

MarK/X After Marxism

Fernando Belo and Contemporary Biblical Exegesis

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In 1974 Fernando Belo's A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark combined Marxist and structuralist ideas to uncover the revolutionary political themes he claimed were encoded in Mark's narrative. Although hailed at the time as a visionary exegetical strategy, it has been largely forgotten over the last generation. While some of Belo's theoretical and political concerns are inevitably dated, his contributions to understanding both the social and political environment of first-century Palestine and how religious texts such as Mark's Gospel operated within it merit our attention and critical assessment, both of which this paper will attempt to provide. I offer a two-fold discussion of Belo's materialist approach to Mark in light of subsequent developments in both philosophy and Marxist social theory. First, I will outline and critically assess the theory of texts found in his discussion of the "Concept of 'Mode of Production'" which makes possible his exegesis of Mark as a subversive political text. Secondly, I will briefly explore his account of the specific "Mode of Production" operative in first-century Palestine which Belo sees Mark's Gospel as challenging, with special attention given to its theoretical underpinnings. I conclude that, while Belo's work is certainly limited both by the state of theory and of the historical knowledge of his time, his ground-breaking efforts to read Mark's Gospel as a subversive text remains highly relevant to contemporary efforts at materialist exegesis.

In 1974 Fernando Belo's *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* (1981) combined Marxist and structuralist ideas to uncover the revolutionary political themes he claimed were encoded in Mark's narrative. Although hailed at the time as a visionary exegetical strategy, it has been largely forgotten over the last generation, due in large part to the simultaneous collapses of structuralism as a dominant theoretical system within the academy and of Marxism as a dominant political ideology across much of the globe. Given the renewal of Marxism and Marxist analysis currently taking place around the world (and not simply within biblical criticism), this amnesia is especially to be regretted. While some of Belo's theoretical and political concerns are inevitably dated, his commentary remains an intellectually exciting and politically powerful attempt to build connections between religious practice, literary theory, and revolutionary political action. Its contributions to understanding both the social and political environment of first-century Palestine and how religious texts such as Mark's Gospel operated within it merit our attention and critical assessment, both of which this paper will attempt to provide.

I will offer here a two-fold discussion of Belo's materialist approach to Mark in light of subsequent developments in both philosophy and Marxist social theory. My focus throughout will be primarily theoretical rather than historical-critical, with the purpose of assessing the strengths and limitations of Belo's general exegetical strategy rather than addressing specific questions about Mark's text. First, I will outline and critically assess the theory of texts found in his discussion of the "Concept of 'Mode of Production'" which makes possible his exegesis of Mark as a subversive

political text. Second, I will briefly explore his account of the *specific* “Mode of Production” operative in first-century Palestine which Belo sees Mark’s Gospel as challenging, with special attention given to the theoretical underpinnings of Belo’s historical reconstruction. I conclude that, while Belo’s work is certainly limited both by the state of theory and of the historical knowledge of his time, his ground-breaking efforts to read Mark’s Gospel as a subversive text remains highly relevant to contemporary efforts at materialist exegesis.

CONSTITUTING SUBVERSION: BELO’S THEORY OF THE TEXT

In the “Essay in Formal Theory” that prefaces his study of Mark, Belo writes: “The purpose of this book is to analyze a subversive narrative [within Mark’s Gospel] and the ideological work that has already been done within it” (1981: 33). His methodological approach to this task, he writes, “is always to read Mark with the help of Marx: K/X, then, if I may so put it and render my homage to Roland Barthes’ splendid book, S/Z” (Belo 1981: 6). Barthes (1977), of course, is only one of many sources within modern French theory from which Belo draws. Belo relies especially heavily on the structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser (1969; Althusser and Balibar, 1970), nuanced by the linguistic and psychoanalytic theories of such thinkers as Sigmund Freud (1961a: 1961b), Jacques Lacan (2006), Emile Benveniste (1973), and the early Jacques Derrida (1998), as well as the uncategorizable Georges Bataille (1962; 1991-1993). Indeed, what distinguishes Belo’s pioneering work from that of so many materialist and Marxist exegetes is this very intentional and detailed employment of structuralist, linguistic and psychoanalytic concepts when reading the biblical text.

