

# **Alienation in the Form of Value (Heterodoxly Approaching *Das Kapital*)**

**Jordi Soler Alomà**

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

**Email address:**

[jordisoleraloma@gmail.com](mailto:jordisoleraloma@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** The objective of this work is to access what we can refer to as the "nerve core" of Marx's dialectical thinking as it appears in in *Das Kapital* linking it to the concept of *alienation* (a key concept of the same thinker). Marx's work has been the victim of a *sui generis* treatment, which would be unacceptable to any of the classical authors. Such intellectual inconsistency with respect to Marx affects all Western thought and, especially, European thought, which declared Marx's thought "officially dead" (i.e. Bad Godesberg, 1959 and, in general, the so called "postmodernism"). Another pathology that affects the study of Marx's thought is the non-distinction between what constitutes the author's thinking properly, and the indeterminate speculative magma of which "Marxism" is composed (of which, as is well known, Marx himself said not be part). Another bad habit is to separate Marx into different characters based on the interests of the user, i.e.: the "young" Marx and the "mature" Marx; the "Feuerbachian" Marx, the "Hegelian" Marx, the "economist" Marx, the "sociologist" Marx, the "philosopher" Marx, the "anthropologist" Marx, or the "methodologist" Marx. There is only one Marx; a philosopher who not only studies the history of philosophy, but (as once did the lucid minds of Plato or Aristotle) also studies the most complex entity of the known Nature: the human being in its entirety, in the most extensive sense of the concept; that is, as a system. In *Das Kapital*, the concept of alienation is taken for granted, since it is part of the author's intellectual baggage and, naturally, does not have to explain it again (there are those who believe that the "mature Marx" abandoned it). In any case, we rely on what Marx vehemently expressed regarding the part where the form of value is analysed: he insists that *the most important and essential of his work is contained in this chapter*, whose reading and assimilation is indispensable for the full understanding of the work. It is in this context that he writes that "the secret of every form of value is contained in the simple form."

**Keywords:** Society, Reality, Alienation, Marx, Value, System

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## **1. Introduction**

The first chapter of *Das Kapital* is not, against what is generally believed, an intrinsically difficult text. It is very well written and is of dazzling clarity. The greatest difficulty for its understanding lies, mainly, in the series of ideological conditions that alienation entails, or, in other words, the problem is not in the configuration of the text but in the architecture of mind. The text requires the reader to face two challenges that require modifying the usual mental behaviour: the ability to transcend appearances (or, as Hegel would say [4], transcend the "thing for us" or what it would be for Plato to "get out of the cave" ) and the ability to think dialectically (what appears to us as "reality", although for perception it is something static —a "freezing" of time; an

abstraction of it, necessary to understand things), what there is always a process that, in addition, at the moment we become part of it is already underway, and has always been —in the ontological sense of that concept. Scientists do the first consciously, while they do the second unconsciously.

Some authors, such as Louis Althusser [1] recommend "skipping" the first chapter of *Das Kapital* as "irrelevant" and "Hegelian." No one would dare to recommend not reading the first chapter of the works of the great philosophers. He did not read the Introduction to the first volume, where Marx insists (as said above) that the understanding of the first chapter is indispensable. Another "trick" is to resort to third parties (disclosures, vague descriptions, etc.); the effect is the same as Althusser's proposal, that is, the omission [5].

The text we treat is the deepest Marx has written, and

perhaps throughout the history of human thought. The reading and understanding of his wise paragraphs have the effect of an intellectual exorcism; they unchain us from all the *a priori* (ideological concepts) that alienation had imbued us, expelling from our mind all the stereotypes and prejudices with which we function "by default", and therefore our "soul" is naked before the *game to which we were always playing*, a real game whose rules *a priori* govern our behaviour and our life, compelling us to behave as mere elements of a gears which existence we do not know. In other words, reading and understanding the text allows us to see the hidden structure of the system (its hidden elements, both material and intellectual, customary or idiosyncratic and the relationships between them). On the other hand, understanding the meaning of the paragraphs in this "cursed" text demands the renunciation of what we call "I"; so we face a huge psychological difficulty that naturally causes rejection, since the text challenges the most intimate that constitutes us as "identities."

Marx considered as essential the assimilation of the first chapter, emphasizing the part dealing with merchandise (essentially the analysis of the *simple form of value*) as a *conditio sine qua non* for the full understanding of the work as a whole. That is, for Marx, *Das Kapital* constitutes an inseparable whole, a building whose entrance door is found in the first chapter. This is clearly manifested in expressions such as "The mystery of all forms of value is embedded in this form of simple value. That is why its analysis that presents the real difficulty"<sup>1</sup>, in this sentence Marx warns us, both of the importance of the matter we are dealing with, and of the (ideological) difficulty in understanding it, phrase that by itself (and coming from the author of the work) is enough to invite the reader to devote all the necessary efforts to understand (with Marx's invaluable pedagogical help) this mystery.

A frivolous observer of society may question the importance of merchandise analysis when there are things that (from such point of view) are more interesting. To this observer Marx would point out a fact that he describes in his work: merchandise, in function analogous to what the cell fulfils in the human body, is the cell of the capitalist system (and its structure<sup>2</sup> is very complex, as will be seen in the development of this writing [3]) and because only by knowing the content of the *merchandise form* of the product of labour (through the understanding of what Marx calls *the dialectic of merchandise*) [5] can we get to know the

intricacy of the being of money<sup>3</sup> (what there are behind some pieces of paper that carry a number) and, with it, how the capitalist organization of society works (elements and structure) or, briefly: the *capitalist system*.

Paradoxically, the most important element of the system hides spooky characteristics. Merchandise, in reality, materially, does not exist: there are things for which there are possible users. What makes something (and in capitalist society virtually everything) appear in the form of merchandise is our alienated relationship with that "something," and that "something" can "reside" in any "thing."

Money is not an innocent "medium of change" (concept whose meaning will have to be specified); as will be demonstrated in this reading of *Das Kapital*, it is a fundamental element of the ideological architecture<sup>4</sup> of the system (vid. supra). Our object of study is a phenomenon that has acquired idiosyncratic fixity<sup>5</sup> and that, customarily<sup>6</sup>, has invested a quality similar to that of taboo (if someone raised the abolition of money, would be considered a fool). Money is "something" that, however, possesses (or carries) properties that are considered intrinsically social, and, moreover, it is the fundamental mechanism of the ideological basis of human alienation<sup>7</sup> in the form of social organization whose modes of production and distribution are capitalists.

The only difference between slave and proletarian is that the proletarian and the salaried worker (i.e. proletarian "in active") are considered free (when the only freedom they have is to "recharge" to return to work day after day, to generate more and more surplus value). Neither the societies governed by monarchical or oligarchic dictatorships (the Egypt of the pharaohs or the America of the cotton fields), nor the society governed by the capitalist oligarchy (modern and contemporary society) can exist without slaves, whatever name they carry.

