

Marx's Critique of Religion and Forms of Value

Hideki Shibata

Introduction

Chapter 1. From the critique of religion to the critique of politics

Chapter 2. Commodity fetishism and critique of everyday life

Conclusion

Introduction

I have recently written on Marx's realistic dialectic and his criticism of Hegel and Feuerbach (Shibata 2019). He developed his realistic dialectic as an inter-objective relationship; however, according to Marx, Hegel and Feuerbach failed to realize the contradiction and the inter-objective relationship in the real world. Hegel and Feuerbach stand, however, at the end of the development of the critique of religion that began with Enlightenment; they were not haunted by old-fashioned religious ideas.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Feuerbach concluded that it was necessary to revise his critique of religion by placing it in the context of historical development. He concluded that the critique of religion was no longer the overriding priority for the Enlightenment, and instead came to believe that political and social reforms demanded urgent attention. Thus, he did not intend simply to deny God or to indict the irrationality of religion. Such critique belonged to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and did not represent what was timely in his era:

The question, whether a god is or not, the antithesis of theism and atheism belongs to the eighteenth and seventeenth, but not the nineteenth century. That I deny God means for me: I negate the negation of man, I substitute for the illusory, fantastic, heavenly position of man, which in actual life necessarily becomes the negation of man, the sensuous, real, and therefore necessarily also political and social position of

* This paper owes much to the thoughtful and helpful comments and advices of the editor of *Editage* (by Cactus Communications).

the man. [*Die Frage, ob ein Gott ist oder nicht ist, der Gegensatz von Theismus und Atheismus, gehört dem achtzehnten und siebzehnten, aber nicht mehr dem neunzehnten Jahrhundert an. Ich negiere Gott, das heißt bei mir: Ich negiere die Negation des Menschen, ich setze an die Stelle der illusorischen, phantastischen, himmlischen Position des Menschen, welche im wirklichen Leben notwendig zur Negation des Menschen wird, die sinnliche, wirkliche, folglich notwendig auch politische und soziale Position des Menschen.* (Feuerbach 1971, S. 189)]

Marx also noted the fact that he inherited the critique of religion from his predecessors, Hegel, Feuerbach, and the other young Hegelians:

For Germany the *criticism of religion* is in the main complete, and *criticism of religion* is the premise of all criticism ... the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of the earth, the *criticism of religion* into the *criticism of law* and the *criticism of theology* into the *criticism of politics*. (Marx 1975a, pp. 175-176)

If, according to Marx, “criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism,” what does he consider religion to mean in this context, i.e., what is the internal relationship in Marx’s mind between critique of the state and economy and the critique of religion? Moreover, how did the critique of religion develop into the critique of the state and economy?

Unlike Hegel and Feuerbach, Marx did not recognize the fundamental difference between religion and the secular political state. They both originate in the abstraction and alienation of realistic human desires and conceal the real social structures that produce religion and the secular political state (Cf. Shibata 2014). The same concealed structures work in the economy. I have previously written on Marx’s account of forms of value (Cf. Shibata 2012 and Shibata 2013) and his development of this theme in order to demonstrate the motif of his study. The critique of religion was a consistent theme in Marx’s work, and fetishism (*Fetischismus*) and fetish character (*Fetischcharakter*), which are the fundamental structures of the religious aspect of everyday life, also occupy an important position in Marx’s system of thought.

The purpose of this article is to work through the logic of Marx’s criticism of religion by questioning how his theory of ideology came to be founded on his critique of religion. The article pursues this objective in two steps: first, I investigate the significance of religious critique in his critique of the secular political state (chapter 1), and then examine the meaning of his theory of the form of value from the perspective of his critique of religion (chapter 2).

