Rethinking the Bottom of the Pyramid: 
A Critical Perspective from an Emerging Economy

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ABSTRACT

Based on a decolonial perspective enunciated in an emerging economy, this article highlights the dark side of the Bottom of the Pyramid (BoP) approach, which has been overseen in mainstream Western management literature, especially in marketing. More than a market-oriented strategy, the BoP approach is discussed as a (geo)political design of Eurocentric modernity, reinforcing a neocolonial order, under the rhetoric of salvation. By reinforcing market-orientation logic as the way for the ‘poor others’ to develop, BoP fosters a US-led neoliberal order in non-Western countries, challenging the decolonial option for a world where many worlds and knowleges could coexist.
1. INTRODUCTION

The pro-poor rhetoric has historically been associated with Eurocentric pro-modernity claims and designs aimed to foster a better world for all from the particular perspective of the wealthy, powerful and civilized. During the Cold War, it was mobilized by First World countries, led by the United States (US), to promote the development of Third World countries.

More recently, in tandem with the transformation of globalization into global imperialism (STEGER, 2009), this rhetoric was directed towards developing countries and emerging economies to promote neoliberal globalization. Its underlying idea is that the non-West is “naturally” entrapped with backwardness and in chronic need of salvation and that the developed West should be responsible for saving the poor through the “creation” of markets and freedom.

Because of this Eurocentric legacy, the pro-poor rhetoric literature in management tends to be silent about the “totality” of the system, since it envisages the system from a particular perspective that is grounded on the imposition of the rhetoric of salvation through modernity - i.e., an advance from a primitive state. More specifically, it reinforces the visibility of the successful rhetoric of modernity and keeps invisible “the exploitative and inhuman logic of coloniality, which is essential to insure the “success” - that is, “growing progress and increasing poverty”” (MIGNOLO, 2005, p.120). Coloniality is understood here as the dark side of modernity, and refers to the domination of power imposed by the West on the non-West (QUIJANO, 2007).

Recently, and particularly after the events of 9/11 and subsequent rise of U.S. unilateralism, and at the expense of those who point out the rise of neocolonialism fostered by Western corporations in the neoliberal era, one of the main designs to help solve the poverty problem discussed in management literature, especially in the marketing area, has been the Bottom of the Pyramid (BoP) approach. This approach has been developed mainly by C.K. Prahalad (PRAHALAD, 2006; PRAHALAD; HART, 2002; PRAHALAD; HAMMOND, 2002) and pushed and supported by powerful US-led institutions – in particular United Nations and World Bank (HULME, 2010; COLLINS; RHOADS, 2010).

Mainstream literature on the BoP approach discusses it mainly as a market oriented approach to help end poverty. Nevertheless, the BoP approach has also been described by a few as a design that fosters (geo)political and inter-state issues that reinforce neocolonial order (ARORA; ROMIJN, 2011). This dark side of the BoP approach is commonly overseen by academics, especially in marketing, which can be explained by the involvement the area of marketing has had, since the end of the Cold War and the expansion of neoliberal globalization, with a market orientation (MO) logic (HUBBARD; NORMAN; MILLER, 2005), as a way to disseminate a US-led neoliberal order in non-Western countries – especially in emerging economies. The main objective of this paper is, therefore, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the BoP approach, by highlighting its neocolonial side, from the perspective of an emerging economy.

The second section of this paper discusses the concepts of Modernity, Coloniality and Decoloniality, and their relation with the BoP approach’s rhetoric of ‘salvation’. The third section presents the main reasoning behind the BoP approach. The fourth section discusses the dark side of the market orientation concept. The fifth section presents the (geo)political and inter-state issues related to BoP approach. The last section provides suggestions for further critical developments on the BoP approach from a decolonial perspective enunciated in an emerging economy from Latin America.
2. MODERNITY/ COLONIALITY/ DECOLONIALITY AND THE RHETORIC OF ‘SALVATION’

Related to the BoP rhetoric is the ideology that the poor need help and the only way to do this is through the implementation of US-based market-oriented discourses, since all other forms of salvation, such as governmental and non-government organizational aid, have failed. This assumption is based on the premise that “the poor” are individuals living in non-Western countries, plagued with eternal backwardness and poverty, whose “salvation” is a responsibility of the developed West (ARORA; ROMIJN, 2012).

This line of thought can be traced back to Eurocentric modernity – a totalitarian and imperial episteme that invented and established the categories that distinguish racially and hierarchically people and regions (MIGNOLO, 2009), neglecting geographical, social and historical diversity of individuals in countries and regions outside of the Eurocentric core (BROHMAN, 1995). Through this view of modernity, Western-based ideologies are believed to be universal and used as moral obligation of modern civilizations to relieve “the most barbaric, primitive, coarse people” from a state of eternal “immaturity” (DUSSEL, 2000, p.472).