As in the slave market, the price of each slave was established according to its characteristics, in the labour market, the price of the worker is also regulated by its characteristics and, like any other merchandise, by market relations; the change of workforce<sup>8</sup> for money is the sale of people (the workforce is *merchandise-person*) although ethically questionable as in the old slavery [6]. From a

1 The pagination refers to the OME edition, by Grijalbo Ed. 1976, considered the best critical edition (in Spanish) of Marx's work. Anyway, for the purpose of this work, it is enough reading the present text. [On the English edition there is a controversy about the David Harvey's translation (Penguin, 1976). Can resort to reading the version of marxists.org or the Kerr edition (1909) with a translation by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, supervised by Frederick Engels].

2 We understand by structure the set of relationships between the elements of a system and between them and its environment. For good definitions of "structure" and "system" see the dictionaries of Philosophy of Ferrater Mora or Mario Bunge (or, for an expanded view, read the work of Von Bertalanffy *The General Theory of Systems* -Bertalanffy, 1976).

3 Whoever believes that this is a triviality (a fairly frequent attitude) should make a great effort to free from such prejudices. Money is much more than it seems and, by the way, it is not what we carry in your pocket or purse (that is a simple *symbol* of money).

4 Ideology is the "intersubjective cement" that forces us to suffer the same vision, loaded with *a priori*s, of reality; the ideology contains the idiosyncratic and the customary (see next note), which adapts to the way society operates, mixed with the dogmas of faith and the functional and foundational assumptions of the system.

5 *Idiosyncrasy*: set of features that configure a common way (of a social collective) of seeing the reality.

6 *Customary*: it is said of what is usual.

7 *Alienation*: a) division of society into (said in understandable terms) exploiters and exploited, together with the idiosyncratic and customary assumption of that fact as normal; b) transubstantiation of the human essence in the *form of value*.

88 Fundamental concept that differentiates the *act* (work) from the *potency* (work force) and that had already been anticipated by Marx in the *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* in the incipient concept of "work capacity".

strictly commercial point of view, it is a normal and common exchange of equivalents (that is why the concept of "exploitation of man by man" is completely foreign to the liberal economy, which lacks ethical presuppositions).

We have seen that the price of the labour force is constituted, like that of any other merchandise, depending on the vicissitudes of the market, neither more nor less, as was the case with the former slaves, who were also sold in the slave market. In ancient Greece, however, the slave owner had to maintain them until the death, while in capitalism slavery is increasingly precarious [10]. What differentiates the buying and selling of people in both periods is that the labour force merchandise, when consumed, produces an amount of value greater than its cost price (it is the only merchandise whose consumption produces value: for all merchandise, it is a fact that its consumption decreases its value), and in this creation of value the consumed person has art, but not part. The proletariat is the hen of the golden eggs of capital.

A warning for navigators: Marx's analysis is evolutionary genetically and, consequently, it makes abstraction of everything that is not essential for his scientific argumentation. In other words: to analyse the "cell" merchandise, he abstracts everything that could distract us from the object of study, in the same way that a physicist, in the defence of a hypothesis, abstracts, in his argument, from everything that do not concern the *thing*.

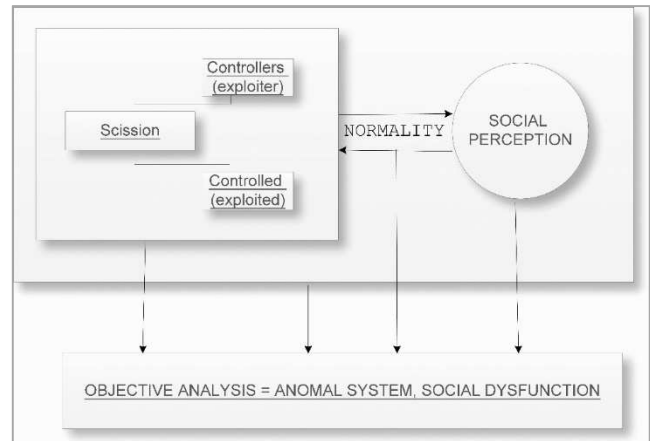
## 2. The "Secret" of the Value Form

The merchandises, strictly speaking, do not exist (it has already been said in the introduction; in addition, their "material existence" is one of the systemic *a priori*). There are *things* and possible *users* of these. What gives the things merchandise's character is our *alienated relationship* with them (later we will see what this relationship consists of). It is not surprising, therefore, that Marx referred to the *fetishism of merchandise* and the *supersensitive nature* of its properties.

Marx uses the concept of form in the original sense of Greek philosophy, that is, as something eidetic, but at the same time, in relation to value, he endows it with a psychological and psychosocial content to denote its belonging to the world of the supersensitive, of the phantasmagorical, of the pathological: value is something that appears, that takes, without us being aware of it, shape before our eyes; this form can be corporeal or not (i.e. transference of knowledge), but it is still a projection of ourselves and our relationships in an object, be it material or spiritual. We need social psychology because we are dealing with an intersubjective mirage on which the functioning of society is sustained. This fact can logically infer a conclusion that has also been reached in other ways: society is sick.

Thus, the merchandise should not be imagined as a physical object (although we irretrievably tend to it) but, simply, as any element that carries value, just as the air carries the sound (except that this is a physical fact, while the

other belongs to another nature, close to the object of study of the alienists). In order for the merchandise to exist, two things must coincide: the value and an element that transports it (later on we will see that, strictly speaking, it is not so, since the value can exist independently of the things that carry value: in numerical form<sup>9</sup>). In figure 1 we can see a panorama of the social alienation.



**Figure 1.** Alienation as the system whose operation is based on the scission of society and on the perception of this fact as normality.

The first section of the first chapter of *Das Kapital* is entitled "The two factors of merchandise<sup>10</sup>: value of use and value (*substance of value, magnitude of value*)". Here Marx presents the merchandise as something that has two different but necessarily complementary aspects: the merchandise has, on the one hand, properties (whether physical or not) that distinguish it from another merchandise (this is not a banal fact), and that confer its utility or *use value* (no matter what type of use it is); but it also has another quality, shared with the other merchandises: the ability to represent *value*, similar to how an ambassador represents a country (we will see what this "disembodied" value is) [5].

Merchandise is not the simple and innocent object that we "perceive", but it presents a very complex structure<sup>11</sup>. As a useful and concrete thing, which satisfies needs or desires (the substrate of the merchandise), it has properties that cause certain effects on its user, which can be physical (for example, the nutrients of a snack or the stimuli in the optic nerve caused by the emission of photons that bounce on the screen on which a film is projected) or psychic (such as the pleasure of eating the aforementioned snack or of watching a good movie, or both at the same time).

However, as a depository of a certain latent abstract value<sup>12</sup> the merchandise has psychological properties (this value is, in the last instance, fictitious —it will be seen

9 One of the effects of this split is modern financial crisis.

10 Merchandise is simply a support of value; a commodity is, then, a thing that carries value (it can be tangible, like a pencil or a coloured stone, or intangible, like the work force or a will; it can be material or "spiritual").

11 See footnote 2.

12 It is abstract because it is independent of the object that carries it and we can only study it by abstracting it; and it is latent because it only manifests, as we will see later, in a specific situation.

why— although “for us” it manifests itself in the real world in a more or less blunt way). And finally, the merchandise, as a thing capable of interacting with other similar things,

updating in that relation the aforementioned latent abstract value, has, in addition, psychosocial properties. (This can be evidenced in Figure 2, present below).

