

Women entrepreneurs: how power operates in bottom of the pyramid marketing discourse

Gillian Hopkinson

Department of Marketing, Lancaster University Management School, UK

Asad Aman

Faculty of Business Administration, Lakehead University, Canada

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Abstract

The paper explores hegemony in bottom of the pyramid (BOP) marketing, specifically rural distribution schemes operated through women. Using Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse the paper considers the joint articulation of 'women entrepreneurs' through analysis of the Unilever Shakti system. It argues the discourse shapes subject positions, prescribes conduct and defines actors and the relationships between them. Discursive construction of entrepreneurs and empowered mothers obscures, to an extent, economic aspects of the arrangement. It also imposes new forms of conduct without unsettling traditional hierarchies. Further research is needed in relating such schemes both to western forms of distribution and to other forms of market and models of distribution in BOP locations.

Keywords: Bottom of the Pyramid, Laclau and Mouffe, hegemony, power, discourse, articulation, women empowerment, Shakti

Introduction

The notion of the Bottom of the Pyramid (BOP) was introduced by Prahalad and Hammond (2002) and elaborated and more widely disseminated by Prahalad's (2006) popular book "the Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Eradicating Poverty through Profits. Enabling dignity and choice through markets". The ambition was clear even in the title and subtitle. Both contributions accepted that globalization might be seen as good or bad, yet, in the face of assumed inevitability addressed the question; 'How do we make the benefits of globalization accessible for all?' The authors treated the poorest 5 billion global inhabitants, living on less than \$2000 a year, as an "invisible, unserved market". For them, these 5 billion constituted a viable market for multi-national corporations if suitable strategies were adopted.

The key feature preventing the realization of the market at the BOP was 'the dominant logic'. Prahalad (2006: 6) argued that "we are all of us prisoners of our own socialization" and see the world through the lenses of "our own ideology, experiences and established management practices". For example, Indian politicians and bureaucrats are suspicious of the private sector. MNCs believe that the poor cannot afford and have no use for products sold in more affluent markets. The charity sector sees the private sector as uncaring and greedy. Prahalad (2002: 9) claims that "Historically, governments, aid agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), large firms and the organized (formal and legal as opposed to the extralegal) business sector all seem to have reached an implicit agreement: Market based solutions cannot lead to poverty reduction and economic development". Fundamentally, then, the BOP thesis rested upon unsettling the taken-for-granted understandings of diverse actors that combined to produce implicit agreement about how those actors could, and should, relate to each other. Unsettling a historic, implicit and agreed upon understanding was necessary to open the way towards poverty eradication, sustained profitability for global corporations, and enhanced dignity and choice for the world's poorest inhabitants.

The Shakti distribution system is widely held up as a success story in BOP marketing. In the Shakti system 'women entrepreneurs' distribute Hindustan Unilever's consumer goods in the more remote, rural areas of India. Allegedly the scheme has multiple benefits for diverse market actors. Firstly, Shakti distribution provides Unilever with access to difficult to reach markets. Secondly, the scheme brings dignity to the women entrepreneurs involved in the scheme. Additionally, the scheme broadens consumer choice in the financially constrained markets served by the Shakti distributors. Although Shakti was not the first distribution scheme that enlisted women entrepreneurs (Avon cosmetics used a similar distribution model in South Africa), the Shakti scheme has garnered considerable attention. For example, the Shakti system has been widely lauded by the world bank (e.g. Dutz, 2007; Neath and Sharma, 2008; Petkoski et al., 2008), disseminated in case study form within management and marketing education and profiled also by Prahalad in more recent publications (Pralhad, 2009, 2010, 2012). The Shakti scheme is also cited as the model on which subsequent initiatives have been based such as those operated by Coca Cola, Bic, Danone, BATA shoes, Nokia etc. in India, Bangladesh and Africa (e.g. Dolan et al., 2012).

The Shakti distribution system is worthy of further investigation for several reasons. As outlined above, Shakti has been invoked to illustrate the potential of market based solutions to poverty by a number of authors, including Prahalad (2009, 2010, 2012). Also, the scheme is acknowledged as the model on which additional market based approaches to poverty have been based. The Shakti scheme appears therefore to have a particularly prominent place in both challenging and providing alternatives to the dominant logic that Prahalad (2006) saw as preventing the benefits of globalization from reaching the world's poorest inhabitants. If, through notoriety and wide celebration, the Shakti scheme has played a part in unsettling the dominant logic to which Prahalad (2006) objected, it is necessary also to attend to how Shakti might have contributed to the shape and dominance of a replacement logic.