This imperialistic Eurocentric episteme is intimately related to the mobilization of the concept of poverty (DUSSEL, 1993). The latter permits the first to advance, since the West must ‘save’ the non-Western poor, even if this means resorting to violence as a necessary way to overcome or suppress the barbaric character of such immature other. From the perspective of modernity/coloniality/decoloniality put forward in Latin America (ESCOBAR, 2010), the construction and cultivation of the concept of poverty through processes of conquest, extraction and accumulation has been a crucial feature in the materialization of Eurocentric domination and corresponding world order, and in the subsequent mobilization of “pro-poor discourses” (QUIJANO, 2007).

The Eurocentric vision neglects that modernity has a darker side, a colonial side, which carries negative content, where modernity is “the justification of an irrational praxis of violence” (DUSSEL, 2000: 472). The salvation of the other, from a Western perspective, is anything but salvation, in the view of non-Westerners, since, in the process of modernity, they lose the “richness and diversity” of their societies (BROHMAN, 1995, p. 122).

Eurocentric modernity requires and reinforces epistemic coloniality (IBARRA-COLADO, 2006). Epistemic coloniality is one of the effects and conditions of the dominant framework of geopolitics of knowledge in the management literature, particularly in marketing, imposed by the defenders of universal Eurocentrism. This “invisible” face of coloniality is marked by the imposition of one type of knowledge based on one “other” reality, which overshadows local practices and knowledge, thus guaranteeing their subalternization (IBARRA-COLADO, 2006).

Coloniality is, thus, described as the dark side of Eurocentric modernity (MIGNOLO, 2011). In fact, modernity and coloniality are inseparable parts of the same phenomena, and emerge simultaneously in the sixteenth century with the “discovery” of America by Christopher Columbus, in 1492 (see BANERJEE; CHIO; MIR, 2009), and not only in the seventeenth and eighteenth century (as if it were a phenomena derived from modernity), such as proposed by the Eurocentric version of Eurocentric modernity (DUSSEL, 1993).

‘Coloniality’ is a concept created to designate the domination of power, of being, and of knowledge. It differs from colonialism since it does not refer to a determined period of time, established arbitrarily by analysts. Coloniality is a strategy of domination that is based on the distinction of races between those who conquer from those that are conquered and in the corresponding geopolitics of knowledge production. Even after the end of the European
colonial domination over Asia and Africa, for example, the coloniality of power as a principle and strategy of domination and control has continued (QUIJANO, 2007).

In response to (and against) the global spread of a one-dimensional way of seeing the world, developed by modernity, coloniality and the totalitarian Eurocentric episteme, Mignolo (2011) defends that it is necessary for the “barbarians” to delink and promote the epistemology from the exteriority. This decolonial option must be proposed by the rest of the world under a transmodern pluriversality perspective (DUSSEL, 1993), by way of involvement with borderline theorizations and thoughts that were in large part ignored or subalternized by the totalitarian epistemology (also in Europe and elsewhere).

As there is no external part to modernity at this stage, border thinking can be described as the epistemology of the exteriority, that is, from the exterior that was created by the interior (MIGNOLO; TLOSTANOVA, 2006). Border thinking originates from the colonial difference, the locus in which modernity and coloniality are found (MIGNOLO, 2011), and in essence challenges the Eurocentric idea that “thinking” is de-localized, when, in fact, thinking is inevitably located. Border thinking should be interpreted as a response to the violence of imperial/territorial epistemology and the rhetoric of Eurocentric modernity/globalization of salvation. The transmodern pluriversality inherent in border thinking transcends Eurocentric modernity by not proposing the substitution of one type of modernity for another; it defends the co-construction of a world in which diverse worlds and knowledges could coexist.

By engaging the decolonial perspective to analyze and reframe the BoP approach, we argue that it is possible to go beyond the pro-poor rhetoric that proposes solving the poverty problem by way of an Eurocentric neoliberal market order in a global scale. By engaging a decolonial perspective intended not to foster a “clash of civilizations” (HUNTINGTON, 1989), but to foster transmodern pluriversality, the BoP approach is seen as a rhetoric permeated with (geo)political issues, which aims to reinforce the neocolonial order and contain alternatives in general and the decolonial option in particular. In a nutshell, offering adequate products and services to the poor, raising their quality of life and, in consequence, eradicating poverty is, thus, not exactly the main objective of the BoP approach.