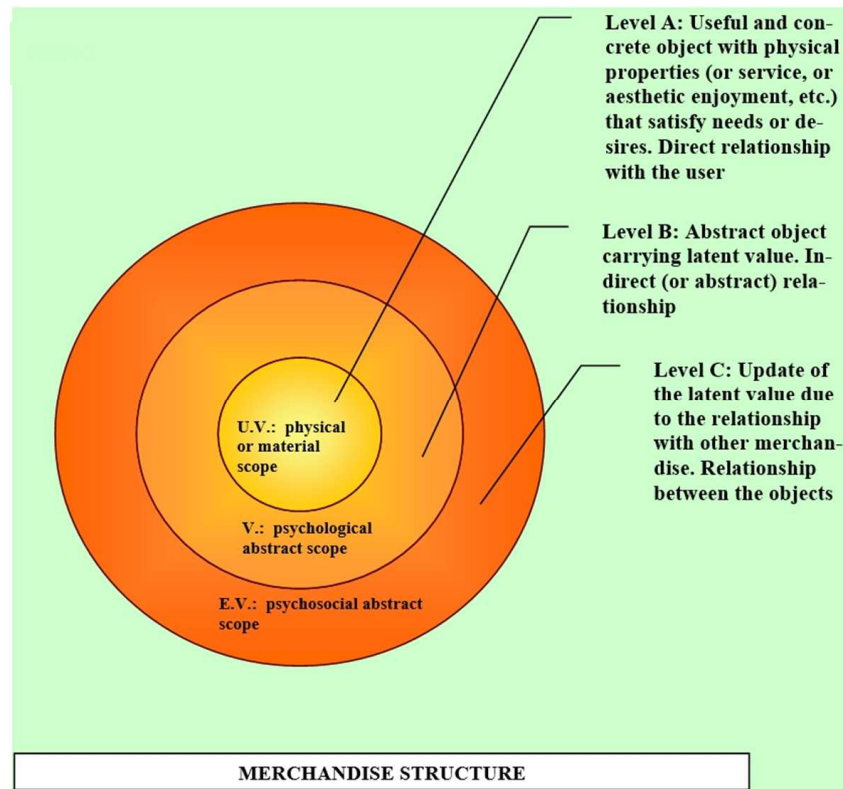


Figure 2. Structure of merchandise.

This scheme shows the merchandise as a set of concentric circles. The core (U. V. or use value) is the thing itself, without added, a concrete thing that can satisfy any type of needs or desires.

The following circle (V. or value) belongs to the psychological field: the thing, whose utility is non-existent, is, however, the vehicle of a latent value, by the mere fact of having invested time (and, perhaps, effort) in its production.

The next circle (E. V. or exchange value) refers to the psychosocial space where the relationship between merchandises takes place, which “awakens” the current value and invests it in exchange value reflecting it in the use value of other merchandise (the only type of tangible value “for us”).

In the second section, entitled “Duplicity of the work represented in the merchandise”, we verify that, the different elements of the merchandise seen above, have their correlation in two different aspects of the work producing the merchandise: the same work obtains, on the one hand, utility (a useful thing whatever its “utility”); on the other hand, value (that is, something, at least apparently, useless); on one hand, we get something concrete, and on the other, something abstract.

Consequently, merchandise producing work is an ambivalent work: it is simultaneously a concrete and abstract activity, constituting this (in a clinical sense) morbid process one of the “condiments” of alienation<sup>13</sup> (see Figure 2) [7, 8]. On what concerns us, Marx says: “Since this is the critical point around which the understanding of political economy revolves, it is worthwhile to illuminate it here in more detail” [5]. In other words, for

Marx, dialectical understanding<sup>14</sup> of work<sup>15</sup> is absolutely

necessary, that is, of the paradoxical twofold concrete and abstract nature that we have described above. We will discuss this issue, later, in greater detail.

In capitalist system, alienated production is known as work and is deployed in two spaces: a) the space of the concrete and the useful (in the sense of being able to be used no matter for what) and b) the space of the abstract and “packaged” time. The juxtaposition of both spaces results in the merchandise.

But let us now face the most crucial of *Das Kapital*, which is the content of the Third Section of the First Chapter, whose title reads “*The form of value, or exchange value.*” The topic we are discussing now is “A) *The simple singular or casual value form*”<sup>16</sup>. In this place, it is essential to stick to what Marx

way of argumentation and the synthesis of the diachronic and the synchronic.

15 We must avoid the confusion between *work* and *workforce*, which are two different concepts well defined and delimited by Marx in *Das Kapital*. Work is the alienated productive activity within the framework of capitalist society while the workforce is the human merchandise that is the object of sale.

16 Marx calls “simple” this form of value in a literal sense: it is the least complex, and he calls it “casual” because it only happens in occasional exchanges, that is, it

13 More information on this concept in (Soler, 2000) or (Soler, 2014).

14 That is, the assimilation of a concept (which resists conventional analysis) by

strongly affirms —something that we have already approached before, by saying that without understanding this part you cannot understand the whole— with regard to this form of value: "The mystery of all value forms is contained in this *simple value form*"; what does Marx mean by the sentence "the mystery"? This term is the referent of what has already been repeatedly stated: that the merchandise *form* and, especially, the money *form*, are not simple objects or simple exchange relations, but rather belong to a rough psychosocially very intricate territory, in which things, as we will see, have *supernatural* properties (That is, they have the same properties that define some collectivities of living beings and, specifically, the human species: they have social characteristics, albeit alienated). And, consequently, Marx's warning that follows the phrase mentioned must be taken seriously: "That is why it is its analysis that presents the *real* difficulty." We must read this paragraph of Marx as many times as necessary to become aware of the importance of the matter.

In fact, the most difficult task that a human brain can face is to investigate in the field of what governs beforehand the reality in which we "exist", that which is always already taken for granted; what constitutes (not in the Kantian sense, but in the Hegelian) *a priori* reality... in short, what is never questioned because it is, despite everything, the ground that sustains us (to adduce an analogy that reflects the complex from the exercise Marx proposes to us, it would be something like seeing, through our eyes, our own eyes).

Figure 3 (bellow) shows how in the capitalist system, alienated production is known as work. This is deployed in two spaces: a) the space of the concrete and the useful—in the sense of being able to be used, no matter for what—and b) the space of the abstract and the harvested time. The juxtaposition of both spaces results in the merchandise.

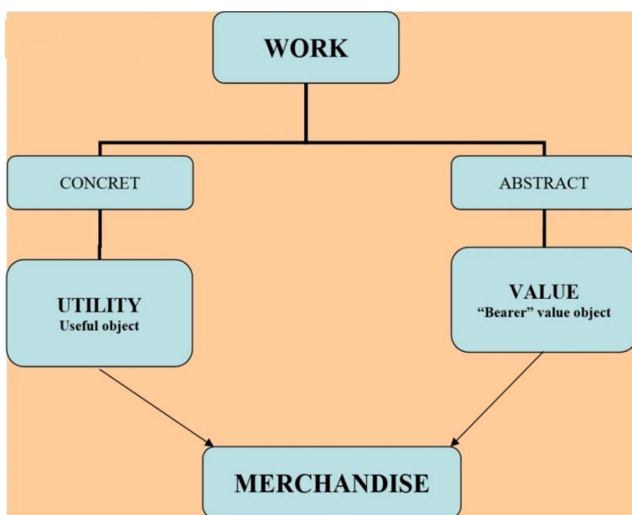


Figure 3. Double nature of alienated work.