This paper takes a critical stance towards BOP marketing with the aim of exploring how the Shakti system has contributed to contemporary and often implicit agreement about the relationships between diverse actors in situations of poverty. Therefore, we examine BOP marketing as a political practice by

focusing upon women in rural distribution systems and the Shakti system in particular. Although the BOP thesis has been critically explored (see for example Karnani, 2007, 2008), such critiques are more rarely voiced in the marketing literature (see however Bonsu and Polsa, 2011). Additionally, despite the focus given to the Shakti system in illustrating ideal marketing practice, the Shakti scheme is rarely subjected to critical scrutiny (notable exceptions include Chatterjee, 2014; Rhatynskyj, 2011). Therefore, following recent studies in management (Contu and Girei, 2014; Kelly, 2013; Lok and Willmott, 2013; Müller, 2013; Nyberg et al., 2013) and in marketing (Böhm and Brei, 2008), we draw on Laclau and Mouffe's conceptualization of hegemony to critically explore the Shakti system. Although Prahalad did not use the term, hegemony provides a useful concept through which to explore 'implicit agreement' and our aim is to explore the implicit agreement constituted through BOP marketing discourse as these are applied to women in distribution systems. What is distinctive in Laclau and Mouffe's formulation and important to our study is that meaning is produced in discourse, evades complete fixation and yet makes available particular subject positions through which lives are experienced. Power operates in organizing the social through the constitutive effects of discourse that incline individuals towards particular formulations of their interests and dispose them to particular practices. Examination of the Shakti system allows us, therefore, to explore the operation of power through BOP discourse by consideration of the subject position 'woman entrepreneur'.

The paper extends previous literatures and makes several contributions. Firstly, Böhm and Brei (2008) demonstrate the role of marketing in wider social formation specifically illuminating the role of marketing practices and communications in the hegemony of a development discourse. We take this one step further to show how a marketing program can itself produce hegemony, in this case through one particular development discourse. Secondly, in introducing to the marketing literature a critique specific to the women entrepreneurial distribution systems, we contribute to the existing marketing literature that applies a critical lens to the notion of the BOP. We build on Bonsu and Polsa's (2011) analysis of BOP marketing as a form of colonial project that shapes subjectivity. This allows us to respond to Faulconbridge's (2013) call for greater attention to the power geometries that relate western market institutions and local parties by developing, in particular, an understanding of the role of discursive logics. Following Araujo's (2013) argument that BOP marketing privileges the formal market, obscuring existing and localized exchange systems, we demonstrate how women are brought into a formal and directed market structure and elaborate upon the relationship this new subject position has to existing cultural positions.

The paper is organized as follows. Firstly, we expand upon Laclau and Mouffe's political theory and relate this to the emergence of the BOP project. Then we explain the key concepts relating to discourse that we draw from Laclau and Mouffe and that guide our analysis. We then elaborate on women entrepreneurial systems before examining the articulation of 'entrepreneur' and 'women' particularly through critical examination of these in the Shakti system. In our discussion we locate our work within existing critique of neo-liberalism within BOP discourse. Finally, our conclusions are accompanied by some suggestions for further enquiry.

The plurality of the social: how Laclau and Mouffe's political theory speaks to Prahalad.

In this section we consider the relevance of Laclau and Mouffe's political philosophy and theory of discourse in the analysis of BOP marketing. We look briefly at the genesis of the theory, the reconceptualisation of the social world that the theory provides and then at the core concepts that will be germane to our analysis. After setting out the theory we relate Laclau and Mouffe's thinking to the BOP thesis.

Laclau and Mouffe's theories were initially presented in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). In this book they addressed what was perceived as a crisis in the left and the then apparent inadequacy of classical Marxist thought. Classical Marxism saw society as an objective entity consisting of super-structure (institutions such as the judicial and education systems and the state) and base structure (material conditions including the economy and relations of production) (Böhm, 2006; Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002; Townshend, 2004). The important aspects of this view, for us, relate to the production of meaning and the single dimension of antagonism. Meaning is determined by the base structure but produced in the super-structure so that the relations of production (that is, the base structure) are deterministic of what people say and think (Böhm, 2006; Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). Marxism proposes one antagonism between capital, who own the base structure, and labour and this antagonism adequately explains the social. The consciousness of labour is ideologically produced in the super-structure and so that ideology operates to prevent workers from understanding their real interests and thus precludes the possibility of revolt (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). Instead, change is determined by the base and these changes in the economic cause changes in the social order (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, 1987).

Whilst Laclau and Mouffe observed the seeming collapse of Marxism they noted the simultaneous emergence of 'new' social movements such as feminism, environmentalism and anti-institutionalism (Laclau, 1985, 1988, 1990, 1996; Mouffe, 1992). These movements were 'new' because they caused a crisis in the traditional paradigm in social sciences in general and Marxism in particular (Laclau, 1985). Laclau and Mouffe's (Laclau, 1985, 1990) work addresses therefore new and multiple forms of antagonism in contemporary society which are not explained by the single antagonism of Marxist thought and are not directly linked to the relations of production (Townshend, 2004). Thus, Laclau and Mouffe's particular project focused upon the multiple ways in which the social field might be drawn.

Laclau (1985) elaborates three aspects of the paradigm crisis in particular. Firstly, the unity of the identity of the social agent which had been determined in the social structure was challenged. New identities are taken up by single social agents, such as worker, consumer, environmentalist and feminist, so that it is difficult to establish *permanent* links between social agents. Secondly, the singular social antagonism between classes is replaced by multiple possible antagonisms according to the consciousness of social agents. Thirdly, the idea that social struggle takes place in a *unified political space* was challenged. Once the deterministic reading of social structure is rejected and multiple

possible links and antagonisms are admitted then analysis focuses upon how the social becomes structured.

Laclau and Mouffe pursue the hegemonic effects of discourse as explanation for the way the social becomes structured and see social position as experienced through discourse. As such, identity is not essentialist and interests are not authentic – rather, these are discursively constituted. This leads Laclau and Mouffe to radicalise the concept of power since the subject's formation is a response to and an effect of hegemony and antagonism. Consequently, Laclau and Mouffe study the struggle between different discourses rather than between different seemingly unified social agents in seemingly objective structures (Willmott, 2005). Therefore, an analysis of power would look at the processes whereby subjects are invested with a particular meaning and the particular identities that condition their activities and form their relationships with others. This is in contrast to a reading of power that sees power as a possession of an already formed and located subject.