3. THE BOP RHETORIC

The proponents of BoP claim that the bottom part of the global economic pyramid is constituted with billions of poor consumers (i.e., below 2-dollar a day), which represents, as a whole, a “fortune” for corporations willing to adapt product and services to serve them. According to two main proponents of the BoP approach: “The real source of market promise is not the wealthy few in the developing world, or even the emerging middle-income consumers: It is the billions of aspiring poor who are joining the market for the first time.” (PRAHALAD; HART, 2002, p. 1).

Rather than imposing home-based marketing strategies in developing countries, those corporations from the West should serve the poor in the non-West from a truly global market-oriented perspective. Embarking the rebirth of international development as poverty eradication, BoP strategies and programs should promote the development of poor markets into emerging or developed markets on a global scale (FAULCONBRIDGE, 2013; WOOD; PITTA; FRANZAK, 2008).

Prahalad and powerful institutions believe that by offering adequate products and services to the four billion poor individuals located outside the West, they can be saved from poverty by raising their quality of life, which, in consequence, would eradicate global poverty. By engaging the rhetoric of salvation, corporations should become responsible for this global problem, instead of governments, at the expense of critical authors who argue that they “have become more imperialist in the [contemporaneous] era of neoliberal accumulation”
(BANERJEE; CHIO; MIR, 2009, p.4) and that “imperialist adventures from the basis of many actions that are now accepted MNC practices” (BANERJEE; CHIO; MIR, 2009, p.7).

Prahalad undermines such criticism since, in his view, corporate imperialism ended with the arrival of the era of neoliberal globalization (PRAHALAD; LIBERTHAL, 1998). Corporations are expected not to exploit the rest of the world, but to foster salvation wherever they find in the non-West poverty and chronic deficit of modern market-oriented institutions (also called “institutional voids”). Such reading goes against a vast literature that claims exactly the opposite: “the rhetoric of modernity works through the imposition of ‘salvation’, whether as Christianity, civilization, modernization and development after WWII or market democracy after the fall of the Soviet Union” (MIGNOLO, 2007, p. 463).

The proponents of the BoP also target (geo)political and inter-state issues regarding civil and cross-border conflicts and global terrorism (PRAHALAD; HAMMOND, 2002). This “dark side” of the BoP approach has been overlooked by academics – especially in marketing – and market-oriented institutions (mainly in the West), and reinforces the neocolonial side of the BoP approach, which helps explain why the BoP approach has achieved such global success. It is in tune not only with the economic and market-oriented side of coloniality, but in particular with its political and inter-state-oriented side. Its trajectory of success goes in tandem with the rise of US unilateralism and the launch of the global “war on terror”, after the events of 9/11, by George W. Bush (Bush, 2002a).

The BoPs’ “strategic” concern with the spread of global terrorism was expanded in parallel to growing concerns in the US with the rise of emerging economies (PIETERSE, 2009). As US-led neoliberal globalization unfolded through a sequence of crises, discussions across the North Atlantic framed emerging economies – especially China – as potential major threats to the US-led West, restraining the expansion of large corporations and neoliberal capitalism (BOYER; TRUMAN, 2005).

BoP strategies became helpful to foster the promotion of market-oriented institutions in emerging economies, not only due to market-oriented reasons, but especially due to geopolitical and inter-state ones. No wonder it has been claimed that the marginalization of Muslims by the mainstream marketing literature is dangerous because “misperceptions can certainly lead to a risk of polarization and global divides” (EL-BASSIOUNY, 2014, p. 42).

The proponents of the BoP approach claim that the transition to market economies is the only alternative for global economic growth, even if such process is fraught with uncertainties. Discussions tend to exclude any other alternative, since the adoption of such types of markets is “no longer in question” (PRAHALAD; LIBERTHAL, 1998, p.127). Institutions in emerging economies should, in effect, be transformed into market-oriented ones. When it happens, marketing and strategic management concepts developed in the US and Europe will function properly in less developed contexts (LONDON; HART, 2004). The proponents of the BoP approach claims that the problem lies with the “anomalies” of “underdeveloped” societies, rather than on the imposition of colonizing theories.

The diffusion and institutionalization of the BoP approach on a global scale, as a way to foster a non-imperialistic market-oriented perspective, helped overshadow argument that US-led neoliberal globalization has not brought the promises of better markets for all, which would in turn help eliminate poverty (ARAUJO, 2013; STIGLITZ, 2003). It has also helped to keep invisible discussions around the rise of US neo-imperialism (HARVEY, 2003) and the dark or colonial side of US-led neoliberal capitalism (KOTZ, 2009).