Chapter 1. From the critique of religion to the critique of politics

Hegel had originally been disappointed at the contempt with which Christianity held actual human beings, and posited as a possible positive religion the idea of national religion and love as the criteria on which to criticize the real world. However, he seemed to change his views after *Die Verfassung Deutschlands*:

Not what is makes us impetuous and suffering, but that it is not what it should be; but we realize that it is how it has to be, that is, not by arbitrariness and chance, so we also recognize that it should be so. [*Nicht das, was ist, macht uns ungestüm und leidend, sondern dass es nicht ist, wie es sein soll; erkennen wir aber, dass es ist, wie es sein muss, d. h. nicht nach Willkür und Zufall, so erkennen wir auch, dass es so sein soll.*] (Hegel 1913, S. 5)

After this turn, Hegel became increasingly convinced of the historical necessity of modern society, acknowledging civil society, that is, the system of property and law, as modern destiny, and focused this attention on investigating the internal law and historical necessity of this destiny. Thus, Marx began his systematic critique of Hegel by criticizing Hegel's use of the state as a solution to the loss of human morality in the modern era and, later, attacked Hegel's views on economics: "Family and civil society are the premises of the state; they are the genuinely active elements, but in speculative philosophy things are inverted. When the idea is made the subject, however, the real subjects, namely, civil society, family, 'circumstances, caprice, etc.' became unreal objective elements of the idea with a changed significance" (Marx 1975a, p. 8).

According to Hegel, these ideas are absorbed and integrated into the superior idea of the state. He recognizes, in the real world, the disjunction of family or civil society and the state, but the contradiction in the real world was sublated in the world of ideas. However, for Marx, this sublation was devious: the contradiction in the real world does not cease to exist. Marx called Hegel's way of idealization "logical, pantheistic mysticism" (Marx 1975a, p. 7).

In *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, Marx focused on disclosing the true natures of the state, civil society, and the family that were hidden behind Hegel's "logical, pantheistic mysticism" and describing them with a method that grasps the exact logic of the specific subject. Marx argued that a problematic contradiction appears in Hegel's theory of legislative power, especially in the portion dealing with the parliamentary system. Marx's criticism included the following points:

1) Hegel presupposed the *separation* of civil society and the political state (a modern condition) and asserted it to be a *necessary element of the idea*, i.e., as absolute rational truth. He presented the political state in the form of the separation of the various powers. The actual, *active state* is designated as body, and the bureaucracy as mind, endowed with knowledge above the materialism of civil society. He counterposed the intrinsic and general aspects of the state with the particular interests and needs of civil society. In short, he presents the *conflict* between civil society and the state as total.

2) Hegel counterposes civil society as *civil estate*¹⁾ with the political state.

3) Hegel characterizes the estate elements of the legislature as the mere *political formalism* of civil society. He describes this as a *relationship of reflection, in which civil society is reflected onto the state*, but does not affect the *essence* of the state. However, according to Marx, a relationship of reflection is the highest form of identity in the case of essentially different things.

On the other hand:

1) Hegel does not want to allow civil society to appear in its self-constitution as a legislative element, either as a mere undifferentiated mass or as a multitude dissolved into its atoms. He wants no separation between *civil and political life*.

2) He forgets that what is in question is a relationship of reflection and makes the civil estates, as such, political estates; however, he does so only in terms of legislative power so that their activity is itself proof of the separation.

He makes the *estates* out to be the expression of the separation; but at the same time, the estates are supposed to be representative of an identity that is not there. Hegel is aware of the separation of civil society and the political state, but he wants the unity of the state to be expressed within the state and for this to be accomplished by the estates of civil society, which also form the estates of legislative society (Marx 1975a, pp. 73-74).

In sum, “Hegel wants the medieval-estates system, but in the modern sense of the legislature, and he wants the modern legislature, but in the body of the medieval-estates system! This is the worst kind of syncretism” (Marx 1975a, p. 95). In such a way, Hegel systematized the harmony and fusion of the Modern era and the Middle Ages in order to

1) “Estates” (*Stände*) refers to the original medieval and feudalistic parliament, which was actually a bargaining place between the monarch and his subordinates (nobility, clergy, merchants, and so on) and had no modern legislative power. Hegel wants to interpret modern society as a kind of medieval estate society, including bureaucracy as one estate, and he tries to establish a formal harmony through estates, which he identifies with the modern parliament.

sublate said dualism. Marx, who had the same goal, had to exceed Hegel's understanding of the true relation between social life and political life in the Middle Ages, which Hegel had designated as the place to sublimate the modern contradiction, by articulating the significance and limits of this dualism.