We "see" an object (physical or not) as merchandise, because we have previously internalized this *form* to be able to project it on the object and perceive it as its own (similar

to how the process of perception works in Kant). If we do not know the rules of the game that we are always already playing, it is because what governs is an underlying norm of a customary nature (perhaps we have already incorporated it into the DNA) according to which nobody should inquire about the hidden rules. This underlying norm works automatically and we are not aware of its existence; It acts as a door that closes when the danger threshold is touched. It is one of the blocking mechanisms that makes it difficult to read the "damn" chapter of *Das Kapital*.

We can affirm, therefore, that in the face of the "reality" imposed on human beings who suffer from the historical process governed by the mechanism called "capitalist system" we perform a perpetual act of psychosocial faith, analogous to what religions require of their faithful; namely: that what we call "reality" is consistent (when we already have evidence that this statement is, at least, questionable). What differentiates capitalism from all social organization systems, which throughout history have been based on the exploitation of man by man, is that the capitalist system is the most sophisticated in the technology of mass suggestion, because enslaves both bodies and minds, since it is the only society in which slaves believe they are free. In other societies, slaves are aware of their situation, and may try to modify it (for example, the struggle of slaves led by Spartacus, which ended, unfortunately, with their massacre, or the struggle of Haitian slaves in 1791 to 1804, which defeated the troops of the major colonial powers and came to proclaim independence).

In capitalist society, people carry the "for sale" announcement without realizing it. Only at the height of the class struggle, the proletarian class has had self-consciousness. On the contrary, the members of the oligarchies (in the broad sense of the concept) are perfectly aware of the class to which they belong; proof of this is that a representative of that class, Warren E. Buffett, said in an interview with the Reuters agency published by the New York Times (in an article by Ben Stein) on September 26, 2006: "There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning." The oligarchy recognizes that there is class struggle, that is this class who leads the initiative and, in addition, that they are winning. From this moment, we must always keep in mind two precepts:

1. As we have already seen, Marx uses the concept form in a sense bordering on that of the Greek etymological concept<sup>17</sup>, that is, as connotative of intersubjective determinations<sup>18</sup> that, through a customary process,

17 Marx uses the concept of form multiple times; for example, he uses it to refer to the form of value, to the form of merchandise of the labour product, to the money form of merchandise... What does it mean? He is using form in the philosophical sense. In this context, the concept of form goes back to the origins of attic philosophy (eidos); It had a meaning close to that of our "idea", but in the sense not of something constructed from the perceived, but of something that regulates perception. We project forms on reality, which we configure according to these forms. They are forms that are not inherent in things, but it is we who project them on them, projections that come from our interpersonal relationships alienated into objects; this is what Marx refers to when he talks about the social properties of things.

18 Intersubjective: relatively objective.

solidify idiosyncratically, constituting the a priori elements of praxis: beforehand, they give a concrete meaning to what we capture by fitting it into a frame of reference: ideology<sup>19</sup> [9].

2. Marx, to make the dialectic of merchandise more palpable, gives it all the prominence, while giving it a certain "subjectivity" that facilitates a certain proximity with that and, in this way, the dialectical assimilation of its process.

To develop his argument Marx argues two related "products": the flax<sup>20</sup> and the frock coat<sup>21</sup>. Let us observe that flax Alienated perception of reality is one of the means of production of the frock, so that, skilfully, Marx offers us examples of two types of merchandise that fulfil a different function in this complex gear: flax, as an example of merchandise of the type "means of production" and the frock, as a "normal" type of merchandise that can be seen in any shop window. As the reader has already noticed, the frock coat is not a very common type of merchandise; so, why does Marx use it as an example? The reason is simple: Marx wants to avoid contamination of the analysis that could cause pernicious familiarity with a type of merchandise such as bread, for example. Marx's goal is to have a healthy distance between the reader and the merchandise-example, to favour the process of abstraction. If Marx had cited examples such as flour and bread, he would have been exposed to the excessively familiar connotations of both objects interfering with this delicate process.

As can be seen in figure 4, alienation of the human substance is perceived as normality (that is, it is not questioned as constitutive of reality, because the main rule of the "game of normality" is that it cannot be questioned).

Assuming Marx's pedagogical note, we will proceed to accompany him in his analysis, putting ourselves in the shoes of a peasant family: suppose that we manufacture flax to dress our family and that we have intentionally produced a certain amount of excess flax, in order to change it for a frock, supposedly because its future user needs the right outfit to attend social gatherings where certain decorum and specificity in clothing are required. If we calculate (then we will see how the process is carried out) the value of the specific amount of flax and that of a unit of frock, we can conclude, in the same way that the tailor will do, that 20 cubits<sup>22</sup> of flax are worth 1 frock, establishing the following equality: 20 flax cubits = 1 frock.

This means, neither more nor less, that the exchange value of twenty flax cubits is a frock coat. However, something that

seems natural is not at all: what is the origin of that exchange value? it is not necessary to be a scholar to know that flax and frock are not the same; therefore, in the equality 20 flax cubits = 1 frock is hidden something that should be common to both but that has no relation to its usefulness or its physical properties. In other words, this equality equals something that is not observable by conventional means (however sophisticated they may be). The only common property that flax and frock share, after having abstracted all observable or measurable properties, is not a visible or tangible property, but which, nevertheless, is the only property common to all merchandise: this common property is that of being products of human activity.

Returning to our peasant family: the flax cloth we have produced to cover the clothing needs of our family members has, for us, a use value, a utility, which is simply satisfied with its use (which is not only practical, but it can also be aesthetic); on the other hand, the flax cloth we have produced to exchange it for useful things for our family, does not have, for us, use value (it has no use); In spite of that although this is imperceptible, it contains another type of value: a value that we establish based on the effort (to use a descriptive expression) that has cost us to produce the amount of excess fabric; This effort is objective and subjective (physical and psychic) and we need a way to measure it; since the production process (like any process) takes place in time<sup>23</sup>, we decided to establish the measure of its value in the units of time that we already have since it is measured<sup>24</sup>.

The value of a thing is defined, therefore, by the amount of time that is usually used to produce such thing. It seems simple, but time is not something that can be packaged; as much as we try, *tempus fugit*. All we can do is forge the collective illusion that time is "packaged" in our products. To this *virtual packaging* (work jelly, according to Marx) we put a number (which only expresses a quantity of something abstract), and through this "ingenious" procedure we believe that we have really managed to capture time in the form of value! an invisible thing, intangible to ordinary mortals, and even mysterious to physicists such as time packaged in humble and vulgar merchandise!

To abstract time as a "substance" is also to abstract from the subjective, psychological characteristics of the perception of time. It is to abstract from the fact that, for different individuals, the same productive activity maintained for, say, one hour, is different: for one, to whom this activity personally gratifies, it is an instant, while for the other, to whom said activity impoverishes personally, it is an eternity. This process is a fundamental "ingredient" of alienation, which reduces the *human substance* to an abstract thing that mediates everything.