For us, Laclau and Mouffe's theories provide a highly pertinent lens through which to consider the introduction of BOP pyramid marketing. Prahalad is concerned with the effects that socialisation and ideology have upon our actions. He argues that socialisation has led to entrenched interpretive frames amongst relevant actors and these have produced a strong historic and implicit agreement that locates those actors in the social. Yet, Prahalad questions the objective reality of historic assumptions – according to Prahalad a 'dominant logic' (Pralhad 2006: 6) has served the world poorly. Although Prahalad differs in his vocabulary there are striking similarities between Prahalad's assertion of the constraining effects of dominant logic and Laclau and Mouffe's concept of '*sedimented* discourse' in that both point to a particular production of the social that constitutes and constrains identities (eg. of aid organisations, of the poor, of MNCs) and the relationships between them.

The BOP project, then, can be understood as an attempt to replace one social order with another. Much as Laclau and Mouffe comment on new social movements such as environmentalism and feminism proposing particular social structures, we might see the BOP similarly as a movement asserting a preferred structure. According to Prahalad this new social order will better serve the real interests of both the global poor and multi-national business. The poor "cannot participate in the benefits of globalization without an active engagement and without access to products and services that represent global quality standards" (Pralhad, 2009: 29). That the poor are also 'a business opportunity' aligns the interests of the two parties in a win-win solution. Prahalad seeks to replace one social order and dominant logic with another - the creation of a new unified political space.

Following Laclau and Mouffe, we instead consider the BOP project as one attempt to invest subjects with a particular meaning and constitute identities and relationships between actors. This enables us to look at the BOP project as a participant in struggles over meaning and the experience of selfhood. Thus, we consider how power operates in the process whereby BOP meanings are asserted and countered.

We now turn to Laclau and Mouffe's account of discourse to elaborate upon how such processes operate.

Key concepts from Laclau and Mouffe's approach to discourse

Several terms are central to Laclau and Mouffe's account of discourse and will be elaborated upon here: articulation, elements, sedimented discourse.

Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of discourse is closely linked to their conceptualization of *articulation*. Articulation is 'any practice establishing a relation among *elements* such that their identity is modified as a result of that articulatory practice' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 105). The structured totality produced as a result of articulatory practice is, for Laclau and Mouffe, a discourse.

The '*elements*' within an articulatory practice have been conceptualized as words in a linguistic domain. For example, Van Bommel and Spicer (2011) demonstrate how the 'slow food' discourse invests words such as 'taste', 'sustainability', 'biodiversity' with certain meanings. '*Elements*' have also been conceptualized as social groups and their actions in a social domain. For example Contu et al. (2013) show how different groups (in their case, MNC head office management, MNC local management and local workers) are realigned according to prevalent articulatory practices in the event of a plant closure. The treatment of both words or groups as *elements* is consistent with Laclau and Mouffe's analogy of linguistic and social systems and their recommendation that we study the social 'as if it was like a language (i.e. a system of signification)' (Contu et al., 2013: 369). Social relations, therefore, according to Laclau and Mouffe would be constituted as linguistic relations. The social is produced and structured in the relationships established amongst words or actors through their articulation.

It is the establishment of relations between elements and the consequent fixing of meaning that lead Laclau and Mouffe (2001) to see all discourses as hegemonic. Some of these discourses, according to Laclau (1990: 34), become so firmly established that they become seemingly 'objective' or common sensically 'real'. The effect is that the relations between elements have the appearance of existing outside the discursive practices which constitute them. Where this happens, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) refer to *sedimented discourse*. We might therefore see Prahalad's articulation of the BOP as constituting the global poor as latent consumers and, through this articulation fixing the links between these as elements to others such as MNC executives, governments, banks and so on. As this articulation is disseminated and reproduced, we might see this as a 'sedimented discourse' where the definitions and relationships take on a seemingly objective reality. This sedimentation and its widespread reproduction by, for example, MNC stakeholders and diverse audiences such as business school lecturers and their students are noted by Chatterjee (2014).

Laclau and Mouffe are also, however, insistent that any discourse, including those that are dominant or sedimented, is always contingent. That is, articulatory practices attempt to fix the meanings of *elements* in a particular domain, but the attempt to establish a *closure* is never entirely fulfilled (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 110). Therefore, there always remains a possibility that those relations fixed in a sedimented discourse can be articulated otherwise (Mouffe, 1992, 1993, 2005). This is consistent with the rejection of the unitary political space and unitary identity of the agent and brings sensitivity to fragility and contingency to the reading of discourse. Analysis must, therefore, attend to both the

constitution of a seeming hegemonic reality in discourse and to the contingency associated with it. We show examples of these hegemonies and contingencies in the following section.

Bottom of the Pyramid marketing and rural distribution.