Marx criticizes Hegel's theory of state because it produces only an imaginary harmony and fusion of the fragmented modern society. Such harmony and fusion are, like religion, only alienation of real society achieved by shifting the people's focus of attention away from the real world to the imaginary. Thus, if the development of the state were to end here, it would never be capable of solving the problems in the real world. This is Marx's main theme in *Critical Marginal Notes on the Article "The King of Prussia and Social Reform by a Prussian,"* wherein he criticized Arnold Ruge by arguing that he dealt with the proletarian problem as an object of social policy and emphasized the need to educate the masses. Instead, Marx sought to unveil the true relationship between the proletariat and the state and, in the process, more thoroughly developed his theory of sublation.

Marx's starting point was to question whether the state can resolve poverty, which is the factual side of the proletarian problem. Marx writes, "The state ... will never see in 'the state and the system of society' the source of social maladies. Where political parties exist, each party sees the root of every evil in the fact that instead of itself an opposing party stands at the helm of the state. Even radical and revolutionary politicians seek the root of the evil not in the essential nature of the state, but in a different state form, which they wish to replace by a different state form" (Marx 1975b, p. 197). From the essence of state, it is apparent that

Insofar as the state admits the existence of social defects, it sees their cause either in the *laws of nature*, which no human power can command, or in *private life*, which does not depend on the state, or in the *inexpedient activity of the administration*, which does not depend on it.... The mightier the state, and the *more political* therefore a country is, the less is it inclined to grasp the *general principle of social maladies* and to seek their basis in the *principle of the state*, hence in the *present structure of society*, the active, conscious and official expression of which is the state. The political *mind* is a political *mind* precisely because it thinks *within* the framework of politics. The keener and more lively it is, the *more incapable* is it of understanding social ills. (Marx 1975b, pp. 197-199)

The argument about the limitations of the abstract political state, as we have seen, is more seriously developed here than the argument about the limitations of the state to address social maladies. The bureaucracy cannot intervene in the self-movement of civil society and must limit itself to "a formal and negative activity," all the more so because

the foundation of the state is “the contradiction between public and private life ... the contradiction between general and private interests” (Marx 1975b, p. 198). Moreover, “this fragmentation, this baseness, this slavery of civil society is the natural foundation on which the modern state rests” (Marx 1975b, p. 198). So, if a state wants to make administration a substantive and vital activity, it must abolish this civil society or “the private life today” (Marx 1975b, p. 198), and it must abolish itself to abolish the private life. By this means, Marx demonstrates how helpless the dualism of the state and civil society is in the face of social maladies and reveals that the emergence of these social maladies and the poverty problem demand the sublation of the dualism of the state and civil society from an historical viewpoint.

Arnold Ruge argued that if social distress produces political understanding, this indicates “symptoms of a great revolution,” and that “all uprisings which break out in this disastrous isolation of people from the community, and of their thoughts from social principles, will be smothered in blood and incomprehension” (Marx 1975b, p. 203). However, Marx criticized Ruge for his conception of “community,” which was merely a “political community,” and mocked his ignorance and small-minded political spirit, saying, “Do not all uprisings, without exception, break out in a disastrous isolation of man from the community?” (Marx 1975b, p. 204). Here, Marx comes to the core of the problem: workers are isolated from a community. However, this community is “a community the real character and scope of which is quite different from that of the political community” (Marx 1975b, p. 204).

The *community* from which the worker is isolated by *his own labour* is *life* itself, physical and mental life, human morality, human activity, human enjoyment, *human* nature. *Human nature* is the *true community* of men. The disastrous isolation from this essential nature is incomparably more universal, more intolerable, more dreadful, and more contradictory, than isolation from the political community. (Marx 1975b, pp. 204–205)

The foundation of the abstract and limited political community is civil society - which is the sphere for abstract private life and the deepest foundation of the state-civil society dualism - while the true human community is life itself. The proletariat has no need for uprisings if it is isolated only from the political community or civil society. However, the proletariat cannot tolerate isolation from life itself (*das Leben selbst*) or human morality (*die menschliche Sittlichkeit*). So, it is the proletarian uprisings that will resolve the isolation from human morality, and this is the basis for the sublation of the dualism of the state and civil society.