As Hegel already showed in his Logic [4], not even a

19 *Ideology*: set of criteria with which a society interprets and judges reality and relates to it; the ideology of the ruling class governs in all historical social systems.

20 The flax is an annual herbaceous plant, of the linen family, with fibrous root, straight and hollow stem, about a meter high and branched in its limb, lanceolate leaves, flowers of five blue petals, and fruit in box of ten cells, with a flattened and bright seed in each. From its stem fibres are extracted that are used to produce the yarn, with which the linen cloth is made.

21 Outstanding male clothing, longer and wider than the frock, and which shirttails get to cross in front.

22 Linear measurement, which was taken from the distance that mediates from the elbow to the tip of the hand.

23 It would be more correct to say that it takes place in space-time; but, just as the economy does, we will also do space abstraction here (which in the end can be separated from time).

24 We will leave aside the discussion about the arbitrary nature of this "fractionation" of something that is continuous, although everything fits in the wonderland of capital.



mathematical operation like the sum can hide the fact that different things are matched. For example,  $1 + 1 = 2$  appears to us as something simple and obvious; however, we can observe that on the left side there is a greater amount of signs than on the right side, and, by the way, on that side more ink has also been used; visually (or graphically), the left side is not the same as the right side, etc. Also, what exactly is the role of the "=" sign? It does not appear to be manifestly ostensible: what does "equal to..." mean? What is the "... identical? What is the "..." interchangeable? None of these questions have a "comfortable" answer. The two numerical expressions, "1 + 1" and "2", are only equal in function of one "thing": the pure quantity (something that, as is known, does not exist); both terms connote, therefore, the same amount of nothing in particular. Well, the expression 20 cubits of flax = 1 frock matches both terms based on that other "something": *value* (another thing that does not exist either!); In both quantities of different things on both sides of equality there is the same (imaginary) content of value. Therefore, "20 flax cubits = 1 frock" assume that the amount of flax produced has spent the same amount of time (hence the value —"frozen" and "packaged" time) as for making the frock. Behind that phenomenon, which at first sight appears as trivial and even innocent, lies what we could call the "Pandora's Box" of History (about which the great Aristotle already said that better close it when we were still on time [2]).

Continuing with the dialectical analysis of merchandise, Marx takes us to the point of no return<sup>25</sup>: "*The two poles of the expression of value: relative form and equivalent form of value*". Merchandise whose value is "expressed" does so by representing it (or, allow me the license: "seeing" it) as a relative value. The merchandise with which the value of the other is revealed (or expressed) is done by representing the role of equivalent. In Marx's category system, the first merchandise is in *relative* form while the second merchandise is *equivalent*.

To understand how the merchandise reaches its full development when it is invested in the *money form*, it is necessary to fully understand what the two forms of which are previously invested. Economists, for the most part, do not take this problem seriously; obviously because they do not understand it and, if they understood it, they would not accept it, because they would be compelled not only to reconsider their "scientific" believing, but also to question their morals. For the orthodox economy (liberal economy, macroeconomics, etc.) Marx is a heterodox and a heretic, just as Copernicus was for geocentric orthodoxy.

### 3. Behind the Relative Form

The relative form of value has a mysterious character, for whose investigation we must enter the world of "spirits", since, *mutatis mutandis* is the place where it resides. Suppose that flax is possessed by a spirit, and that this spirit can only be seen through a special mirror, similar to those used in

ghost movies, and that it is capable of returning the image of the spirit that possesses it: that is, when the flax is placed in front of this mirror, what is seen is not the flax rolls, but the image of a frock coat. This analogy illustrates what happens in reality: in the intersubjective process in which the relative form of value takes place, we "see" the value—or "spiritual" component— of a commodity reflected by the body—or physical substrate— of another merchandise (there are more tangled conditions of value reflection, but it is better to illustrate the analysis in a reasonably intelligible way).

The time has come to see how Marx reveals the content of the relative form of value. To do this, Marx affirms something paradoxical: "To find out how the simple expression of value of a commodity is inserted in the value relationship between two goods, one must suddenly consider that relationship with complete independence of its quantitative aspect" [5]. *Nota bene*: what we match are not simple quantities, but they are *different things*.

The quantitative factor only interests us for something that is alien to the very nature of what the members of equality connote. Therefore, what stands out here is the fact that things of a different nature are matched. On the other hand, we are not interested in the quantities in which they are equal, whose character is contingent, how has it been if not abstracting from the quantity that we have realized? The alienated architecture of our mind prevented us from seeing that behind the value relationship that we had always assumed as a quantitative comparison, a relationship of equality between different objects was hidden, which can only be equalized if they are reduced to what is common to both: what they have socially in common.

Through abstraction, therefore, from the quantitative, we can legally reduce the previous equality to the following: flax = frock. The finding, which may seem Hegelian, that such different objects are only comparable by their metaphysically social properties is logically necessary. In Marx's words:

When we say that goods are not, as values, more than human work jelly, our analysis reduces them, then, to value abstraction; but that is not why it gives them any form of value other than their natural forms. The situation changes when it comes to the value relationship between one merchandise and another [5].

Consequently, the flax fabric that has been left over, in itself, that is, as *solidified working time*, presumes a certain potential value. The dialectical analysis of merchandise has shown that it leads a "double life"; it is an object that exists in two "parallel universes": on the one hand, merchandise exists as a useful, concrete object (it cannot not be), invested with a set of properties (physical or empirical), and on the other hand it exists as a metaphysical and abstract entity, bearer of "social" and "psychosocial" properties. In this second "mode of existence", the merchandise can be reduced to "dry" value, we must remember here, following Marx's scientific method, that we are doing abstraction of all quantitative determination; in fact, the recognition that any object has the character of merchandise implies the recognition of its value. When we see the flax, we "perceive"

25 If we have managed to get here, it makes no sense to go back.

its value (qualitatively). However, it is not enough to "perceive" or "have the feeling" that flax contains value; to determine this, the flax is referred to the frock (as any merchandise must be referred to another); in that process the value of the flax is in the form of a frock, so that, in that relationship, properties that only were, outside it, potentially existing, are updated.

As we have already observed, the amount of flax that has been left over, for us, has no use, however, we now know that its latent value lies in the fact that it has cost us an effort to produce it and that that effort, frozen and packaged in the merchandise form, it can transcend quantitatively in the exchange process. If that "transcendence" were not possible, the excess flax would go directly to the dump or to the recycling container, since for us it would be worthless.

When comparing the flax with the frock, what we are doing is expressing the value of the flax through the means (medium) of the frock, which, gladly, plays the equivalent role of the flax. As everyone knows our neighbouring tailor has also required some effort (and a certain amount of time units) to make the frock, so what has happened in that whole process? Simply: we have compared (with respect to the production of flax and the making of a frock coat) the respective "efforts"; that is, we, as weavers, and the neighbour, as a tailor. We have considered our respective concrete works as work in general, that is, *abstract work*<sup>26</sup>, and in this process of abstraction we have reduced it to a single factor: time. In Marx's words:

As you can see, the flax itself tells us, as soon as it enters into treatment with the other merchandise, with the frock coat, everything that the analysis of the value of the merchandise had told us before. Only that it betrays its thoughts in the only language that is common to it, in the language of merchandise. To say that work, in its abstract property of human labour, constitutes its own value, flax says that the frock consists of the same work as it itself to the extent that it is *equivalent*, that is, to the extent that it is *value*. To say that its sublime objectivity of value is something different from its rigid flax body, it says that value has the appearance of a frock, and that is why it itself, flax, resembles, as a thing-value, the frock like an egg to another [5].