Given the range of influences on his thought, even a moderately detailed account of Belo’s complex theoretical apparatus is impossible here. Instead, I would like to focus on some of the central structuralist and Marxist categories he employs, since these are most central to his strategy as a biblical exegete. Most importantly, Belo’s self-described “materialist theory of texts” distinguishes between three layers of social reality at work in any text:

- (1) the classical Marxist concept of the superstructure, that is, “the level of the organized concrete forms” of economic, political and ideological activity as a whole which determine the possibilities for practice within a given social formation (1981: 9);
- (2) the infrastructure, that is, the specific codes and practices which define economic, political and ideological practices within their own autonomous fields. The last of these, the *infraideological* region, is “constituted by an oral language that is articulated as a system ... set up as *different* from the ‘reality’ of the social formation [which] makes it possible to *read* this reality, that is, to organize it according to specific semantic classifications” (1981: 9); and, finally,
- (3) the individual texts themselves, especially narrative texts (containing “the discourse of a practice”), which are uniquely well-suited to communicate the infraideological codes of a society “since a social formation is [itself] a complex set of structured practices” (1981: 30).

According to Belo, these individual narrative texts, operating within a symbolic ideological system which itself is determined by the superstructure, typically function “to *establish* and/or *reproduce* the ... codes of the social formation” and thereby perpetuate the social order built upon them (1981: 31). This ideological function of texts, facilitating, legitimating and perpetuating the social order in which they exist, is familiar to Marxists of every stripe. However, Belo insists that texts can, at least in some instances, function instead “to subvert these codes with a view to transforming them” and, thereby, to both reflect and enable revolutionary “practices [that] are *subversive* of the structures of the social formation” (1981: 31). It is precisely this subversion of the governing ideological code that Belo intends when he speaks of the “subversive narrative and the ideological work that has already been done within” Mark (1981: 33).

But what is this “ideological work that has already been done” in Mark? For Belo, no revolutionary text springs into existence fully formed to reveal in ideal form the revolutionary praxis it describes – Mark’s Gospel is no exception here. Rather, the relationship between praxis and theory is dialectical in character. The revolutionary character of any text, its ability to challenge and subvert the dominant ideological code, does “not [appear] suddenly, but by a long, slow process, a *genesis* (a first sally outside the ideological closure permits a reading of that closure; then the writing of a program for another closure that is slightly different; then a first, slightly variant practice; etc.). New reading(s), new writing(s), new subversive acts(s)” (Belo 1981: 32). Indeed, Belo insists, the act of writing, of narrating subversive practice, is itself a constitutive element of that subversive practice, since it is only within a narrative (the recounting of a practice or a series of practices) that subversiveness can be thought at all: “How is the theoretical knowledge of this subversive practice possible? Being singular, the practice is recounted in a *narrative* or series of narratives. ... ‘Narrative’ means the narrative of the subversive act, a subversive narrative” (1981: 32).

The act of narration makes it possible to break out of the dominant ideological code and to relate practices immediately to the real, embodied existence of the agents rather than to the symbolic order which had previously mediated and defined these practices. Belo writes: “the totality of the organizing forces determines the strict limits of any subversive political practice; the totality of the inscriptive forces (or the totality of the oral and written texts) determines the strict limits of any subversive theoretical practice. ... Subversiveness is [only] possible, then, if the practices in question are *displaced* outside the field of the closures, and break away toward the materialist sites of the reading” (1981: 31). In other words, the very possibility of political practice that subverts the dominant political and economic order rests upon a textual *re-narration* of this practice that interprets it precisely as subversive rather than allowing it to be absorbed by and defined within the dominant ideological codes of a society. To be even more concise: for Belo, by the act of narration the subversive text *both identifies and creates* subversive practice!

Belo here resists the tendency found among many Marxists toward a crude economic reductionism in all matters religious, exemplified by such diverse thinkers as Karl Kautsky (1953) and Anton Pannekoek (2003), but in fact traceable to Marx himself (Boer 2010a). Indeed, Belo’s central theoretical accomplishment as a materialist exegete, I suggest, lies in his use of structuralist and linguistic concepts to identify the theoretical task confronting all materialist exegesis. His “rough sketch of a theory of relations between *narrative, practice and ideology*” treats the biblical text as at least quasi-autonomous from the economic order and possessing of its own inner symbolic and logical necessity (1981: 5). This enables Belo to deny the *absolute* supremacy of the economic sphere, which would reduce all texts to the status of mere effects or mirrors of economic relations (as with the vulgar reductionism of earlier Marxist theorists of the Christian religion), while still adopting a recognizably Marxist and materialist understanding of the text.