Marx’s attempt to sublimate the dualism of the state and civil society resulted in “a

political revolution with a social soul” (Marx 1975b, p. 205). After this, his investigations concentrated on the critique of economics, which has its basis in criticism of civil society from the viewpoint of the true community of men, life, and human morality. This project was completed in *Capital* (*Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Oekonomie*, first appeared in 1867-1894). Although the proletariat, which is separated from life itself and isolated, appears in Marx's criticism of economics as being absorbed in civil society (as wage labor), it must - as the material foundation and subject of the sublation of the dualism - make itself the subject and class of social revolution. Therefore, Marx's task is dualistic, entailing the simultaneous critique of both politics and economics.

Chapter 2. Commodity fetishism and critique of everyday life

Fetishism (*Fetischismus*) and fetish character (*Fetischcharackter*) are immensely significant categories for Marxism. Marx referred to these concepts constantly in his theoretical development, at one point in relation to “alienation theory,” and at another in relation to the “system of the critique of economics.” In this section, I seek to clarify Marx's real intention by investigating commodity fetishism in relation to his concept of “forms of value.” Fetishism is most minutely studied in the section “Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof” of *Capital*.

Fetishism is the fundamental concept of the critique of the political economy (*Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, which is the subtitle of *Capital*). This is evident from the fact that Marx specifically attacks the bourgeois ideology of classical economics in “Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof.” Hence, it will not be possible to understand Marx's critical holistic investigation of the bourgeois ideology without this foundation.

First, however, it is necessary to clarify the significance of Marx's concept of fetishism, and then explore the formalistic development of fetishism, or the form of value, from the view point of fetishism.

1. Critical summary of fetish world

Before beginning the minute investigation of “fetishism of commodities,” I would like to summarize the idea of “fetish world.” Marx described the society in which the capitalist mode of production prevails [*Gesellschaft, in welchen kapitalistische Produktionsweise herrscht*] as a fetish world. This summary will facilitate understanding of the latter part of this paper.

Marx criticized the “Trinity Formula” of vulgar economy as follows:

Vulgar economy actually does no more than interpret, systematize and defend in

doctrinaire fashion the conception of the agents of bourgeois production who are entrapped in bourgeois production relations. It should not astonish us, then, that vulgar economy feels particularly at home in the estranged outward appearances of economic relations in which these *prima facie* absurd and perfect contradictions appear and that these relations seem the more self-evident the more their internal relationships are concealed from it, although they are understandable to the popular mind. But all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided. Thus, vulgar economy has not the slightest suspicion that the trinity which it takes as its point of departure, namely, land - rent, capital - interest, labor - wages or the price of labor, are *prima facie* three impossible combinations. (Marx 1998, p. 804)

In capital - profit, or still better capital - interest, land - rent, labor - wages, in this economic trinity represented as the connection between the component parts of value and wealth in general and its sources, we have the complete mystification of the capitalist mode of production, the conversion of social relations into things, the direct coalescence of the material production relations with their historical and social determination. It is an enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world, in which Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre do their ghost-walking as social characters and at the same time directly as mere things. It is the great merit of classical economy to have destroyed this false appearance and illusion, this mutual independence and ossification of the various social elements of wealth, this personification of things and conversion of production relations into entities, this religion of everyday life. It did so by reducing interest to a portion of profit, and rent to the surplus above average profit, so that both of them converge in surplus value; and by representing the process of circulation as a mere metamorphosis of forms, and finally reducing value and surplus value of commodities to labor in the direct production process. Nevertheless, even the best spokesmen of classical economy remain more or less in the grip of the world of illusion which their criticism had dissolved, as cannot be otherwise from a bourgeois standpoint, and thus they all fall more or less into inconsistencies, half-truths and unsolved contradictions. (Marx 1998, p. 817)