The flax, which we could have thrown in the trash, because the latent, testimonial and abstract value is useless and, in addition, occupies space, the flax (said) becomes important because the frock discovers that it is also worth. This flax, then, betrays its thoughts and betrays itself: value, which was supposed to be its own intrinsic property, turns out to be an external addition, and that is evident in its relationship with the frock. In Marx's words:

Thus, by means of the value relation, the natural form of merchandise B becomes the value form of merchandise A, that is, the body of merchandise B becomes a mirror of the

value of merchandise A<sup>27</sup>. Merchandise A, when referring to merchandise B as a body of value, as a materialization of human labour, converts the use value B into material of its own expression of value. The value of merchandise A, thus expressed in the value of use of merchandise B, has the form of relative value [5].

Once we have explored the qualitative aspect of the relative form of value (see figure 3), which is the only way to capture the essence that lies behind the appearance, we must also face the task of exploring its quantitative side, since it is its natural manifestation mode. This leads us to the section: "b) *Quantitative determination of the relative form of value*", in which Marx develops this argument:

The equality "20 cubits of flax = 1 frock, or 20 cubits of flax are worth 1 frock" presupposes that in 1 frock there is exactly as much substance of value as in 20 cubits of flax, that is, that both quantities of merchandise cost the same amount of work, the same work time. But the working time necessary for the production of 20 flax cubits or 1 frock changes each time the productive strength of the weaving or tailoring changes [5].

Let us observe, in passing, that the value of a merchandise will depend (among other factors) on the procedure used for its production:

[...] It turns out that the same change in magnitude of the relative value may arise from totally opposing causes. Thus, starting from 20 flax cubits = 1 frock you have, 1st, the equality 20 flax cubits = two frocks already because the value of the flax is doubled, and because the value of the frocks decreases halfway, and 2nd, the equality 20 cubits of flax = 1/2 frock already because the value of the flax decreases in a half, and because the value of the frock increases until the double [5].

Everything is due to short-term variations that affect the production of one or another merchandise. In Marx's words:

[...] The actual changes in the magnitude of value are not reflected either unequivocally or completely in their relative expression, in the magnitude of the relative value. The relative value of a commodity may change even if its value remains constant. Its relative value may remain constant, even if its value changes, and, finally, it is not necessary that the simultaneous changes of its magnitude of value coincide with those of the relative expression of that magnitude [5].

Let us observe that palpable examples of these variations in value are suffered by phenomena such as inflation, devaluation, etc. Financial speculators obtain benefits with sudden fluctuations in value, which are always in their favour (because if things go wrong, losses are "socialized"), and to the detriment of third parties (which are usually small

26 To abstract: separating by means of an intellectual operation the qualities of an object to consider them in isolation or to consider the same object in its pure essence or notion. In our case, we have abstracted all the properties less than one: *the duration*.

27 In a way it happens with man as with merchandise. Since he does not reach the world with any mirror, nor in the condition of a Fichtean philosopher, with his *I am I*, "man begins by reflecting on another human being. The man Peter does not relate to himself as a human being but through the relationship with the man Paul. But with that it turns out that Paul is for him, with all his details, with all his Pauline corporeality, the form of manifestation of the human race (Marx's Note).



shareholders and the rest of the society).

Although it is paradoxical to us, to determine the value we must reduce the concrete human activity, determined qualitatively, to something indeterminate, purely quantitative, when the evidence tells us that if for some reason human activity is human it is because of its qualitative specificity,

and it is, in addition, being qualitatively specific as it creates wealth. But, if as intermediaries that we are among the merchandises, we must *make the time*.

*Object of sale* there is no other way to "package it" than the one that has been analysed.

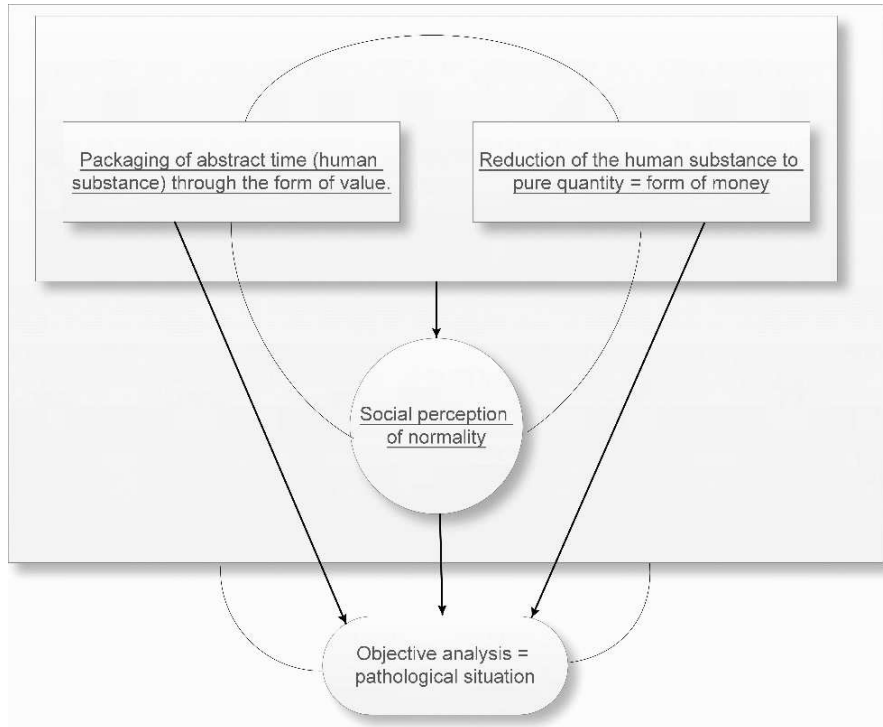


Figure 4. Alienated perception of reality.

## 4. Behind the Equivalent Form

Flax fabric, like Alice, has already seen what is in the mirror. Now, the time has come to pass through it. The time has come to see what "The equivalent form" consists of (see Figure 4) and, to enter this unknown territory, no one better than its discoverer, Marx, as a pathfinder:

As we have seen, when a merchandise A (the flax) expresses its value in the use value of a merchandise of another species, B (the frock), it prints to the latter a peculiar form of value, the equivalent form. The flax merchandise, shows its worth through the fact that the frock, without having to assume a form of value different from its corporeal form, is worth the same as her. Thus, the flax expresses in fact its own worth by the circumstance and in the circumstance that it is immediately interchangeable with the frock. Consequently, the equivalent form of a commodity is the form of its immediate interchangeability with other merchandise [5].

In other words, what is in the other side of the mirror is the relationship of the flax cloth with the frock, which consists in the its interchangeability. That is, what is on the other side of the mirror is the equivalent form dressed as a frock. However, the merchandise that acts as an equivalent in that

relationship cannot express its value, but only serves to express the value referred to as equivalent; if in front of the "mirror-frock" we put a frock, no image of value will be reflected, since a commodity cannot have the equivalent relation with itself.