Responding to Engels’ famous claim that the economic relations determine society “in the last instance,” Althusser had denied even the possibility of economic forces ever existing apart from the totality of society, which includes political and ideological forces as well: “From the first moment to the last, the ‘lonely’ hour of the last instance never comes” (Althusser 1969: 113). Whether or not Engels’ interpretation of Christianity was as reductionistic as commonly assumed – one recent author has argued it was not (Boer 2010b) – Belo followed Althusser’s account of structural causality in conceptualizing the relationship of religion to the larger structure of society. He writes: “Marx’s thesis that the social formation is in the last instance determined by the economic mode of production is formulated thus: in the last analysis the economic instance determines the social formation, either by having the dominant role in it or by determining whether it is the political or ideological instance that is to have the dominant role” (1981: 26).

For Belo, as for Althusser before him, textual, political and economic practice are *always-already* in mutually determining relationships within the social totality, such that no one sphere of human

practice can ever been given absolute or ultimate priority and determination over any other. Indeed, the economic, political and ideological are themselves only “relatively autonomous instances” of human practice which are determined, ultimately, by the superstructure, “which in every case already overdetermines the infrastructural” instances (Belo 1981: 9). Accordingly, in good structuralist Marxist form, Belo concludes that the Gospel of Mark is not an exclusively textual reality – it is always already an intersection of economic and political as well as of ideological practice in first-century Palestine. Therefore, Mark’s Gospel both reflects and helps constitute (by re-narrating it) the subversive practice of early Christians. As Belo explains: “As proclaimer of the subversive acts, the narrative makes it possible to read them, enlarge upon them, and extend them. The narrative thus has an important and unappreciated role to play in a revolution” (1981: 32). The importance of this insight alone, along with the intellectual seriousness with which Belo sets about analyzing it, makes him worthy of our continued attention in the twenty-first century.

Once it has our attention, though, what should we say today about the theoretical framework within which Belo constructs his “materialist reading of Mark”? As the discussion has already shown, to read Belo is to enter entirely into the realm of grand social theory which so marked the intellectual scene of the late 60s and 1970s and which so separates that cultural world from ours. I suppose the most obvious (indeed, the most banal) criticism one can make of Belo’s theory of the text is precisely its reliance upon structuralist concepts and political issues that seem as dated and unfashionable as bell-bottom pants and disco music. Such a dismissal of Belo’s work, though, would be pointless, an exercise in fashion history rather than a serious attempt to separate what is living and what is dead in Belo’s structuralist Marxist exegesis. However, time has passed and some judgments about his most important assumptions, in light of subsequent developments, can and must be made, however briefly. While this discussion can hardly claim to be an exhaustive list of the challenges confronting Belo’s exegetical strategy in the twenty-first century, neither should it be taken as a *post mortem* identifying the fatal flaws in his approach either. Rather, my goal here is simply to highlight some of the more immediate theoretical and methodological challenges a contemporary follower of Belo would have to confront.

First, we must take seriously the anti-essentialist criticisms of his methodology raised by postmodernism. While Belo draws upon the works of Derrida and Barthes, both of whom are ranked among the fathers of postmodernism, his intellectual milieu is clearly defined by the structuralist and post-structuralist themes which preceded postmodernism within the French intellectual scene, and his work is clearly not postmodern either in its assumptions or conclusions. For example, Belo, following Althusser and Etienne Balibar (1970: 214), speaks of the “absolute invariance in the elements which are found in *every social structure* (an economic base, legal and political forms, and ideological forms)” (Belo 1981: 4). This assumption that all social structures of all times and places, at least at the superstructural level, have certain essential features in common, is accepted as self-evident by Belo – as it indeed must be, given his desire to use Mark as a basis for modern revolutionary practice and to use Marx as a key to solving all social questions. However, the tendency of much postmodern thought to deny the commensurability of diverse social and ideological systems and to emphasize the uniqueness of each particular social structure, makes this assumption problematic, to say the least.

One need not have read deeply in postmodern philosophy to recognize the problems involved in proposing any totalizing philosophical system (Marxism included) which would either suppress radical difference or embed it within a larger system of identity (which amounts to the same thing). Recall, for instance, Gilles Deleuze’s insistence that “social and economic structures, forms of thought, norms of action, are all produced through particular and contingent conjunctions of desires, actions and effects, and are all part of an assemblage in which each element is conditioned by all the others” (Baugh 2006: 285). This denial of the commensurability of historically discrete social phenomena is itself problematic, of course, since it calls into question the very possibility of

objective historical knowledge. While postmodernism itself is perhaps the logical outcome of Althusser's claim that history is "a process without a subject," that is, an endlessly de-centered process with no single logic (*contra* Hegel) driving it to a conclusion, and thus lacking any guarantee of diachronic unity or intelligibility, Belo did not see or accept this consequence in his work. Whatever one's views of the value of postmodernism, contemporary readers cannot accept Belo's structuralist Marxism uncritically or as unproblematic. At the very least, any sustained attempt to draw Belo's methodology into the twenty-first century would need to address (if not resolve) these fundamental philosophical challenges that have arisen since the early 1970s.

