What’s more, the description of a local tradition as a ‘meaningless ritual’ is in itself an oxymoron, given that a ritual, by its very definition, is imbued with cultural meaning by those practicing it. According to Prahalad and Hart, the practices of BoP populations are worthy of serious consideration – as long as they promise to confer some kind of economic value, while cultural value is given no attention. Until they are scrutinized through the lens of ‘our’ methods of ‘scientific’ inquiry and prove to possess of any kind of value for MNCs, local practices at the BoP are ‘meaningless.’

These arguments from both ‘camps’ of the discourse mirror Ferrero’s words: ‘the productive work of a civilized man is regular and methodological, (whereas) the sport (or rituals) of savages is irregular and intermittent’ (Ferrero, cited in Frenkel and Shenhav 2006). For Prahalad and Hart, the ‘senseless’ cultural rituals of ‘the other’ can be rendered meaningful only if they prove to be useful and (economically) valuable according to ‘our’ scientific methods. As far as Karnani is concerned, the cultural significance and social function of local ceremonies are irrelevant, which enables him to conclude that they are mere ‘distractions’ that could easily be substituted with television and/or movies. Even more significantly, the above excerpts implicitly suggest that the power to grant meaning to and make sense of a local ritual or practice lies

within our/Western frame of analysis, practitioners of which have taken on the self-proclaimed role of deciding what should be perceived as meaningful and relevant. In doing so, he formalizes, canonizes and specifies what can and cannot be done, which is one characteristic of colonialism (Prasad 2003).

In a similar vein, the second wave of the BoP literature continues to depict the ontological inferiority of BoP populations in their status as outsiders vis-à-vis the formal, global, capitalist economy. London and Hart view the BoP as ‘the population of the world that is generally excluded from the current system of global capitalism’ (*ibid.*: 8). This statement assumes that the BoP is a priori outside the global conjuncture and thereby explicitly introduces a binary opposition: us/current global system vs. them/outcast BoP populations. This can further be seen in descriptions of the characteristics of the BoP.

The key point is that the BoP segment has the following characteristics: is heterogeneous across multiple dimensions; includes the portion of the world’s population with the least amount of income; contains local enterprises that generally are not well-integrated with formal capitalist economy; lives primarily in the informal economy; and constitutes the majority of humanity (London and Hart 2011: 9).

Among others, these statements exemplify the view that the formal economy is seen as the normative core from which the local and informal is excluded; furthermore, the local does not deserve a space of its own but can be represented only in relation to the global. The local is viewed as a passive entity, as opposed to the formal capitalist economy that provides the resources and makes things happen. While remaining on the outside, the BoP is nonetheless depicted as an opportunity (or a threat) that can be exploited and controlled by MNCs and used to benefit the West. This reflects Prasad’s (2003) observation that when fleshing out an ontologically inferior ‘other’ in need of the ‘helping and civilizing’ hand of the West, Orientalist discourse succeeds in presenting colonialism almost as a moral obligation (Prasad 2003):

The terrain is new, yet many of its features are familiar. With the right framing in place, the real opportunity space begins to unfold in front of us. We can create a fortune with the BoP, and perhaps, in the process, move all of us toward a more inclusive and sustainable future (London and Hart 2011: 231).

PRESCRIPTIONS TO THE BOP

What is required of the Oriental expert is no longer simply ‘understanding’; now the Orient must be made to perform, its power must be enlisted on the side of ‘our’ values, civilization, interests, goals. Knowledge of the Orient is directly translated into activity, and the results give rise to new currents of thought and action in the Orient (Said 1978: 238).

A recurring line of argument in Prahalad’s bestselling book is its self-proclaimed pragmatic approach to poverty alleviation. Early on, he declares:

(T)his book is concerned about what works. This is not a debate about who is right. I am even less concerned about what might go wrong. Plenty can and has. I am focused on the potential for learning from the few experiments that are going right (Prahalad 2010: xiv).

Within the pragmatic and moral framework set forth here, he implicitly claims that culture and politics are irrelevant, redundant and even destructive. Prahalad’s analysis pays little, if any, attention to context, structures and power dimensions, thus treating the present state of the world as a given. It is within this geographical and historical vacuum that the four billion impoverished people of the world, together with the global private sector, are being assessed, and upon which potential solutions to global poverty are predicated. While the BoP discourse encourages the impoverished individual to change and ‘improve,’ it deliberately chooses to remain moot when it comes to the problematic and unjust traits of the surrounding global structures and systems, nor does it address the possible role(s) of these systems in any of the current inequalities. To the contrary, global – i.e., Western-imposed – structures are seen as the panacea for poverty alleviation, with the primary task of converting the BoP market ‘from unorganized, inefficient local monopolies (for example, local moneylenders, local medics) to an organized and efficient private sector’ (Prahalad 2010: 11).