Whilst Prahalad argues that increased migration to urban settings generates a relatively accessible market, rural distribution was noted, from the earliest formulations, as a critical barrier to BOP marketing. “The critical barrier to doing business in rural regions is distribution access, not a lack of buying power” (Prahalad and Hammond, 2002: 50). One response by western organizations to this barrier has been through the involvement of women located within widely dispersed and small rural communities to provide direct-to-consumer distribution. This model has been used, for example, by Avon in South Africa (Dolan and Scott, 2009), by Hindustan Unilever initially through the Shakti scheme in India in the late 1990s. Unilever subsequently extended this to other South-East Asian, African and Latin American markets such as in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. In Bangladesh and Sri Lanka it is being promoted as project Joyeeta and Saubaghya respectively (Vijayraghavan, 2009).

The Shakti scheme is held up as a success story in BOP marketing that allows economic and social goals to be realized for both Unilever and the women. It has been extensively publicized through inclusion of this as a case in Prahalad (2009), teaching case material (e.g. Rangan and Rajan, 2005) and through general media comment (e.g. Bhasin, 2012; Amanullah, 2012; Lucas, 2011) as well as being reported by international policy institutions such as the world bank (Dutz, 2007; Neath and Sharma, 2008; Petkoski et al., 2008). The prolific use of the Shakti system to showcase BOP marketing is perhaps not surprising given Prahalad’s engagement as a Non-Executive Independent Director of Hindustan Unilever from 2000 and the preponderance of attention paid to this organization throughout the BOP literature (Kolk et al., 2014).

Rural distribution systems, as we shall show, have developed through the joint articulation of women and entrepreneurs and separately these elements are prominent features of early discussion of BOP markets. Prahalad (2009: 25) urges that the poor be recognized as ‘resilient and creative entrepreneurs’ and introduces the notion of democratized commerce which sees every person as a ‘producer, entrepreneur’ (Prahalad, 2009: 21) - without elaborating the relationship between the two words. Women are presented as central to development - “A well-understood but poorly articulated reality of development” “central to the entire development process” and “at the vanguard of social transformation” (Prahalad, 2009: 134). The more generalized role of women in development is articulated, however, within the commercial development in which poverty is to be eradicated through profits. Women are likely to play a “critical role in product acceptance ... (because of) their household management activities (and) the social capital they have built up in their communities” (Prahalad and Hammond, 2002: 10). Thus, the thesis that poverty can be eradicated through profits rests upon the articulation of elements such that the poor are entrepreneurs and women are development agents.

Both formulations relate to discourses prevalent elsewhere. The former to the discourse of entrepreneurship (which we return to later) and development discourses surrounding gender, education and re-production, for example, but what is important here is the articulation that creates specific positions and subjectivities through which life is to be experienced. In these the poor are to be entrepreneurs and women are to be agents of commercial development. That women are to be entrepreneurs articulates a further coupling and elaborates the possibility of a further position when Prahalad and Hart (1999: 25) ask “why not borrow a lesson from Amway?” implicitly, and without questioning, drawing the analogy between women entrepreneurs in the north and south.

The chained articulation of women as entrepreneurs offers access for consumer goods companies to those rural markets that are difficult to reach. We now consider how women entrepreneurs are discursively realized and given meaning in rural distribution schemes. We do this by focusing on the two elements. Our aim is to show, following Laclau and Mouffe, how meaning is fixed for the elements in a chain of signification, enabling the coupling of elements through the exclusion of alternative meanings. In turn this demonstrates the hegemonic operation of power since certain meanings are viable whilst others rendered unviable. We also attend to the contingency, or the failure of complete fixation of meaning in each articulation.

Defining the entrepreneur

Hindustan Unilever’s promotional texts show us how ‘entrepreneurship’ as a floating signifier gets invested with contradictory meanings whilst, nevertheless, being offered to fix the meaning of ‘women’. Entrepreneurship is central to the presentation of Shakti on Unilever’s website. That is, entrepreneur is the dominant noun when referring to the women enrolled in the Shakti system. For example, in a webpage reviewing the progress of the Shakti scheme, Unilever define their target and report their performance very much as we might expect for any business project. Here entrepreneur is used without definition.

“We will increase the number of Shakti entrepreneurs that we recruit, train and employ from 45,000 in 2010 to 75,000 in 2015.” (Target) (Unilever website, n.d. (c))

“48,000 entrepreneurs (‘Shakti Ammas’) were selling products to over 3.3 million households in 135,000 Indian villages in 2012.” (Performance) (Unilever, 2012 online report)

There are, however, contradictory articulations of these entrepreneurs in which they are either created by HUL or are entrepreneurs by trait merely assisted by HUL. Thus, in some statements entrepreneurship is constructed as an opportunity provided by the Shakti system for the poor through which entrepreneurs are ‘created’: “Helping women, Creating entrepreneurs” (Unilever website, n.d. (b)). Elsewhere, however, entrepreneurship is a pre-existing characteristic, even a trait, showing the Shakti system as ‘assisting’ those with this trait, rather than ‘creating’ entrepreneurs.

“The solution also aimed to assist rural entrepreneurs to start businesses and improve living conditions in their regions” (Hindustan Unilever, n.d. (b)).