Second, one must address Belo's use of Freudian concepts (filtered through Lacanian psychoanalysis) to conceptualize the role of "utopias" within both social and ideological practice. The importance of Jacques Lacan in postwar French culture can hardly be underestimated (Turkle 1992), and his influence on Belo's Marxism was both profound and problematic. For instance, can the "ideal" which regulates and norms every particular social practice, that is, the "utopia" of a given society, really be conceived as an "analogue, in the social formation, of the Freudian *drive*," and the "utopia-order" that this ideal creates within society an "analogue of the Freudian *death instinct*" (Belo 1981: 20)? Can the psychoanalytic be aligned so closely and effortlessly with the economic, the political and the symbolic orders of society? I am dubious. While the influence of both Lacan and Freud has hardly disappeared (Žižek 2007), one cannot deny that Freud's broader cultural status has waned since the 1970s (Dufresne 2006), nor can one ignore the debates over both the theoretical foundations of and empirical evidence for Freudian theory that have occurred since Belo wrote (Grünbaum 1984; Sachs 1991; Robinson 1993). At the very least, Belo's own understanding of psychoanalysis now looks underdeveloped and outdated. Moreover, even if one accepts the general soundness of Freudian theory, Belo's use of it as an analogue for political and social formations requires a much grander theory than most contemporary exegetes or political theorists are willing to accept. Certainly, Belo's attempt to use Freudian concepts to establish an isomorphism between the significance of Mark's Gospel for revolutionary practice in the Subasiatic Mode of Production in first-century Palestine and the Capitalist Mode of Production in the modern West remains problematic, to say the least.

Even leaving aside these "external" criticisms, perhaps the most difficult question of all is whether the internal logic of Belo's theory, defined as it is by structuralist Marxism, can really theorize the possibility of revolutionary change at all? This is not just the question of whether revolution was a historical possibility for first-century Palestinian peasants. Belo concedes that "what the villagers of a [Subasiatic Mode of Production] might achieve through revolution would be a return to primitive 'communitarian' forms. Revolution is impossible for them" (1981: 28). Rather, the question is whether a structuralist Marxism, with its emphasis on the limitations ideology places on both subjectivity and agency, can provide any account whatsoever of revolutionary practice and the transition from one social order to another – a possibility denied in the past by some structuralist Marxists (Hindness and Hirst 1975). The utter discreteness of every historical instance, the incommensurability of all social systems and the omnipresence of difference so celebrated by many postmodernists is certainly presaged by this *aporia* in structuralist approaches to history. Indeed, the indictment of structuralist Marxism as essentially incapable of explaining historical change was famously put forward by E.P. Thompson (1978; Bottomore, 1998) several years after Belo's work appeared, and remains one of the most serious difficulties confronting this branch of Marxism. Of course, various strategies have been suggested for dealing with this problem (Giddens 1979; Anderson 1980) – I personally do not think it is insurmountable – but any attempt to follow Belo's method today must address these questions as well.

Despite these theoretical difficulties, I would insist that Belo's theoretical framework remains an enormously challenging and promising one for contemporary exegetes. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that it remains promising precisely because of these difficulties, since the philosophical

changes that have occurred since the appearance of his work, the rise of methodological pluralism within the discipline of biblical studies, and the seemingly endless proliferation of social, racial, and gender perspectives in the reading of scripture, have perhaps made more rather than less difficult the challenge of transcribing the biblical text into a viable political program. Belo's foray into grand theory, however foreign to the academic mindset of today, remains an essential foundation for any politically astute materialist reading of the biblical text.

BELO'S HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF FIRST-CENTURY PALESTINE

Turning from Belo's theory of texts to his reconstruction of the specific historical context of first-century Palestine within which Mark's text appeared and operated, we find both the enduring strengths of Belo's generally sound historical sense (at least from a Marxist perspective) and the limitations imposed by the historical and social theory available when he wrote. Rather than reconstruct his portrait of first-century Palestine in detail (a task that lies beyond the scope of this paper), I will focus briefly here on two assumptions that govern Belo's account of Mark's religio-political context and offer some suggestions on how subsequent developments in historical research and sociological analysis could improve upon Belo's work while leaving his basic model intact.