Local social and economic structures, on the other hand, are depicted as the root cause of many problems and the major drivers and reproducers of systematic inequalities, unfair resource allocation and poverty:

[The poor] are prisoners of local monopolies, including local moneylenders. They have no recourse to law. The local landlords can and do enforce their will on the local population (Prahalad 2010: xxviii).

Prahalad's book is filled with examples similar to the above. For example, he contends that the Mandi commission agents⁶ are 'extremely wealthy' as a result of 'the lack of professional competition combined with the communal stranglehold on rural trading' (Prahalad 2010: 280); 'information asymmetry (...) allowed local moneylenders to have sway over the poor farmers; or buyers [to] have advantage over fishermen who had no idea of what the prices were' (Prahalad 2010: 22). However, through the 'democratization of commerce,' the poor female entrepreneur 'does not operate as an extralegal entity. She is bound to the national and global system and is less beholden to the local system of moneylenders and slum lords' (Prahalad 2010: 95). Thus, according to the discourse, BoP populations could benefit from the imposition of 'better' structures, a process for which the helping hands of Western MNCs are needed. While local elites are demonized and accused of exploitation and greed, MNCs and their shareholders and managers, together with the global economic system in which they exist, are represented as saviors and treated as guarantors of the Western virtues of transparency, professionalism, and accountability.

In this discourse, wherein the West and MNCs are portrayed as the saviors, the key ambition is to develop a market at the BoP, which involves creating the capacity to consume, coming up with new products and services, and making 'significant investments in educating customers on the appropriate use and the benefits of specific products and services' (Prahalad 2010: 65). Convincing MNCs to pursue this strategy should not be difficult, as '(t)he case for growth opportunity in the BoP markets is easy to make' (Prahalad 2010: 46). Put differently, as Western markets become highly competitive and saturated, MNCs can continue their growth by exploiting BoP populations and easing them into the habit of consumption. However, neither Prahalad nor his adherents explain at length how consuming more of 'our' products would foster self-esteem and self-respect among BoP populations, which is argued to be lacking. Instead, the usual rhetoric of the 'civilizing mission' takes precedence once again. The frequently cited case study of Hindustan Unilever (referred to as HLL below), the Indian subsidiary of the British-Dutch MNC, is a telling example:

6 Mandi commission agents are brokers who buy and sell produce between the companies and farmers in the mandi system (i.e. agricultural markets). Most of these commission agents, distinct from the farmers, belong to a close-knit community who often collude on trading practices favoring them and not the farmers.

Not surprisingly, in BoP markets, education is a prerequisite to market development. (...) However, the problem (for HLL) was how to educate people on the need for washing hands with soap and to convey the causality between 'clean-looking but unsafe hands' and stomach disorders. HLL decided to approach village schools and educate children on the cause of disease and how to prevent it. (...) The children often became the most educated in the family on hygiene and, therefore, began educating their parents. The children became the activists and the advocates of good and healthy practices at home and HLL reaped new profits (Prahalad 2010: 65).

Another central theme of the discourse, particularly in the second wave of the BoP literature that will be discussed below, is increasing entrepreneurial drive among 'the poor'. In other words, BoP proponents are not satisfied with co-opting 'the poor' into the market as consumers; they also want to empower BoP populations through entrepreneurship, production and value creation. More specifically, the ambition is to create an 'appropriate ecosystem' in which 'a large network of micro entrepreneurs' is advised to interact with large/multinational firms (Prahalad 2010: 36). Furthermore, Prahalad (2010) rightfully sees significant value in granting impoverished people greater access to information (since local moneylenders create and exploit manipulative information asymmetries), credit (since organized microfinance institutions and banks are inherently better than local moneylenders), and regional/national markets (which are otherwise inaccessible unless micro-entrepreneurs are systematically organized and connected) so that commerce can be 'democratized.' The 'poor' can exercise 'personal choice' to become consumers and/or entrepreneurs, establish themselves as active participants in the global system, and, as a result, will be able to attain self-esteem and dignity. Implicit, yet important, in this prescription, however, is that the terms and scope of this increased access are all defined and determined by the West, which liberates and introduces 'order.' There is an evident business logic in creating an armada of small and unique production facilities tightly connected to an MNC hub. With a pool of potential suppliers to choose from, MNCs can increase supply-chain control, reduce risk, and fill institutional voids while improving their reputations. In other words, by exploiting 'the poor' through entrepreneurship, the extraction of resources from the BoP to the West can continue, but this time in a systematic and, more importantly, legitimate manner.