2 . The origin of the fetishism of commodities

Marx, who spent most of his life studying the critique of bourgeois political economy, or fetish world, said at the beginning of the summary of the idea of fetish world:

In the case of the simplest categories of the capitalist mode of production, and even of commodity production, in the case of commodities and money, we have already

pointed out the mystifying character that transforms the social relations, for which the material elements of wealth serve as bearers in production, into properties of these things themselves (commodities) and still more pronouncedly transforms the production relation itself into a thing (money). All forms of society, in so far as they reach the stage of commodity production and money circulation, take part in this perversion. But under the capitalist mode of production and in the case of capital, which forms its dominant category, its determining production relation, this enchanted and perverted world develops still more. (Marx 1998, pp. 813-814)

As Marx noted, there is a “mystifying character” to “the case of commodities and money;” thus, it is important to investigate his argument in detail. Commodities, everyday things that we indispensably live on, are the starting point of Marx’s critique of economics and overcoming the “religion of everyday life.”

He discusses, in minute detail, “commodity-god” as the origin of the fetish world in the section “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof.” Here he defined the fetishism of commodities at the outset:

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it is capable of satisfying human wants, or from the point that those properties are the product of human labor. It is as clear as noon-day, that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head. (Marx 1996, pp. 81-82)

In the above passage, Marx says “so far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it,” but “so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent.” Thus, commodities are the unity of use value and value; notably, although commodities gain their fetish character from value, they do not originate from use value.

Marx denies that use value is the origin of the fetish character of commodities. He also denies that “determining factors of value” are the origin of this fetish character. Determining factors of value refer to abstract human labor, which is expressed in the value of commodities. Marx lists three reasons why the fetish character of commodities

does not originate from the determining factors of value:

The mystical character of commodities does not originate, therefore, in their use value. Just as little does it proceed from the nature of the determining factors of value. For, in the first place, however varied the useful kinds of labor, or productive activities, may be, it is a physiological fact, that they are functions of the human organism, and that each such function, whatever may be its nature or form, is essentially the expenditure of human brain, nerves, muscles, etc. Secondly, with regard to that which forms the ground-work for the quantitative determination of value, namely, the duration of that expenditure, or the quantity of labour, it is quite clear that there is a palpable difference between its quantity and quality. In all states of society, the labour time that it costs to produce the means of subsistence, must necessarily be an object of interest to mankind, though not of equal interest in different stages of development. And lastly, from the moment that men in any way work for one another, their labour assumes a social form. (Marx 1996, p. 82)

On the basis of the above three reasons, Marx argues convincingly that the fetish character of commodities does not originate from determining factors of value. These three determinants refer to activities through which humans work upon nature and provide for life's necessities. In addition, these activities are human labor, which is fundamental for all kinds of human societies. Such labor is the fundamental determinant of what it is to be human and common to all societies, including capitalist society and feudal society. In this sense, it is social substance.

So, if the fetish character of commodities comes neither from "value in use" nor "determining factors of value," "whence, then, arises the enigmatical character of the product of labour, so soon as it assumes the form of commodities? Clearly from this form itself" (Marx 1996, p. 82).

Marx finally sought for the origin of the fetish character of commodity in the "form of commodity." According to Marx, "the equality of all sorts of human labour," "the measure of the expenditure of labour power by the duration of that expenditure," and "the mutual relations of the producers, within which the social character of their labour affirms itself" appear in the form of commodity as "their products all being equally values," "the form of the quantity of value of the products of labour," and "the form of a social relation between the products" (Marx 1996, p. 82). That is, a commodity is "the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour" and "the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour" (Marx 1996, p. 83).

“A definite social relation between men” appears, in their eyes, “the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Marx 1996, p. 83). Marx called this displacement [quid pro quo] specific to the form of commodity fetishism. He said furthermore, “In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race” (Marx 1996, p. 83). As God in heaven originates from the independence of “the productions of the human brain,” so the fetishism of commodities, which is the god on the earth, originates from the independence of the products of men's hands. Such comparison of the religious world with the secular world enables us to imagine the religious structure of our familiar commodity economy.