This dark or colonial side of the BoP approach, which is more salient in the rest of the world than in the West, challenges the underpinnings of the concept of market orientation and the strong engagement of US-led marketing discipline with MO in the early 1990s. More specifically, this dark and untold side of the BoP approach challenges the reworkings of MO in emerging economies (VISWANATHAN; SETH; GAU; CHATURVEDI, 2009;
The marketing literature has overlooked such discussions, based on the principle that the neoliberal market-oriented world order is “one civilization”, with no divides of North and South. This US-led neoliberal view gained further currency with the end of the Cold War, when it was understood that US-led capitalism prevailed over communism, and “free” markets were the only way to foster economic growth and opportunities for all. Such view was exported globally, especially to Latina America (ALCADIPANI; BERTERO, 2011; VIEIRA, 2003), contributing to exclude important political and ideological debates, as part of a colonial process (ALCADIPANI; CALDAS, 2012).

This discourse disguises the fact that US-led neoliberal globalization actually represents the expansion and deepening of asymmetrical processes informed by the Eurocentric representation of the rest of the world as locales marked by chronic backwardness and threat. It constrains the capacity of the rest of the world to foster other knowledges in marketing and alternatives to US-led neo-imperial order (SANTOS, 2001; SOUSA SANTOS, 2007; TADAJEWSKI, 2010), since the area of marketing is seen more as part of the problem than of its solution (BREI; ROSSI; EVRARD, 2007).

In this vein, we argue that marketing should recognize that, more than just a market-oriented corporate strategy informed by the Eurocentric idea of ‘salvation’, the BoP approach serves as a mechanism of “colonization of what managerialism would have us believe are institutional voids” (COOKE; FARIA, 2013).

4. ON THE DARK SIDE OF MARKET-ORIENTED ACCOUNTS

Marketing discipline and institutions embraced the BoP as a way of fostering a truly global market orientation. Market-oriented strategies focused on middle class in advanced economies and applied in emerging economies, informed by an “obsolete” logic of corporate imperialism, had to be replaced by grand market-oriented strategies, aimed to include the ones located at the margins of the market. The BoP approach embraced the salvation rhetoric, focusing on helping local people and marketing academics overcome the institutional voids of emerging economies and foster right conditions for the rise of modern markets and market-oriented institutions.

The sudden end of the Cold War period in the late 1980s marked the final victory of the US-led neoliberal war of ideas based on free market and stateless world. No wonder it was in 1990 that the concept of market orientation was launched (NARVER; SLATER, 1990; KOHLI; JAWORSKI, 1990) and started an unprecedented trajectory of success in the field of marketing (HUBBARD; NORMAN; MILLER, 2005).

There is, on the other hand, a dark side of MO, in the same fashion there is a dark side of BoP and Eurocentric modernity (MIGNOLO, 2011). This other side is generally ignored by the marketing literature produced within the core of the “system”. Even analysis from the perspective of academics and market-oriented institutions in emerging economies tend to constrain in marketing any perspective “from the invaded ‘outside’ that was fabricated by the ‘inside’ invader” (IBARRA-COLOADO, 2006, p.464).

The US-led neoliberal ideas that inform the concept of MO begin in the 1970s, with the launch of the neoliberal war of ideas aimed to restore the hegemony of the US (HARVEY, 2003). This war of ideas started when non-Western countries initiated reforms – especially in China – that would push the rise of the “rest of the world” (ARRIGHI, 2007).

The neoliberal war of ideas was led by US power elites and US-led powerful institutions – in particular World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and United Nations (UN). It was consolidated when the IMF replaced its Keynesian economists with
neoliberal monetarists, making the Fund a “prime agent of neoliberalization” (HARVEY, 2007, p.32). This idea of a stateless world, featured by peace, progressive change, freedom, cooperation and multipolarity, was based on an assumption that countries in general, and the “lone superpower” in particular, would be voluntarily willing to dispense state sovereignty over markets.

This neoliberal and rather illusionary representation of market, which was diffused on a global scale by powerful US-led institutions and at the expense of alternatives and major interests of the rest of the word, was backed by influential authors and institutions in marketing in the US (especially the Marketing Science Institute). They defended that everything that was not part of the market should become part of the market (ACHROL; KOTLER, 2000), creating an ideal scenario for the proliferation of the concept of MO.

The first articles on MO showed how large businesses (in the US) that followed this concept achieved superior performance (NARVER; SLATER, 1990; KOHLI; JAWORSKI, 1990). Based on such (biased) results, research on MO expanded beyond its initial scope in the private sector, “invading” (KOTLER, 2005) the realm of public organizations and non-profit organizations. This expansion was also noticed globally, as researchers from different countries applied uncritically the concept in Asia, Latina America and Eastern Europe (HOOLEY et al., 2000, 2003), “proving” that MO could be implemented in many contexts.