First, Belo assumes that first-century Palestine was organized as what the Marxist tradition calls a "Subasiatic Mode of Production," that is, an agrarian economy characterized by slave and peasant labor existing at the subsistence level, whose economic activity was centered in rural villages, but ruled and exploited through a state apparatus controlled by major landowners, the mercantile class, and an urban political class. The economic and social dislocations brought about by this system, in turn, gave rise to class struggle and widespread guerilla movements in the countryside and the rise of a *lumpenproletariat* in the cities economically incapable of concerted political action (Belo 1981, pp. 83-84). This Subasiatic Mode of Production, Belo claims, produced fundamentally different economic and political situations in the fertile northern region of Galilee and the more arid region of Judea, the conflict between which the religious ideology of Temple Judaism centered in Jerusalem attempted to suppress (1981, pp. 60-61).

While Belo is undoubtedly correct to point to the geographic and economic differences between North and South as critical for explaining the success of Jesus' ministry in Galilee and its failure in Judea, as well as for connecting the political resistance to Roman rule with economic realities throughout Palestine, the specifically Marxist concept of a Asiatic Mode of Production – of which Belo's "Subasiatic Mode" is derivative, through the theoretical work of Georges Dhoquois (1970) – is hardly as self-evident and unproblematic as Belo assumes. Leaving aside the question of whether Marxist theories of social development in general are appropriate – how could Marxist exegesis question this? – within Marxist sociology there has been much debate over the viability of the concept of an Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP). As Bryan Turner has noted in his assessment of the concept, too often "the concept of the AMP has been used promiscuously to describe almost any society based on communal ownership and self-sufficient villages where capitalist markets are absent. ... The AMP is also riddled with theoretical problems. It is difficult to see, for instance, how self-sufficient, autonomous villages could be compatible with a centralized state which must intervene in the village economy" (Turner 1998). Turner (1978, 1998) is not alone in his criticism of this concept (Hindness and Hirst 1975; Krader 1975), although other scholars have defended its (limited?) usefulness (Briant 2002: 802). Other problems also abound with the concept, including that of explaining the origin of the state in the absence of class struggles (Currie 1984). More generally still, is the concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production just a Marxist expression of the more general "orientalism" which has plagued modern Western studies of non-western culture, according to such writers as Edward Said (1979)? Whatever answers are given to these questions, it is clear that Belo's over-ready acceptance of this social category as an essential element in his exegesis of

Mark raises difficulties that a more theoretically informed materialist account of history must take account of today.

Second, in very structuralist fashion, Belo argues that the ideological space of first-century Palestine involved “two distinct systems [that] are to be found in the legislative texts of the Old Testament: a system of *pollution or contagion* and a system of *debt*, the former being dominant in texts belonging to the priestly document (P), the latter belonging to the Elohist (E) and Deuteronomist (D) documents ... Beginning at a certain period in the subasiatic monarchy, the two systems are related by a dialectic which is that of a class struggle” (1981: 38). Belo then elaborates a very complex structuralist account of meaning in which these competing symbolic systems (the pollution system being associated with the ruling priestly class and the Jerusalem Temple, the debt system with the rural agrarian economy and popular religious observance in the countryside) mirror and mediate the class tensions engendered by the Subasiatic Mode of Production. According to the Belo, the pollution system and its focus on purity and Temple sacrifice has its origins in the Davidic monarchy, while the debt system, transmitted also through the prophets, represents the religious practice of “early pre-subasiatic tribes” (1981: 56). The social and economic conflicts that result from this imposition of a latter monarchical system on agrarian society, Belo claims, define the society within which Mark was written and define the space within which its subversive narrative operates. As Belo writes: “An exegesis of the prophetic texts would, I am sure, easily confirm the brutal conclusion that is already clear and that the bourgeois exegetes systematically avoid; the class system established by David and the exploitation of brother by brother are the curse that fell on Israel and brought it to devastation and exile. We shall see that the Gospel of Mark is located on the same field as far as the reading of the history of Israel is concerned” (1981: 56).