The discursive construction of women entrepreneurs must therefore navigate alternative attempts to fix meaning to entrepreneur. For example, as seen above, entrepreneurs are “recruit(ed), train(ed) and employ(ed)” (Hindustan Unilever, n.d. (a)), thus calling into question the distinction between entrepreneurship and employment. Specifically, we highlight Karnani’s (2007, 2008) critique of BOP that argues that the BOP articulation creates a specific form of entrepreneur that contradicts that found in much of the economic literature. Where recruitment, training and employment become possible attributes of the entrepreneur then ‘entrepreneurship’ becomes a form of employment rather than an act of *creative destruction* (in Schumpeterian language) done by visionary and dynamic individuals (Karnani, 2007). For Karnani (2007), those enlisted within BOP schemes (such as Shakti, although he does not specify this scheme precisely) are “own account workers” (104). The risks they carry (an allusion to the risk bearing characteristics of the entrepreneur) are sizeable because of the low barriers to entry and because there are high levels of competition associated with the forms of work. In common with models of entrepreneurship forwarded elsewhere in association with BOP projects, entrepreneurship is here attached to few specialized skills and, critically, low scalability (Kolk et al., 2014). Whilst scalability might be seen as important in allowing development for the entrepreneur, instead rural distributors are tied to a specified zone and product source.

We might develop Karnani’s critique further, and tailor it more to the specific context of BOP distribution schemes by noting that similar criticism has been made of franchising. Alan Felstead (1991), for example, writes of ‘controlled self-employment’ (1991) in which franchisees bear none of the upside risk, have little chance to innovate and carry all the downside risk. The bearing of the downside risk is apparent in the description of the Shakti system in which the Shakti ‘entrepreneur’ is supposed to buy the stocks from the local distributor using micro-credit. This credit is to be gained through local self-help groups and in which members’ ‘conduct’ is regulated either through formal and legal requirements of through the training and socialisation that creates, or possibly assists, them as entrepreneurs. The Shakti system also resembles franchising and is distanced from entrepreneurship in the application of ‘selection criteria’. As with mainstream corporate franchising in which the franchisors are shown to be keen to recruit ‘entrepreneurs’ having complete backing of their family (Felstead, 1991) so that family labour can be tapped (Edens et al., 1976; Power, 1989), Rohatynskyj (2011) finds that the Shakti system in practice ensures that only entrepreneurs having the backing of their male family members are given credit facility. Selection criteria may also be applied to an applicant’s social capital (as highlighted by Prahalad and Hammond, 2002) and the notion of ‘family’ employment has been further extended through the recent introduction of Shaktimaan scheme which targets the male member of the family of Shakti entrepreneurs (which we discuss in greater detail in next section).

From these arguments, in which we have included some strident critics of the BOP thesis from fields of economics (Karnani, 2007) and development (Rohatynskyj, 2011), our point is that hegemony operates through the articulation of distributors in rural systems as entrepreneurs and in so doing a specific

meaning of entrepreneur is fixed. We have noted the contingency of this meaning whereby features of employment are unproblematically invoked. In excluding certain meanings of entrepreneurship, most specifically those associated with risk and scale potential, BOP operates hegemonically to fix a symbiotic or complementary relationship between MNC and distributor. The use of entrepreneur, rather than employee or franchisee to which the system might be compared, also, however, contributes to defining the relationship as one of relative independence between the elements.

Defining the woman

With the description of 'entrepreneurship' as an opportunity for the BOP, the 'BOP women' in HUL's Shakti case study are depicted as 'rational economic women' (Rankin, 2001) who are capable of undertaking the tasks involved in the business and also capable of 'self-regulating' (Foucault, 1991) in terms of their debt obligations. However, as previously stated, the BOP thesis carries the subtitle 'enabling dignity and choice through markets' (Pralhad, 2006). Thus there is a broad social aspect to the Shakti system which is emphasized in the case studies that Unilever make available on their websites. The subjectivity constructed through the scheme therefore combines economic and social elements as we shall discuss with particular reference to 'Rojamma' who is featured on Unilever's website.

Rojamma is, we are told, "a woman from a very poor background. She was married at the age of seventeen to a man with whom she had two daughters but who then left her to fend for herself" (Unilever website, n.d. (a)).

Unilever is concerned with the "livelihood enhancing opportunities to 48,000 women" and is grounded in the belief that "giving additional income to women would result in greater benefits for the household as a whole and enhance livelihood for the family" (Unilever website, n.d. (a)). Thus the women are, to an extent, depicted as uniquely positioned in terms of ensuring that resources go to the family.

Illustrative material shows how individual women are now able to provide opportunities, especially educational opportunities, to the family beyond those they themselves could enjoy. The women make suitable economic choices to enhance the possibilities of family members, especially the younger women. The Shakti case study shows Rojamma, without assistance from her husband, "giving them (her daughters) the chance (for education) in life she didn't have" (Unilever website, n.d. (a)). In this way the BOP discourse, as developed in rural distribution systems, does produce women who can, indeed, make choices but equally draws on the suitability of choices that the woman makes.

"Most (Shakti entrepreneurs) generate sales of 10,000 – 12,000 rupees a month, netting a monthly profit of 700-1000 rupees (US\$ 15-22). For those with husbands who work in the fields, this typically doubles the household income. For single mothers like Rojamma, it is a far cry from the handful of rupees she earned working in her mother's field" (Unilever website, n.d. (a)).