The literature on MO overlooks the fact that the success of this concept was based not only on its seductive flavor, but mainly on the unrivalled military power of the US, especially after the US victory of the Cold War, interpreted as the apex of Eurocentric modernity and the arrival of an unconstrained market civilization (LIE, 1997). With the end of the Cold War, the US started to experience its unipolar moment. To restore its hegemony, the US began diffusing global scale neoliberal discourses. Market-oriented disciplines and concepts, such as marketing and MO, were particularly helpful for this grand strategy (KAGAN, 2002).

The first more obvious signs of failure of market fundamentalism – i.e., the notion that “unfettered markets by themselves can ensure economic prosperity and growth” for all (STIGLITZ, 2009, p. xiii) – with the Asian crisis in 1997 had raised counter-movements. The age of freedom, inaugurated by US-led neoliberal hegemony, turned into an age of exclusion, becoming “clear that the “free market” is incapable of welcoming everyone. The business of the market is not to provide jobs, let alone social cohesion. There is no room for the growing number of people who make little or no contribution to production and consumption. The market operates for the benefit of the minority” (GEORGE, 1997, p.47).

The age of US-led neoliberal hegemony was criticized by many, especially by the anti-globalization movement. The critiques had the IMF and the World Bank as the main targets, because their promises of modernity through neoliberal order did not result in positive outcomes. Dissemination of poverty in the global South was one of the consequences of this new world market-based order.

The marketing literature overlooked this overall picture, in tandem with the first obvious signs of success achieved by MO (KOHLI; JAWORSKI, 1990). There was another reason for the marketing literature to overlook this picture. Counter-movements and academic arguments contrary to the US-led neoliberal project were framed as signs of subversion and divergence by US-led neoliberal elites, who had in their hands not only the control of finance neoliberalism but the unrivalled military power of the “lone superpower”. More specifically, anti-globalization manifestations were framed as manifestations of anti-Americanism and anti-modernity. Any plural visions in marketing, which supported "border thinking", were classified as inadequate by the dominant episteme (FIRAT, 2010), showing how difficult it is for the area to admit its errors of the past (CASOTTI, 1998).

This dark side of US-led neoliberal hegemony was reinforced with the election of George W. Bush as president in 2000, as it brought the neoconservatives back to power
(HARVEY, 2003), and the events of 9/11 in 2001. That was a strong justification for military interventions and an important trigger for the reinforcement of MO and the launch of the BoP approach globally.

Motivated by such events, debates on US empire got to the surface, not only abroad, but mainly in the US. Consensus was that the anti-imperialist restrain that was holding back the US in becoming the next great global empire should be eliminated, as “the disorder in poor countries grows more threatening” (MALLABY, 2002, p.2). The US was portrayed as a benign or benevolent hegemony and as the “indispensable nation” (IKENBERRY, 2004) to bring modernity to the non-Western world.

With the transformation of neoliberal globalism into military globalism after the events of 9/11 (see STEGER, 2009) executives from global corporations, analysts form large consultancy firms, and researchers from business schools and think tanks admitted in the US that the market in emerging economies had specific institutional characteristics, different from (and inferior to) advanced economies, that should be acknowledged by researchers, executives and consultants from advanced or developed economies.

While specialized literature in management, and especially in marketing, focused on such institutional characteristics of markets in emerging economies, it overlooked international and geo-political issues and, in particular, the claims in the US that the rise of emerging economies was threatening to the West, because such world order would be marked by the rise of authoritarianism (BOYER; TRUMAN, 2005). Russia’s soft power strategies toward Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Central Asia (HILL, 2006), and China’s soft power programs in Africa and Latin America became major issues within Euro-American international relations circles and help explain why emerging economies have been portrayed as a threat to the West.

The MO literature overlooks authors who argue that large corporations and market-oriented strategies and philosophies explain a great deal of the problems faced by emerging economies (BLOCK; EVANS, 2005; MADELEY, 2008). More important, it also ignores the rise of a US-led neo-imperial market-oriented world order, under the allegation of modernity. Where as in the sixteenth century modernity had begun with Christianity, had been followed by the civilizing mission in the nineteenth and developmentalism in the twentieth, in the present century modernity is associated with the vision of a neoliberal global market (MIGNOLO, 2000).

As we supposedly get into the second round of globalization, both critical and mainstream analysts from developed economies seem to agree that emerging economies will play a key role in the future of global capitalism and that it is necessary to engage ‘the other’ as long as they do not address the complicated ‘self’ (unintentionally). According to Kemal Dervis (2005), the head of the United Nations Development Programme, globalization, which was viewed by some as an ‘unequalizing process’ in the twentieth century, has the potential to become an ‘equalizing process’ in the twenty-first century.