Therefore, this form can show the value of any merchandise, except its own one. However, the equivalent form is even more intricate than what we have seen so far, and Marx develops the argument of his analysis in the following paragraphs:

But insofar as the frock merchandise species takes the place of the equivalent in the value expression, its magnitude of value has no expression as such a magnitude of value. This kind of merchandise does not appear in the value equation except as a determined quantity of a thing<sup>28</sup>. For example: 40 cubits of flax "worth" what? 2 frocks. As the frock merchant species plays the role of equivalent here, as the frock use value functions as a body of value with respect to flax, a certain amount of frocks suffices to express a certain amount of flax value. That is why two frocks can express the magnitude of value of 40 linen cubits, but they can never express their own magnitude of value, the magnitude of value of frocks (Marx [5]).

<sup>28</sup> That is to say: not as a quantity of value, but as a quantity of concrete and useful thing [the note is mine].

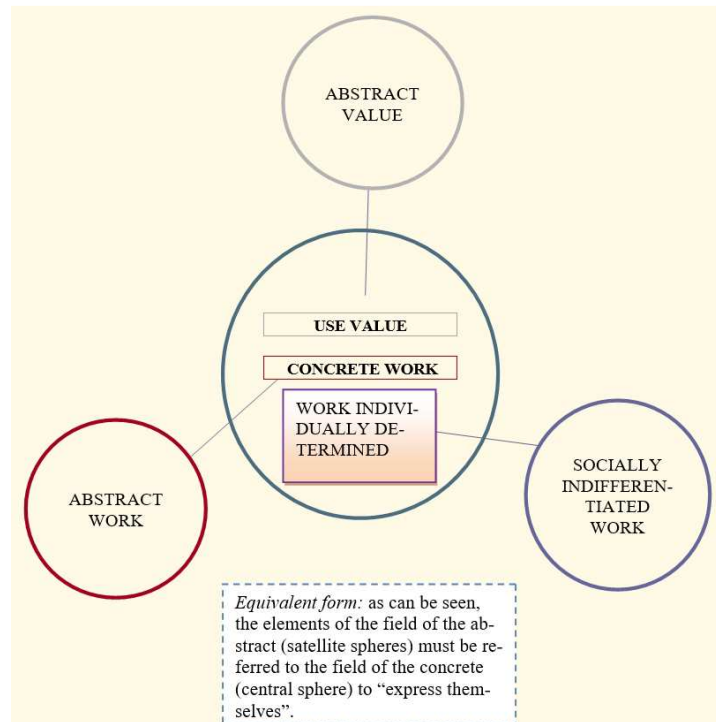


Figure 5. Equivalent form.

We see, then, that the equivalent form (observe figure 5 above) does not entail quantitative determination of any value, but consists solely of a concrete amount of something that serves to make this “something” manifest; that it cannot express its own value, but it can only reveal the value of what enters into that relationship with it. On this matter, Marx develops an argument that demonstrates his ability to think dialectically:

The first peculiarity that attracts attention when considering the equivalent form is this: a use value becomes a form of manifestation of its opposite, the value. The natural form of merchandise becomes a form of value. But —*nota bene*— that *quidproquo* is not produced for a merchandise B (frock, or wheat, or iron, etc.) other than within the value relationship that enters any other merchandise, A (flax, etc.), only within that relationship. As no merchandise refers to itself as equivalent, that is, none can make its own natural skin an expression of its own value, it has to be referred to as equivalent to other merchandise, it has to convert the natural skin of another merchandise in the form of his own value (Marx [5]).

We have seen before that the frock interests us not because it has value (value already has the flax; if it were value what we wanted, we would not have any need to go to change it) but because it has the quality of being useful as an outfit that allows us to attend to certain social gatherings, in other words, it has use value. In order to know what amount of value “our flax” contains, we must compare it not with another amount of value, but with the amount of a thing that serves us for something and that we need or want (that is, we change abstract value for something useful). At this point,

Marx offers the reader of *Capital* a very useful analogy to better illustrate the aforementioned *quidproquo*:

That will illustrate the example of a measure that suits merchandise bodies as merchandise bodies, that is, as usage values. A sugar pylon, such as a body, gravitates and, consequently, has weight; but it is not possible to perceive the weight of a sugar pylon with sight or touch. We take, then, various pieces of iron whose weight is previously determined. The corporeal form of iron taken in itself is not at all a form of manifestation of gravity, exactly the same as that of the sugar pylon. Despite this, to express the sugar pylon as gravity being we put it in a weight relationship with iron. In this relationship, iron works as a body that represents absolutely nothing but gravity. Therefore, the amounts of iron measure the weight of sugar and do not represent, with respect to the body of sugar, more than mere form of gravity, form of manifestation of gravity. Iron does not play that role other than in this relationship in which sugar or any other body whose weight is trying to find out enters with it. If the two things were not gravity beings, they could not enter into that relationship nor, therefore, could the one serve as an expression of the seriousness of the other. When we put them both on the scale, we effectively see that they are the same as gravity and, therefore, that, in certain proportions, they are of the same weight. In the same way that the iron body as a measure of weight does not represent with respect to the sugar pylon more than gravity, so also in our expression of value the body of the frock does not represent in front of the flax more than value. But this ends the analogy. In the expression of weight of the sugar

pylon, iron represents a natural property common to both bodies, its gravity; while in the expression of value of flax the frock represents a supernatural property of both: it represents its value, a purely social thing [5].

With this argument Marx demonstrates the fact that we are not aware that value is a social property of its bearers (merchandises) and we perceive it as an intrinsic property of these. The alienated architecture of our mind projects on things and relationships, among them, the *a priori* that suit the case. Our alienated relationship (to which we referred to earlier), with what we produce, means that the things we produce become entities that carry human qualities and relationships while humans are relegated to mere intermediaries of the relationships between things in which we have alienated our human substance.

In the fact that the relative form of a merchandise expresses its worth as something entirely different from its body and its intrinsic properties, we can only deduce that it's hiding a "social" relationship. Conversely in relation to the equivalent form, since it expresses, precisely, that a body of merchandise (i.e. the thing as it is) expresses value, that is, it intrinsically has a form of value. This fact can only be observed in the value relationship in which the merchandise "x" refers to the merchandise "y" as equivalent.<sup>29</sup> However, "... as the properties of a thing are not born from its relationship with others, but in this relationship they only act, the frock seems to possess by nature its equivalent form, its property of immediate interchangeability, exactly like its properties of being heavy or giving heat." [5]. —Marx refers in this analogy to the extrinsic properties of objects—. Here lies the origin of the enigmatic character of the equivalent form, which "...does not jump into the dull bourgeois view of the cultivators of the political economy more than at the moment in which they face that form, already finished, in money. Then the economist tries to get rid of the mysticism involved in gold and silver through an explanation that consists of sliding under them less splendid merchandises and chanting, with constantly renewed satisfaction, the catalogue of all the humble merchandises that once played the role of equivalent. He does not even realize that the simplest expression of value, such as *20 flax cubits = 1 frock*, raises the riddle of the equivalent form<sup>30</sup> (ibid).