The generation of enhanced livelihoods is, however, just one aspect of the reform brought about by Shakti. The more 'profound' effect is that "it has brought them self-esteem, a sense of empowerment and a place in society" (Unilever website, n.d. (a)). In Rojamma's words: "When my husband left me I had nothing except my daughters. Today everyone knows me. I am someone now". Shakti has, according to this, literally created an identity and this identity is bound up with self-esteem and empowerment. It is worth noting that this is also implied in the naming of the scheme. Shakti with the literal meaning of strength is derived from Sanskrit word Shakti meaning 'power, divine energy'. In Hinduism the word refers to the personification of divine feminine creative power in the form of a Hindu deity, 'The Great Divine Mother'. In becoming Shakti Ammas (Shakti mothers) these associations are conferred on the woman. Although self-esteem and a sense of empowerment are overridingly seen as positive, it is noted also that these are placed as an obligation on the woman who is to make suitable, motherly, economic choices.

It is worth considering what is excluded by the definition of the empowered, economically rational woman who makes suitable market choices. Firstly, we might note that according to Unilever's calculations the women make between 15-20\$ a month and therefore remain well within the \$2 a day poverty level defined by organisations such as United Nations and adopted as defining the criteria of BOP (Karnani, 2007). Although certainly an improvement on the 'handful of rupees' previously earned the scheme does not eradicate poverty for the single mother.

In support of the Shakti system, Unilever have recently introduced the role of "Shaktimaan" (Hindustan Unilever, n.d. (b)). The Shaktimaan delivers bulk orders to Shakti Amma, covering an area of several villages by bicycle. Often these Shaktimaan are related to extant Shakti Amma. What is noticeable is the distinction between mother (family role) and man – and the association of Shaktimaan with 'superman' via a famous Bollywood character of the name. The lack of viable comparison between the two is evident in Unilever discourse, for example, the Shaktimaan has a business (rather than entrepreneurial) opportunity.

"Now Project Shakti has provided business opportunity to the male member of the family too" (Hindustan Unilever, n.d. (b)).

Moreover, we are told that the men are given a more 'arduous' task – with no explanation why this would be more arduous than the activities performed by women – and commensurately higher earning potential.

"It is estimated that the Shaktimaan would earn 2.5 times this amount, given the arduous task he has been given to perform" (Hindustan Unilever, n.d. (b)).

Other comments allow us to see how the female entrepreneur is empowered by men in a strictly gendered hierarchy. This is shown in Rojamma's story. After joining a woman's self-help group (we are not told under who's initiative this was formed) Rojamma reports that it "felt good to be part of a group but that's not the same as eating food" (Hindustan Unilever, n.d. (a)). All that changed when "a man from Hindustan Lever came" and that is reported as "the moment that changed my life". Through the case Hindustan Unilever's (male) Shakti project manager, Sharat Dhall, is widely quoted. Although the

Shakti system may well reproduce broader gender relations within Indian society, at least rural Indian society, it does so whilst introducing a new category of women empowered by men. Furthermore, self-esteem is dislodged from economic factors since it is attributed to the women who continue to earn below the poverty line and less than the men, who are in business rather than entrepreneurs and whose tasks are defined to be more arduous. In these circumstances it is possible to see a sense of empowerment and self-esteem as obligations to be able to assume an identity and live life through the specified subjectivity of the Shakti Amma.

The subjectivity incorporating empowerment is critical in demonstrating the broader societal benefits of the rural distribution scheme. In turn, it constitutes the relationship between the rural poor women and MNCs as one that is complementary since the women's identity is tied to the relationship. We argued that this relationship is one of mutual independence with respect to economic elements since the women are entrepreneurs with fewer claims on the company than in an employment relationship. Arguably a higher level of dependence of the women on the MNC is generated through the social or psychological benefits conferred, or indeed obligated, by the relationship. This is especially so since, as we have seen, it is the arrival of the man from Hindustan Lever that changes lives.

Discussion: women as entrepreneurs

Recent years have seen the expansion of notions of entrepreneurship well beyond the field of commerce or the economy and this phenomenon has been discussed elsewhere in the management literature (Du Gay 2000, 2004; Jones and Spicer 2005; McDonald et al., 2008). 'Enterprise' no longer simply refers to the creation of successful independent business, 'rather it refers to the ways in which economic, political, social and personal vitality is considered best achieved by the generalization of a particular conception of the enterprise form to all forms of conduct' (Du Gay, 2004: 38). It is widely depicted in the cases made for welfare reform in the West (Rose, 1996) in which each individual becomes an ally of economic success by "ensuring that they invest in the management, presentation, promotion and enhancement of their own economic capital" (1996: 339).

The BOP thesis and its preference for free markets has widely been associated with the centrality of entrepreneurialism within neo-liberal rationality. This is well illuminated by Chatterjee (2014) who criticises neo-liberal rationality exercised through the entrepreneurial discourse as a solution to all forms of social problems at the BOP. This discourse, Chatterjee (2014) argues, implies an understanding that the locus of problems (poverty, joblessness, dispossession, environmental degradation and so forth) lies not in the institutional dysfunction and the social, political and economic circumstances but rather in the individuals themselves. We extend Chatterjee's work to the more specific terrain of rural distribution and to 'women entrepreneurs'. We argue that in the articulation of the Shakti project constitutes female entrepreneurs such as Rojamma as responsible and rational economic women, empowered by and gaining identity through the 'entrepreneurial opportunity' utilised to build self-worth, both economic and psychological. By implication, rejection of such an opportunity or failure to experience empowerment through it by rural Indian women constitutes a problem. Additionally, other means of

getting by, including participation in those informal markets that Araujo (2013) highlights, are subordinated to those introduced by the MNC. The informal is by implication deficient, lacking the possibility of empowerment and self-esteem offered through MNC administered schemes.