5. THE BOP APPROACH AS A REWORKING OF A NEO-IMPERIAL MARKET-ORIENTED ORDER

In the preface of his bestselling book “The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid: eradicating poverty through profits”, Prahalad (2006, p.xv) discusses the difficulties in publishing his first article with Stuart Hart, about the relationship between multinational corporations and poverty alleviation. According to the author, “not a single journal would accept the article for publication. It was too radical. Reviewers thought that it did not follow the work of developmental economists.”
After such rejections, Prahalad adapted his ideas on the BoP approach in his working paper (PRAHALAD; HART, 2000). His newer articles were better accepted. Curiously, in 2002, they finally got published; one of them, with Allen Hammond, in the prestigious Harvard Business Review (HBR) (PRAHALAD; HAMMOND, 2002).

From a decolonial perspective, the acceptance of Prahalad’s work in HBR should not be seen as a surprise. Historically, the journal has taken a stance in defending US interests, which, very often, meant spurring neoliberal order. During the Cold War, for instance, academics - in particular one of the Deans of Harvard Business School - and executives that voiced their opinions in HBR urged for the expansion of businesses “social responsibility” as a means of defending free market capitalism against the global expansion of communism (SPECTOR, 2006, 2008). Since Prahalad’s BoP proposition defended a similar corporate responsibility, advancing a US-based market oriented approach promising it would eradicate poverty, it was only natural that the article would be well accepted in HBR.

Prahalad’s published articles presented small changes to the ideas proposed initially in his working paper, though the salvation rhetoric was maintained. His “new” approach became more aligned with the context of the times. In these articles, Prahalad linked poverty to terrorism, defending that the BoP approach could eradicate the first and, in effect, eliminate the latter (PRAHALAD; HAMMOND, 2002; PRAHALAD; HART, 2002). In doing this, Prahalad’s work gained recognition in the academic community, especially in the field of management, at a time when the US was prone for such propositions.

After the events of 9/11 in 2001, the US government declared “war on terror”, as a prevention policy against the advance of terrorism and possible future attacks on the country. This triggered a stream of declarations from US politicians about terrorism, and how its root causes were related to poverty (ABADIE, 2006). To eliminate terrorism, therefore, the social and political roots of poverty needed to be confronted (EHRLICH; LIU, 2002).

To complement the military approach, the US government started to defend that the only way to deal with terrorism and poverty would be by offering “economic freedom” to nations where such liberalism (to populations and businesses) was not present (PIAZZA, 2008). In this sense, the US saw itself as responsible in “leading the fight for freedom from terror” (BUSH, 2002a), and bringing modernity to the non-Western world.

The belief that free markets were the answer to such critical global problems based itself on the ideal that these forms of markets “have proven their ability to lift whole societies out of poverty” (BUSH, 2002b, p.4). By implementing neoliberal order around the globe, trade would increase between countries, creating economic prosperity. This, in exchange, would help fight poverty and terrorism and the reemergence of “reactionary forces from Islamic radicalism” that have “weakened [the (neo)liberal order] and threatens to weak it further” (KAGAN, 2008: 105).

The view that the US was the “lone superpower” responsible for saving the world from terrorism and implementing free markets in less developed contexts did not begin only in response to the events of 9/11. In fact, in the post Asian Crisis, former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright declared that the US would “not be intimidated or pushed off the world stage by people who do not like what we stand for, and that is, freedom, democracy and the fight against disease, poverty and terrorism” (WHITNEY, 1998).

Such statement, given at a time when the US-led neoliberal project was being criticized for its economic flaw in Asia, connect capitalist ideals to the fight against poverty and terrorism, legitimizing the neoliberal order as the only alternative to resolve such problems. Any organization or country against such reasoning would, by consequence, be considered an opposer to the benefits of free markets and an enemy of the US. In this sense, when the events of 9/11 occurred, it only helped to reinforce in the Eurocentric world that a US-led global neoliberal order was needed.
To incentivize support for the US-led global war on terror, foreign direct investment from Western countries flowed into countries from the rest of the world that joined the efforts to fight terrorism. Such investments also had a second purpose of disseminating a US shaped market order in regions where other forms of markets were present. Only in the Arab World, the US committed more than $1 billion to the United States-Middle East Partnership Initiative, a loosely defined aid program “designed to unleash the private sector, empower civil society and foster democracy in the Near East and North Africa” (MOORE; SCHRANK, 2003, p.112). Foreign investments from Western countries also helped the economy in Pakistan have a 6 per cent average real GDP growth, after the country agreed to fight with the US-led coalition against terrorism (FATIMA; SHAHBAZ; ISLAM, 2012). As well as raising support in favor of the US assault against terror, such incentives also had the workings of neocolonial order, since they helped foment neoliberal markets in regions where such type of market was not common.