Let us underline Marx's reprimand to economists for not being able to see that the simplest expression of value already poses the riddle of the equivalent form. That is to say: everything that has been argued so far, of what is hidden behind that relationship. It is now perfectly understood that such an accusation of Marx is applicable, also, to all those who suggest skipping the first chapter of *Das Kapital*, like

Mr. Althusser among others [1]. The equivalent of this nonsense would be to recommend reading Einstein bypassing the Theory of Relativity or listening to Mozart omitting the Requiem in D minor.

Through habit, of everyday life, the relation of change of flax cloth for frocks makes them natural equivalents of the first, so that *equivalence* becomes, "for us," a natural property of the frock, and as such, we perceive it. The alienated nature of the matter is revealed in the paradox that the *quality* serves to reflect the *quantity*; that what in that relationship plays the role of equivalent, that is, the "official" representative of the useful and concrete nature of the expression of human work in its creation, intervenes in that relationship as an embodiment of abstract work, empty of content (i.e. alienated human substance). Like the paradoxes to which Alice was subjected, the frock can only be on the other side of the mirror being and not being a frock at the same time: so that the value of our flax cloth can be reflected in the frock as equivalent, our neighbour's tailoring work must shed any attribute other than its abstract property of being human work in general. So, then, to express that "...weaving constitutes the value of flax not in its concrete form of textile work, but in its general property of human labour, it is faced with tailoring work, the concrete work that produces the equivalent of flax, as a tangible form of performing abstractly human work. There is, then, a second peculiarity of the equivalent form: that in it, concrete work becomes a form of manifestation of its opposite, of abstractly human work" [5].

However, "as soon as that concrete work of tailoring works as a mere expression of indifferent human work, it has the form of equality with other work, the work present in the flax, although private work like all other work producing goods, is as much, also work in immediately social form. Precisely for that reason it is represented in a product immediately interchangeable with other merchandise. It is, then, a third peculiarity of the equivalent form that private work becomes the form of its opposite [i.e.] work in an immediately social form" [5].

In other words: the fact that the frock, a product of private labour, serve to express the value of other things—in the case at hand show that of our flax—invests them as referents of immediate social work.

Aristotle was, for Marx, one of the great thinkers of history; He refers to him as the "great researcher who first analysed the form of value" (ibid). In fact, Aristotle, in his *Policy* [2] discovered that the money form is nothing more than a development of the simple form of value, and he noticed the fact that, to match (equalize) different entities in the exchange relationship, must refer them to a third element. However, Aristotle did not discover what it is that confers the "skill" that make different entities *equalizable*; the cause of such limitation was that in Greek society there was no work as we know it today: namely, as abstract human activity, but that the different productive activities of the Greeks were concrete and irreducible tasks, by their very nature, to an abstract generalization [5].

The equivalent form has, then, three peculiarities that

29 This is what Marx calls *determinations of reflection*, which "... always have their peculiarity. Such a man, for example, is king for the sole reason that other human beings behave about him as serfs. Inversely, they believe they are serfs because the other guy is king. [\* "Reflection determinations" means fixed concepts applied to things to understand them in a first approximation, regardless of their movement, of their change, of their relativity, of his story. The notion comes from Hegel's philosophy.] (Op. Cit., p. 65, footnote)

30 One of the meanings of "equivalent" is: the expression whose words are different from those of any other phrase, but which has the same meaning.

characterize it:

1. The abstract value, in general, empty of all content, is expressed through its opposite, the use value.
2. Abstractly human, unqualified work, which produces value in general, has the mode of expression in the contrary: concrete, qualified work, which produces concrete and useful things.
3. Indifferently social and<sup>31</sup> alienated work, integrated into the undifferentiated sum of "dry" value-producing works, manifests itself through individual, private labour, whose product is concrete merchandise.

Religion, in order to "realistically" worship its objects of cult, needs to "embody" them in icons, paintings and sculptures, making them, in passing, "tangible" for the faithful; similarly, entities that reside in the abstract world of value need to manifest themselves in real-world objects to prove their existence.

## 5. Conclusion

One of the main objectives of this work has been to interpret and develop the part of *Das Kapital* that deals with the analysis of the merchandise, to show: the dense, consistent and deep nature of the contents; the philosophical importance and transcendence of the concept developed by Marx in the form of value, both in its approach and in its analysis that reveals its duplex character as a relative form and equivalent form and show how the concept of alienation is inexorably inherent in the whole analysis.

Interpreting and extending Marx's analysis, the psychosocially esoteric nature of merchandise has been revealed. The development of this analysis has inferred a substantial fact that we could name "the operation of society" or "the operation of the system", is closely linked to the complex and intricate structure of the merchandise (specifically, at present, in its completed form: the *money* form). By "own merits" the merchandise has been incardinated in the system of "material" and "spiritual" relations in society, being one of the fundamental elements of the architecture of alienation as well as one of the pillars of ideology [9].

The contingent nature of the merchandise "vehicle" has also been mentioned, to draw a striking analogy: the merchandise character is like a pathology whose transmitting virus can infect any type of entity, be it material, spiritual or intangible. And that is because for capital (which mode of organization is the one that unfortunately governs the lives of the inhabitants of planet Earth) the only thing that matters is that the merchandise is able to increase the figure that gives meaning to its existence.

We have also seen the "subconscious" nature of merchandise. Its structure works hidden from our perception, because it belongs to the scope of the constitutive; of what we were referring to with the expression "the game that we are always already playing" and that, therefore, is governed by the *a priori* rules and is subsumed in the context of what governs and regulates our daily behaviour,

being part of the whole of the customary, idiosyncratic and ideological, that is, of *alienation as a system*.

Through the description of the merchandise analysis, we have shown that this cell of the capitalist system—as defined by Marx—is not an ordinary object. We could grant that in a way it is "alive", since it has social properties through which it maintains complex relations with the world of value, which is the sphere of the social abstracted and reified. Through the analysis of the relative form, we have revealed the existence of a "potential" value and we have observed that this value, latent and contingent, only "becomes real" when it is reflected in something necessary and tangible<sup>32</sup>: the body of a commodity, which, on the other hand, cannot be the same one (since the value can only be revealed, as has been demonstrated, through a different merchandise-entity).

In the analysis of the equivalent form, it has been exposed as that area of the abstract, disqualified, indifferently social and alienated, which can only show its real existence when it has something useful, concrete and individual in front of it—related to someone—to through which it states that it exists (emphasize the prefix of the Latin *ex*).

The development of the analysis and its argumentation has led us to the momentum; to the logical singularity (for its logically necessary nature) and historical (because it marks a point of no return in history) in which the equivalent form is embodied in a commodity whose use value consists in being the official representative of the value; is at that moment when the value is no longer required to be justified as such, being sufficient with a numerical representation of it. This is the kick off the capital's war without quarter which unleash the petty passions that nest in the human chest. The last way value is embodied is the phantasmagorical form of money, the true tyrant of our consciences.

The great Greek sage warned us, but we ignored him.

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<sup>31</sup> For capital, that social only matters as an area of the organization of production and consumption for the sake of value reproduction; the individual, therefore, only interests as a factor of production and consumption.

<sup>32</sup> Necessary and tangible "for us."