Marx's motive – which he maintained from the beginning – was to develop the logic of the critique of religion into the logic of the critique of society, or to accomplish the same critical logic through the critique of religion, right, and economy. From this point of view, was the logic of fetishism or reification the final and complete form of his motive? I would suggest the answer is “yes,” because Marx's view of religion is that it is not merely the abstract product of the human brain, but instead that the human brain is the brain of humans who live in a historically prescribed real world.

So far, we have followed Marx's argument, but the structure of this quid pro quo – that is, how “a definite social relation between men” appears as “a relation between things” – has not been clearly explained. However, the clarification of this fetish character of commodities is possible only through the clarification of the structure of this quid pro quo. What is then the structure of commodities?

3. Formalistic development of fetishism and reification

Commodity society or commodity economy is often highly praised because it is thought to be the world where rationality prevails and where modern people enjoy their liberty after medieval bondage. So, modern humans easily fall into a pitfall of everyday life (i.e., loss of problem), unless we face the world with thorough critique. Ideological and external critique is powerless because such critique misses the larger point and does not clarify the structure of the danger of this world. Critique is effective only when it enters the internal world deeply and clarifies its upside-down and dangerous structure through logic. Not the ideological, but the logical critique can clarify the religiosity of the commodity world, that is, the religion of everyday life.

I would like to reread “The Form of Value or Exchange Value” as the fundamental logic for the fetishism of the world. “The Form of Value” itself demonstrates that the inner contradiction of commodities between value as homogeneity and use value as heterogeneity is the fundamental origin of reified human social relationships. It is this

fundamental contradiction that develops into the external contradiction, that is, dualism of commodity and money. This self-development of commodity, which is, at the same time, both the development and resolution of contradiction, produces the social relationship itself, and this relationship develops into reification or money.

“The objectivity of the value of commodities” as homogeneity of commodities “differs in this respect from *Dame Quickly*, that we don't know where to have it,” because if we “[t]urn and examine a single commodity, by itself, as we will, yet in so far as it remains an object of value, it seems impossible to grasp it.” “The value of commodities has a purely social reality” and “can only manifest itself in the social relation of commodity to commodity ... presenting a marked contrast with the varied bodily forms of their use values [their money form].” The task of “The Form of Value or Exchange Value” is “the task of tracing the genesis of this money form, of developing the expression of value implied in the value relation of commodities, from its simplest, almost imperceptible outline, to the dazzling money form” (Marx 1996, pp. 57–58).

“The value form, whose fully developed shape is the money form” at first looks “very elementary and simple,” (Marx 1996, p. 7) but we will soon realize that it is “a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (Marx 1996, p. 81). So, “to the superficial observer, the analysis of these forms seems to turn upon minutiae” (Marx 1996, p. 8). This value form is, however, “not only the most abstract, but is also the most universal form, taken by the product in bourgeois production, and stamps that production as a particular species of social production, and thereby gives it its special historical character” (Marx 1996, pp. 91–92). As long as “even Adam Smith and Ricardo, the best representatives of the school, treat the form of value as a thing of no importance, as having no connection with the inherent nature of commodities” (Marx 1996, p. 91). We must therefore pursue the analysis of this value form with abstract and dialectical thinking, regardless of the possible accusation of “turning upon minutiae.”

4 . Fetishism of “Elementary or Accidental Form of Value”

The starting point of “The Form of Value” is the value relation of commodities, from its simplest, almost imperceptible outline, “that of one commodity to some one other commodity of a different kind.” This simplest relation, however, includes the whole secret of money form and “the whole mystery of the form of value” (Marx 1996, pp. 57–58), so “its analysis, therefore, is our real difficulty” (Marx 1996, p. 58).

Elementary form of value is, for example, expressed as “20 yards of linen = 1 coat.” In this equation, the linen expresses its value in the coat and the coat serves as “the material in which that value is expressed.” Here, the value of 20 yards of linen is expressed in 1 coat. “The value of the linen is represented as relative value, or appears in relative form. The coat officiates as equivalent, or appears in equivalent form” (Marx 1996,

p. 58).