In this sense, the BoP approach fit well into the context of the times, since it promised “economic freedom”, by way of MO (KARNANI, 2011), in regions where other forms of market were practices. But, most importantly, the creation of a rhetoric of ‘salvation’ that combined poverty, terrorism and free markets permitted the neoliberal order to continue advancing by way of the BoP, under allegations that this was the path to world order - an order that, in essence, would follow US orders.

Though the BoP approach promised to eliminate terrorism through the eradication of poverty, BoP Learning Labs did not expand to countries typically associated with terrorists, in the Middle East or Africa. As a fact, these Labs where created in developed countries and, especially, in emerging economies, not known for hosting terrorist activities. But, since these economies do have large segments of poor individuals, they offered a perfect setting for the BoP approach to flourish in the local field of management (GARDETTI, 2007).

The expansion of the BoP approach to developed countries and, especially, emerging economies disguised the fact that the US-led neoliberal order has not saved the world, i.e., resulted in better markets and less world poverty. In fact, it has not been effective at revitalizing global capital accumulation. But, in turn, it has succeeded in maintain power in the West, through the dismantling of institutions in the rest of the world that defend a more egalitarian socio-economic conduct (HARVEY, 2007). Also, the BoP approach has masked that, behind its expansion, are the workings of the US to maintain a neocolonial order in emerging economies, in face of the growing global importance these regions have achieved in the recent past.

Important for the expansion of the BoP approach are the efforts of international institutions, such as the WB, the IMF and the World Trade Organization, that promised that the US-led neoliberal order would help end poverty, bringing stability and growth to underdeveloped countries and emerging economies. But, contrary to these allegations, poverty has not receded, and blame has been pointed at the WB and the IMF, since in almost all recent cases of countries’ economic collapses, these institutions have been heavily involved, attempting to implement a US-led neoliberal market order (EASTERLY, 2007).

In consequence of the failures of such institutions in trying to eliminate poverty through neoliberal ideals, criticism has been made to the way the proponents of the BoP approach argue in favor of MO. BoP reconceptualize poverty as a problem that can only be solved by market mechanisms, stripping all historical, political and social foundations associated with this problem (SCHWITTAY, 2011). The poor, in result, are constituted as empowered consumers, mirrored on their Western peers, individualizing their needs and arguing that only through markets will they be able to enhance their personal benefits (BONSU; POLSA, 2011). As Prahalad puts it: “If people have no sewerage and drinking water, should we also deny them television and cell phones?” (JOHNSON, 2005).
Through the implementation of the BoP approach in emerging economies, the “empowered” poor consumer starts to rely more and more on markets to supply him with gains, shifting citizenship to consumerism, reinforcing the notion that free markets are the only alternative. But, in truth, these consumers have scarce power over markets (MADELEY, 2008).

Curiously, when the proponents of the BoP approach talk about poverty, they only refer to the poor in emerging economies and underdeveloped countries, not acknowledging that in Western countries this same problem, to a certain extent, is also present (ARORA; ROMIJN, 2012). They discuss cases of “successful” corporate actions in helping the poor from countries in Latina America and Asia (HART, 2010; LONDON; HART, 2010; PRAHALAD, 2006), disregarding examples coming from the US or Europe. They describe emerging economies and underdeveloped countries mostly in terms of their disadvantages relative to developed economies, legitimizing the exploitation of local markets, because of their disfunctionality, corruption, inefficiency and injustice to the poor (MONTGOMERY; PEREDO; CARLSON, 2012).

This reworking of the neo-imperial market order through the BoP approach shows how this concept “appears to be a continuity in symbolic colonial tactics that reproduces the inequalities of market power” (BONSU; POLSA, 2011, p. 239). It is based on a neocolonial and racist dichotomy between Western and non-Western values, where Western values represent liberalism, rationality, social equality and individual rights, and non-Western values represent illiberalism, irrationality, social inequality and collective rights. Under such rationale, the imposition of MO through the BoP approach in a global scale is a legitimate responsibility of the US, the “lone superpower”, since “the promotion of democracy, human rights, and markets are far more central to American policy than to the policy of any other country” (HUNTINGTON, 1993, p.83). For the BoP approach to foster modernity, therefore, coloniality must come with it (MIGNOLO, 2011).

By reinforcing the market orientation logic as the only way for to the poor others to develop, the BoP approach reinforces the US-led neoliberal order in non-Western countries, especially in emerging economies – group of countries portrayed as a major threat to the US-led Western civilizing hegemony, because of their growing importance as world order-makers. In this sense, the BoP approach perpetuates the rhetoric of salvation by framing decoloniality as a threat, reinforcing the Eurocentric mandate that states that the coexistence of worlds, orders and knowledges is an impossibility because of the inevitable clash of civilizations (HUNTINGTON, 1989).