What should we say about this? Obviously, the Documentary Hypothesis, on which Belo so clearly depends, has undergone sustained criticism since he wrote, and would be rejected entirely by a sizeable number (perhaps even the majority) of biblical scholars today (Blenkinsopp 2000). However, those debates seem less central to assessing Belo’s project (I suspect Belo could navigate around these challenges and retain a biblical and historical basis for the ideological systems he identifies at work in first-century Palestine) than the methodological developments in biblical research since he wrote. More significant, I believe, for anyone using Belo today, is the development of a social-science criticism which, over the last thirty or more years, has put forward a very sophisticated and empirically well-grounded portrait of the ideological world of the New Testament that centers not around the *pollution-debt* dichotomy the structuralist Belo proposes but rather around more universal *honor-shame* systems such as those proposed by Bruce J. Malina (2001). These approaches take full account of kinship relations, class status, and economic relations (just as Belo does), but mediate and interrelate them through anthropological and sociological research rather than through the lens of French theory.

Of course, these social-scientific approaches often minimize or even eliminate the consideration of class to produce what Steven J. Freisen has labeled a “capitalist criticism” of the New Testament, and such tendencies must be resisted (2004: 336). A prime example of such neglect (which helps explain the contemporary amnesia surrounding Belo’s work) would be David Rhodes’ *Reading Mark: Engaging the Gospel* (2004). This study, which takes an explicitly social-science approach to the text, relegates Belo’s work (which the author admits is “a fascinating Marxist analysis of the Gospel”) to a single footnote (Rhodes 2004: 233), while the study of Vernon K. Robbins (2009) makes no reference to him at all. Belo himself bemoaned such tendencies in an earlier generation of scholars such as Reginald de Vaux (1961) who often placed so much emphasis on the religio-ideological spheres as to even “deny the existence of social classes in Ancient Israel” (1981: 310 n. 72). Marxist exegesis remains essential today if for no other reason than its insistence that exegetes not allow secondary and tertiary social factors to distract readers from the economic and class divisions which operate at the deepest and most determinative levels of society. Nevertheless, I am reluctant to

claim that these approaches do not identify real features of the ideological and cultural space of first-century Palestine which can enrich a Marxist exegesis, even if they cannot overturn it. Certainly, any scholar in 2011 who wishes to continue Belo's work and extend it cannot ignore what has passed since it first appeared.

The two theoretical pillars on which Belo builds his historical reconstruction of first-century Palestine, namely, the Marxist concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production and the structuralist account of the pollution/debt system which accompanied it, certainly demand a richer and more nuanced explication than he gives them in his work. Taking seriously these subsequent developments in historical understanding, both from within Marxist theory and within the larger guild of biblical scholars, would certainly change many particulars within Belo's magnum opus, in ways that he never envisioned and probably would not be entirely comfortable with. However, until a more fruitful and suggestive way to relate the economic and ideological systems of first-century Palestine is put forward, which can preserve both their relative autonomy and essential interrelatedness, Belo's work remains an excellent starting point for contemporary Marxist exegetes. Rather than dismiss Belo's proposed solution to this problem out of hand as outdated or irrelevant, contemporary Marxist exegesis needs to take up his task once again.

CONCLUSION

In light of the assessment and criticisms of Belo's "materialist reading of Mark," what are we to conclude about its relevance for contemporary and future attempts at Marxist exegesis? Undoubtedly, Belo's study shows the limitations of both the state of historical knowledge and the theoretical situation when the book was written. Many of his methodological and historical assumptions appear much more troubled to us than they did to Parisian readers of the mid-1970s, and addressing these problems would demand some substantive revisions, both in theory and in practice. Nevertheless, Belo's approach to the Bible deserves our continued attention because it recognizes and attempts with conceptual rigor to grapple with the profound complexity of the interplay between economics, politics and text which we find at work in Mark's Gospel. Such an intellectual sophistication when reading the biblical text is essential if we are to escape foolish "political" readings that indulge moral sentimentalism and narcissism more than they provide real guidance for sustained and theologically serious political exegesis. Moreover, Belo's recognition (made possible precisely by his structuralist methodology) that the revolutionary character of Mark's Gospel has itself subsequently been re-narrated and "re-ideologized" into the dominant ideology and thereby stripped of its subversive power is itself a critical and enduring contribution he has made to the understanding of the text (Belo 1981: 33). As such, his materialist exegesis, by uncovering the original subversive power of these long re-ideologized codes, can still "make possible a confrontation between a political practice that aims to be revolutionary, and a Christian practice that no longer aims at being religious" (Belo 1981: 1). This accomplishment, despite the inevitable problems accompanying his efforts, makes Belo's theoretical engagement of the text timely and, I would suggest in conclusion, of enduring interest and significance.

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