What is the foundation of this equation? The profound thinking through of this point will make clear the significance of the concept of elementary form of value. Generally speaking, it rarely happens that commodities such as 20 yards of linen and 1 coat are considered equivalent and directly exchanged in our daily commodity circulation. It is almost impossible to demonstrate the necessary development from this rare case to the reality of commodity circulation, that is, the commodity circulation mediated by money.

The elementary form of value is abstract when compared with the realistic commodity circulation; however, we must not merely play with hypotheticals. The abstract is not the same thing as hypothetical creation because the former must be valid in the real world. This is a difficult point. If the idea of elementary form of value is interpreted only as direct commodity exchange, which rarely happens in the real commodity economy, then the true significance of the form of value cannot be understood in its Marxian sense and will remain at the level of classical economy.

The assumption of the direct exchange of commodities assumes the external criteria for the exchange. In order to understand it from an internal perspective, we must interpret the elementary form of value as a relationship which needs to posit some medium of exchange.

Understanding the equation 20 yards of linen = 1 coat from the internal perspective seems to mean to stand on the side of the linen, for this equation expresses the value of the 20 yards of linen and the subject of the expression, that is, linen plays the active role in this equation. We cannot explicitly favor the coat, which serves as a material of value expression for linen and plays a passive role in this equation.

Now, we have the fundamental perspective for grasping the origin of the elementary form of value. What does the equation 20 yards of linen = 1 coat mean? It refers to the one-way, subjective relationship of an owner of linen, in that he will give his 20 yards of linen to satisfy his appetite for 1 coat. It is a personal request of a linen owner for a coat. We cannot deduce, therefore, from this equation another one, for example, 40 yards of linen = 2 coat, for the owner may not want more than one coat. In this elemental form of value, the value expression of 20 yards of linen is possible only under the absolute constraint of the use value of another commodity, that is, a coat. This means that the origin of the value form is the desire of the linen owner.

Since it is the origin of the money form, what kind of reification structure does the equation 20 yards of linen = 1 coat express? We can explain this from the viewpoint of the significance of the commodity, which serves as equivalent form (a coat) to the owner of the value expressing subject (linen owner). The linen owner expresses that his 20 yards of linen has a value "by saying that the coat is directly exchangeable with it" (Marx 1996, p. 65). That means that linen does not express its value by itself, but also makes a detour of

expressing its value by way of another commodity. The linen owner has a direct desire for a coat, on a unilateral basis and actively, but his request is almost impossible to satisfy because it is a one-way desire and the coat owner pays no attention to it. On the other hand, the coat owner, who has a passive position in this equation, is more likely to get linen in exchange for his coat, if he so wishes. This is the strange upside-down relation. The more the subject of the value expression emphasizes his subjectivity (i.e., a request for exchange), the more he loses his subjectivity. This upside-down relation develops finally into the money form. Money has prevailing, one-way purchasing power over other commodities and makes the commodity circulation possible.

In the equivalent form, “use value [i.e., 1 coat] becomes the form of manifestation, the phenomenal form of its opposite, value” (Marx 1996, p. 66). This is a strange quid pro quo because originally 1 coat is “the form of the equivalent” only in the relation subjectively set by the linen owner; however, now it seems “the material commodity itself - the coat - just as it is, expresses value, and is endowed with the form of value by Nature itself.” “The properties of a thing are not the result of its relations to other things, but only manifest themselves in such relations, the coat seems to be endowed with its equivalent form, its property of being directly exchangeable, just as much by Nature as it is endowed with the property of being heavy, or the capacity to keep us warm” (Marx 1996, pp. 67-68). The properties of the equivalent form contain some social relations, but they are neglected in daily life.