The critiques of the BoP concept also prescribe measures that can lead to the exploitation of the BoP population. Karnani's conceptualization of the BoP as helpless children has led him to prescribe an increased role for governments, in order to protect BoP populations from corporations, demonstrating a paternalistic approach that aligns with his infantilizing view of BoP populations. He argues that the romanticized view of 'the poor' does not help them, but rather harms them, because it results in too little emphasis on legal, regulatory and social mechanisms to protect impoverished people. It also overemphasizes microcredit, while under-emphasizing the need to foster modern enterprises that would provide employment opportunities (Karnani 2009). Although he highlights the critical role and responsibility of the state in poverty reduction efforts, Karnani also depicts BoP governments as inefficient machineries, or helpless and corrupt infants in themselves.

Governments have the responsibility to guard their most vulnerable citizens from unsavory practices. Yet governments in all countries have problems of regulating markets. This is all the more true in developing countries with corrupt government that are in cahoots with firms. And even when governments in poor countries have good intentions, they often lack the resources and competence to design and administer appropriated regulations. Other mechanisms for protecting consumers are likewise very weak in developing countries, and even more so with regard to poor people (Karnani 2009: 42).

By infantilizing BoP governments, Karnani resorts to a co-optation to global governance, positing them as local Leviathans that will serve as intermediary mechanisms and client regimes for the exploitative policies of supra-national organizations like the IMF and World Bank. This subtle co-optation is captured by Jack et al. (2011), who argues,

the nation state is a primary agent for the 'legitimate' exercise of violence against indigenous communities under conditions of necrocapitalism and internal colonialism. By curtailing the rights and notions of sovereignty for indigenous communities, either through legal or military means, national governments continue to play a vital role in a transnational political economy (Jack et al. 2011: 288).

An illustrative example of this co-opting tendency can be seen in how Karnani regards local farming practices as inferior to global technology, citing eviden-

ces from studies funded by the foundations that are established by well-known MNCs:

Banerjee and Duflo (2006:165) argue that the poor have a 'reluctance to psychologically commit themselves to the project of making as they can.' In a study of farmers in Kenya, Duflo, et al. (2006) find that few farmers use fertilizers, even after the benefits – an average return on investment of over 100 per cent – have been demonstrated to them. Not many Ghanaian farmers cultivate pineapples, which would achieve returns of 250–300 per cent (The Economist, 2007a). This is perhaps understandable: the poor face such bleak circumstances that they come to believe the future is hopeless (Karnani, 2010: 12).

Once again, Karnani delimits the problem, as well as possible reasons to the farmers' behavior to a Western frame of reference. There are numerous other viable reasons for choosing not to use fertilizers or deciding not to switch to a new crop, none of which Karnani bothers to consider. For Karnani, therefore, whatever decisions the 'poor' make in the present and/or whichever vision the 'poor' have for the future can be attributed to him/her being 'poor'. By assuming that the failure to adopt expected practices or make 'optimal' economic decisions is a reflection of, and will result in, an envisaged hopeless and bleak future, Karnani hijacks the voice and agency of 'the poor', as well as their vision and future.

Therefore, despite Karnani's critique of market forces and emphasis on state intervention, he ultimately promotes an alignment to the global market and an admission of the superiority of market systems. In the process, the characteristics of the BoP are 'normalized' by employing Western countries and the programs of their governments as benchmarks, using standards created by supra-national institutions:

One researcher calculates the public expenditure on education as a percentage of GNP for developed countries to be 5.46 per cent in 1980 and 5.54 per cent in 1997; the comparable numbers for developing countries are 3.99 per cent and 3.92 per cent. World Bank data in 2004 indicated public education expenditure to be 5.6 per cent of GDP for developed countries and 4.1 per cent for developing countries. Similarly, public health expenditure accounted for 6.7 per cent of GDP in 2004 in high-income countries compared to 1.3 per cent in low-income countries. Governments in developing countries need to play a larger role in education and public health (Karnani 2008: 52).

Similarly, the second-wave BoP literature engages in co-optation, championing BoP business structures that are:

[...] both global and local (both bottom-up and top-down) at the same time [...] to source capital and technology, while also paying attention to local needs and challenges (London and Hart 2011: 14).