In other words, the neocolonial order engendered by the BOP design not just reinforces five centuries of Eurocentric domination, but it also aims to contain the decolonial option and the many claims “from the bottom of the pyramid”. It also helps to contain the many alternatives provided by the rest of the world – especially by the so-called emerging economies (see ARRIGHI; ZHANG, 2011) – for the (re)(co-)construction of a world in which many worlds and knowledges could coexist from a perspective of transmodern pluriversality.

6. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This paper aims to foster a decolonial option to the bottom of the pyramid approach, by highlighting its neocolonial side from a particular perspective enunciated in an emerging economy from Latin America. Our understanding of decolonial thinking from Latina America is informed by the realization that coloniality is the darker and constitutive side of modernity. Accordingly, it is informed by the understanding that the rhetoric of modernity "is a rhetoric of salvation (by conversion yesterday, by development today), but in order to implement what the rhetoric preaches, it is necessary to marginalize or destroy whatever gets in the way of
modernity” (MIGNOLO, 2011: xxiv-xxv). In this sense, we pointed out in this paper that the BoP rhetoric also serves as a mechanism to contain the decolonial option. More specifically, it aims to contain the co-construction of transmodern pluriversality and reinforce the rewesternization strategy focused on guaranteeing by all means faithful believers in the US-led neoliberal order.

By adopting a decolonial view, we tried to highlight a side of the BoP approach (i.e. the dark side) that has been overlooked by mainstream management literature, especially in marketing studies. More importantly, we intend to bring forth a decolonial perspective of the BoP approach from academics that live and work in an emerging economy from Latin America and engage with researchers who live and work outside of the “bottom of the pyramid”. Our intention with this is to help co-construct other knowledges that dialogue with existing knowledges from a perspective of transmodern pluriversality, instead of Eurocentric universality.

Discussions on the BoP have been fostered by academics who are inside of the system (therefore, outside of the BoP), and directed towards countries where the BoP approach has been imposed, especially in emerging economies. Informed by the rhetoric of salvation established by Eurocentric modernity, such developments tend to frame the BoP approach as a universal market-oriented approach, at the expense of darker and constitutive side of modernity that is a priority for those who work and live at the BoP.

The rhetoric of ‘salvation’ that informs the BoP approach frames the non-Western world as locales “naturally” marked by backwardness and threats that must be saved by civilizing or true knowledge from the West. Such rhetoric keeps invisible the dark side of modernity to justify BoP-alike neocolonial interventions, which are not framed as such because the darker side of modernity has become more invisible to the Westerners than to non-Westeners over the last five centuries of Eurocentric domination. The mobilization of the BoP approach as an instrument of ‘salvation’ for the chronically poor in the non-Western world can reinforce a neocolonial order that goes at odds with the basic principles espoused by the BoP approach itself.

Through a decolonial perspective, the BoP approach has been displayed in this paper as more than just a market-oriented strategy of corporations aimed to get a “fortune” through the salvation of the “poor other”. We showed it is also a geopolitical tool that expands a controversial US-led Western neoliberal order towards the non-Western world, especially to emerging economies, where other forms of order and ways of dealing with “poverty”, which move much beyond the market-oriented rhetoric, have been responsible for the rise of the rest (ARRIGHI, 2010). It is a neo-colonizing resource informed by modernity/coloniality that constrains multipolarity by reinforcing the idea that “there are no alternatives” but the neoliberal order driven by market and market-oriented business corporations.

The neocolonial and darker side of the BoP approach and MO is not only limiting, but is criticized for its lack of adequacy to emerging economies. Authors from these regions (VISWANATHAN; SRINIVAS; ROBIN, 2010) have stood against the imposition of a US-led MO, questioning its sustainability, given “the starkly different conditions” (VISWANATHAN et al., 2009, p. 421) existent in subsistence marketplaces.

Those “different conditions” helps explain why researchers outside of “the bottom of the pyramid” tend to overlook the dark side of the BoP approach and MO. As academics from an emerging economy located in Latin America, we join colleagues from emerging economies in other regions and other countries from the rest of the world (including those located in US and Europe) to stand for the co-construction of a decolonial perspective in marketing that could review the BoP approach and re-theorize marketing in particular and re-design management in general.
We stand for the engagement of management institutions and knowledge, particularly in the field of marketing, with the “bottom of pyramid”, constituted by millions of people in Brazil who have been excluded from responsibilities appropriated by local universities through the mobilization of the Eurocentric rhetoric of salvation, to liberate the “field”. By engaging the basic tenets of transmodern pluriversality, we also stand in this paper for the engagement of management institutions and knowledge in different parts of the world with such important mass of billions of “excluded” from the large “global BoP” as a necessary path to the co-construction of a world in which many worlds and knowledges could coexist.

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