Bonsu and Polska (2011) argue that, through neo-liberal discourses, BOP strategy is a form of colonisation by MNCs that subjectivize BOP markets. Following Foucault (1991), they focus on the governmentality whereby “consumers are encouraged into offering their resources toward their own entrepreneurial activities to facilitate entry into the global consumer economy while enhancing the firm’s profitability’ (Bonsu and Polska, 2011: 241). Therefore, and referring to BOP strategy as a general movement rather than looking at specific programs, they write of the ‘civilizing mission’ that empowers consumers to choose whilst constraining appropriate choices and doing so according to the interests of the MNC.

In the specific case of female distribution systems we argue that these have particular potency in relating the economic and social aims in the civilizing mission. By drawing on Laclau and Mouffe we are able to show how this is achieved through the articulation of women alongside other elements or actors. The notions of strength and agency that are emphasised carry a responsibility for these distributors to conduct themselves in their roles as family members, primarily mothers, extending opportunities to others in their families. This articulation, positioning women with dependents in the family, is critical in chaining together the economic and social. In this way, the position as female entrepreneur enables a reading of extending market reach for MNC consumer goods as consistent with rural development at the same time partially obscuring the MNC’s economic aims behind their social ‘responsibility’. The comparable gain of economic and social benefits by both parties positions the MNC and female entrepreneur as complementary to each other, the so-called win-win relationship of BOP interventions. As we have argued, however, in this articulation the economic dependence of the women on the MNC is minimised and the application of entrepreneurship, despite some ambiguity, serves to deflect from questions of commitment by the MNC in this relationship. Simultaneously, however, since the female is highlighted as the route to social benefit and this through empowerment, self-esteem and social role, perhaps rather paradoxically, the dependence of women within the relationship is presented in a very positive light.

The HUL text lauds close relationship between HUL and local and state government departments, especially those concerned with ‘Women’s Empowerment’ and poverty alleviation (Unilever website, n.d. (a)). Complementary relationships are also articulated between the private sector, government and NGOs, replacing hostility and implicit agreement around their separation. This theme has been developed elsewhere. In the development literature, for example, issues of gendered development and government support have been associated with the reconfiguration of elements to support markets over state intervention in poverty alleviation (Rankin, 2001).

We return to Prahalad’s (2002: 9) depiction of a dominant logic in which the MNC and the poor are unconnected through the tacit agreement of hostile parties. The Shakti scheme forms one element within BOP discourse in which the relationship between the poor and the MNC is radically redrawn, the elements are reconfigured, and one might argue to the benefit of the MNC. That the scheme is so widely cited, studied in management schools and imitated across BOP contexts, demonstrates the

potency of the scheme in creating a new logic that might come to dominance, rendering other articulations 'illogical'.

However, alternative articulations do exist and see gender empowerment as much broader than mere economic empowerment. For Dolan et al. (2012) "at the core of gender empowerment processes is the notion of agency, that is the ability 'to formulate strategic choices, and to control resources and decisions that affect important life outcomes' (Malhotra, 2003: 9), particularly in contexts where this ability has been previously denied (Kabeer, 1999)". The critics of the neo liberal logic within the development sector view the gender empowerment delivered by micro credit and FMCG distribution schemes far from this definition. Rankin (2001) criticises the kind of gender empowerment boasted by micro credit schemes and views the identities constructed in the Shakti text as exacerbating rather than challenging social hierarchies. For example we have shown how that the names 'Shakti' and 'Shaktimaan' actually reinforce rather than challenge the local gender roles and ideologies, and how 'women only' groups also reinforce cultural ideologies. So the neo liberal discourse according to counter articulatory practices constructs the work of poor, hardworking women brought into mainstream markets as indicative of an articulatory practice relying on individualism rather than presenting novel forms of empowerment. Dolan et al. (2012), who study a rural sales program in Bangladesh (similar to Shakti in India), buttress Rankin's position by citing the lack of evidence that such schemes improve women's capacity to effect broad based social change.

While the term 'empowerment' has been critiqued in some development discourses on BOP markets (as shown above), we take this critique a step further by analysing the term and its use in the context of the Shakti discourse and based on Laclau and Mouffe. We do this by illustrating the complex relationship between 'structural positions' and 'subject positions' as elaborated by Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 11). Structural positions of an individual are determined by the social formations into which she is "thrown," (Smith, 1998: 59) and these are not shaped by her free will. For example, in the Shakti discourse within the national and gender hierarchies she takes structural positions of the 'new Indian rural woman' who is determined to change her economic circumstances. The subject positions on the other hand are the ensemble of beliefs through which an individual experiences, interprets and responds to structural positions. In discourses with stabilized structural hierarchies and a relatively closed set of interpretive frameworks, like the Shakti discourse, a singular and rigidly defined set of subject positions operates as a coherent interpretative framework through which structural positions must be lived (Smith, 1998: 59). For example in Shakti's case the subject positions of a traditionalist, family oriented housewife, single mother or a widow are the only set of subject positions through which the 'new rural Indian woman' (the gendered and national structural positions) can be lived. The structural positions of the 'new rural Indian woman' within Shakti discourse are inaccessible to a range of subject positions such as liberal unmarried, single and career oriented woman or that of defining entrepreneurship within less formal market systems. Thus, in Laclau and Mouffe's terms, the Shakti discourse, while sets a new way of being an Indian rural woman, restricts their freedom to define this.