London and Hart's book (2011) offers toolkits, roadmaps and models aiming to guide MNCs and entrepreneurs, abounding with concepts such as 'Seven key principles for creating a fortune with the base of the pyramid' (p. 21); 'Five key factors that make the BoP markets unique' (*ibid.*: 47); 'Four toolkits for BoP business models innovations' (*ibid.*: 53); 'The green leap or great convergence model' (*ibid.*: 85); 'Three phases of embedded innovation' (*ibid.*: 118); 'Four general stages of strategic design' (*ibid.*: 176); 'Two models of venture creation' (*ibid.*: 198), and so on. These prescriptions are clearly efforts to empower MNCs and entrepreneurs and co-opting to the global market, using a simplified management approach to development. While the BoP population is posited to remain passive, the BoP concept was invented and reinvented by its proponents, the same proponents who also created and monopolized knowledge about the BoP through their normative BoP-for-managers models. What results is an alternative Third World, made up of communities that can only come to be known through theories and intervened upon from the outside (Mitchell, cited in Escobar 1995), without any real attempt to understand them and let them express themselves.

Thus, both proponents and opponents of the BoP concept envision a singular process for modernization and economic prosperity, developed by and in the West and then exported to other societies. The ethnocentrism and emphasis on universality in the prescriptions of both camps are clearly evident throughout, building on a binary opposition between the inherently inferior BoP and the omnipotent global system. Such attributes include framing the 'Orient' as:

being (an) 'inferior, exotic, degenerative culture that requires acculturation and modernization', and also the supposedly 'objective' differences between the westerner and the 'other', which accord the former the right to rule and ultimately civilize and even represent the latter (Frenkel and Shenav 2006: 857).

In totality, the discourse creates an apparatus that serves the powerful actors in the global market, legitimizing their actions to exploit, control and dominate the BoP. It can be seen as an agent of the new 'Empire' ushering imperialism or the 'radically altered forms of capitalism's accelerated penetration into the non-capitalistic world' (Parry, cited in Westwood 2006).

Conclusion

Our post-colonial critique of the BoP discourse, which is novel in that it also focuses on critiques of the BoP concept, has led us to a number of significant conclusions. Through an analysis of the BoP's invention, including its constituent representations and prescriptions, we show that the discourse serves as a constructed space and apparatus that allows the dominant actors in the global market to canonize knowledge about an invented 'Other' and legitimize an exploitative agenda to maintain their dominance. The first wave of BoP proponents created an invented space for opportunities and threats, characterized by colonial assumptions that rationalize culture, emphasize income, and value size and scale. In defending this domain from its critiques, the space was reinvented by the second wave of BoP proponents, again based on many of the same colonial assumptions emphasizing passivity and homogenizing the collective in terms of income and market characteristics. This space was made by and for the West, particularly MNCs. Therefore, taken together, the prescriptions of the proponents and the critiques underscore the omnipotence of the global economy, suggested unsurprisingly by business scholars and gurus, in an effort to maintain and legitimize the dominant position of those they serve and from whom they create knowledge, and giving them power to continue to exploit what they have created.

Aforementioned points withstanding, several delimitations of this chapter merit mention. First, in the present investigation, we primarily focus on the typical traits of the mainstream, or dominant, BoP discourse. We acknowledge the magnitude as well as the multidisciplinary nature of the literature that explicitly refers to the BoP concept, but choose to put emphasis on some of the most central and vocal texts within the business literature. Second, the BoP proposition can be, and to a certain degree has already been, criticized from postmodernist and post-developmental horizons at large. We welcome and fully concur with critical treatise from such perspectives, which to a large extent are interrelated and closely connected to the form of postcolonial

analysis we undertake presently. However, instead of providing a critique of the neo-liberal economic system as such, we focus on the issues pertaining to cultural domination, othering and representation. Hence, we will leave general post-modernist and post-developmental accounts outside the immediate scope of the present examination.

In fine, this post-colonial critique aiming to defamiliarize the readers, offers an alternative analysis that reveals how conflicting dialogues between proponents and critiques in a discourse can actually work towards fortifying the same ideologies and propagate exploitative colonial agendas. Karnani might have appeared to have criticized Prahalad and Hart by forcefully presenting opposing representation and prescriptions, but a closer look reveals that beyond those harsh words and opposing views lie similar colonial assumptions that aim to legitimize the status quo and the actions necessary to maintain this invented space of the BoP. Therefore, what we undertake in this chapter is an important task of reading and reflecting on the BoP through a post-colonial lens, one that defamiliarizes readers and presents them with the intellectual pitfalls that such a discourse can bring with it. We do not suggest alternative courses of action on how best to effect poverty alleviation, because the problem of poverty is often compounded by the multitude of commonly advanced prescriptions. What we offer is a different perspective and a unique analytical approach that hopefully can lead to more fruitful discourse in addressing the real issues surrounding poverty.

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