Critiques, such as these, expose the contingency of the articulation with, in particular, the potential of vulnerability through centrality of the construal of female entrepreneurs to form and enable a particular relationship between these parties that links the economic and social.

Conclusion and future directions

Böhm and Brei (2008: 349) assert that scholars working within the field of Critical Marketing must question marketing's "ways of seeing things". Interestingly, the adoption of BOP marketing programs can be seen as part of Prahalad's ambition to overturn a tacit agreement around established ways of seeing things. The ideas that Prahalad forwarded have, indeed, been instrumental in ushering in a new vision of actors and their relationships that, broadly, highlights the complementarity of MNCs, NGOs, governments and the world's poor. This is evidenced in the growth of female entrepreneurial distribution systems, the reporting of which has been prominent in arguing the case for BOP marketing. Critical marketing scholars, however, must question the hegemonic effects and the ways in which power operates through such programs, rather than take these objectively as ideal systems to redress extant disparities.

We have argued that a very specific subjectivity is created through which women are called on to experience the world as one of an apparently mutual relationships between themselves and the MNC and to experience themselves through the lens of empowerment. Drawing upon the neo-liberal consensus around understandings of self-direction and responsibility, we have questioned the extent to which entrepreneurship, as deployed in BOP discourse, may obscure the economic aspects of entrepreneurship. In doing so, we suggest that entrepreneurship is used, in this discourse, to evoke notions of self-reliance and possibilities of (unbounded) personal economic development that can not be delivered within the controlled nature of such distribution schemes. Therefore, we regard this hegemony as enabling, in rural distribution schemes, a relationship of one way dependence with less mutuality of interest than is, at times, recognized. We have also looked at the empowerment of women as a feature that masks, perhaps, the continued recourse to a previous view of gender relations and exacerbates gender ideologies rather than unsettling them. Although we would not expect a reversal of gender relations on a grand scale our point is that the discourse at once presents the empowered woman without unsettling the relationships around her.

This paper encourages us to see BOP marketing as an ontological and political practice that only takes on the appearance of common-sensical reality or objectivity as a *sedimented* discourse. Laclau and Mouffe (2001) wrote at a historic moment that led them to reject a social theorisation based on a single antagonism and a unified political space. We do consider BOP marketing to have offered a new vision of a unified political space that has been very widely adopted as a credible meta narrative of development (Chatterjee, 2014). We have, however, highlighted other critiques from different disciplines that reveal the contingency of the BOP articulation of female entrepreneurial distribution systems.

This encourages us to study the process of power within and between different discourses which constitute different actors rather than between different seemingly objective actors (as if they were constituted outside a discourse). As an implication the question: "Who is the more powerful actor in the BOP markets?" becomes less important than the question "How is power exercised in particular BOP

discourses?” We have shown how the BOP discourses align actors, enabling or disabling particular subjectivities and in turn allocating the potential to act on others. Specifically we have argued that the BOP discourse constructs a particular form of controlled independence amongst the category of actors it treats as entrepreneurs. This legitimizes a relationship in which rural women are dependent on MNCs for social esteem yet through a distant economic relationship that places few obligations on the MNCs. To the extent that women are financially empowered, this is within the traditional subject position as family provider and outside any fundamental change in gendered hierarchy. This, we believe, has helped us illuminate the working of discourse in the geometry of power between MNCs and local participants, as requested by Faulconbridge (2013).

We have drawn upon possible similarities between female entrepreneurial distribution systems and established western systems. Although Prahalad urged BOP marketers to take a lesson from Amway, we are not aware of explicit comparison of such systems in the literature. Marketing scholars might critically scrutinise the similarities and differences between the (largely) female entrepreneurial systems of the western world, such as party plan selling, and the female entrepreneurship systems at the BOP. It is worthwhile, we believe, to scrutinise the extent to which MNCs have taken or rejected lessons from Amway. Contrasts in economic and cultural settings and the longer heritage of western systems might help to illuminate the particularity of specific systems and their shared characteristics. A comparative study of the discursive operation of power across systems might speak to a deeper understanding of marketing’s location within broader political currents, national and international.

A further direction that merits study results from the privileging of MNC distribution schemes that has been gained through their ready use as a BOP marketing success story. Such schemes are not reported or examined alongside other methods of exchange and forms of economic activity that are subordinated and may have been displaced. There is a need, we believe, for intensive study of such a scheme tracing its broader effects upon the context in which it is established. We have considered the operation of power within the discourse of female entrepreneurship – our interest, then, might be directed at how this extends also to those who are not explicitly included in the bounded texts offered in corporate cases.

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Gillian Hopkinson teaches in the Marketing Department at Lancaster University Management School. Her research interests focus on power and marketing channels. Recent publications on these themes have been published in *The International Journal of Management Reviews*, *Journal of Marketing Management* and *Industrial Marketing Management*.

Asad Aman recently completed his PhD in Marketing from Lancaster University Management School. He teaches Marketing in the Faculty of Business Administration at Lakehead University, Canada. He also provides consultancy to businesses in Pakistan. His interests lie in headquarter-subsidary relations in multinational corporations and evolving FMCG distribution channels in Asian markets.