“Hence the enigmatical character of the equivalent form which escapes the notice of the bourgeois political economist” (Marx 1996, p. 68). In the elementary form of value, however, it fails to appear and is a temporary phenomenon. Once “this form, completely developed, confronts him [i.e., the bourgeois political economist] in the shape of money,” it surprises him. “He then seeks to explain away the mystical character of gold and silver, by substituting for them fewer dazzling commodities, and by reciting, with ever renewed satisfaction, the catalogue of all possible commodities which at one time or another have played the part of equivalent” (Marx 1996, p. 68).

This enigmatical character of the equivalent form, however, is not completed in the elementary form of value. Its character depends on temporary and accidental conditions, such as the desire of the linen owner. Even so, the elemental form of value tells us the origin of the money form. The bourgeois political economist, who cannot understand commodity as form, but only as a labor product, “has not the least suspicion that the simplest expression of value, such as 20 yds of linen = 1 coat, already propounds the riddle of the equivalent form for our solution” (Marx 1996, p. 68).

To solve the puzzle of the enigmatical character of the equivalent form, it is necessary to clarify the fundamental structure of the fetish world, which requires analyzing why a linen owner puts a coat in the equivalent form or why a coat is one of the reflective

provisions of linen. Solving the puzzle is far easier than expected, however, but it does indicate a very serious development. A commodity is, as long as it is commodity, that is, as long as it is thematized in commodity circulation or in its social aspect and not in production and consumption aspect as labor product. "No commodity can stand in the relation of equivalent to itself, and thus turn its own bodily shape into the expression of its own value" (Marx 1996, pp. 58-59) and "every commodity is compelled to choose some other commodity for its equivalent, and to accept the use value, that is to say, the bodily shape of that other commodity as the form of its own value" (Marx 1996, p. 66). This is the logic of relation that is specific to the commodity form. The value of commodities (equality) cannot help but be expressed only by the use value of another commodity. This detour makes it possible for a coat to appear to have both its natural properties and supernatural properties: the upside-down phenomenon we noted earlier. The origin of a coat's supernatural properties is the specificity of the value expression, that is, the linen owner gives his 20 yards of linen to get a coat for his desire to exchange. Such origin is easily understood in the case of the elementary value form because the fact that a coat is apparently the object of the linen owner's desire and is put in the equivalent form only in subjective value relation set by the linen owner shows clearly that the origin of the mystery of equivalence is the desire for exchange by the linen owner. Once the linen owner loses his subjective, one-way desire for exchange, the mystery of equivalent form disappears immediately. In this sense the elementary form of value is a very primitive form and displays no fixed equivalent form. Fetishism and the fetish world thus have objective necessity and do not disappear when the subjects of commodity owners disappear.

This objectivity is confirmed by money, which assumes the expression of value for all the commodity world; however, each commodity owner does not come in contact directly with his specific and accidental desire. "It is, however, just this ultimate money form of the world of commodities that actually conceals, instead of disclosing, the social character of private labour, and the social relations between the individual producers" (Marx 1996, p. 86). So, it is logically rational to begin the investigation of the mystery of money with its origin, the elementary form of value. In it, the pure social relation, that is, the equality of value, is expressed not socially but in a single commodity. Therefore, "the opposition or contrast existing internally in each commodity between use value and value" (Marx 1996, p. 71) is, for example, in the case of linen, externalized only in another commodity, e.g., a coat. This means that in the elementary form of value the commodity value of linen is expressed only in limited form in the use value of a coat. In other words, the linen owner's desire for exchange is directly related only to a coat, but the value must be expressed thoroughly in order for it to be a value. Moreover, the desire for exchange must develop into the desire for universal exchange; thus, the value expression of the linen commodity

“passes by an easy transition into a more complete form” (Marx 1996, p. 72).

Conclusion

The major difference between my previously published work on value form (Shibata 2012) and this article is my emphasis on the fetish character of commodity and the effort to make it clear that the origin of value is the appetite of the commodity owner whose commodity is in relative value form. Value is defined and prescribed only reflexively. The commodity in equivalent form has the power of domination (1 coat) over the commodity in relative value form, however the power does not originate in the commodity in equivalent form (20 yards of linen), but from the desire of the owner of the commodity in relative value form. The larger the desire, the more heavily the power of domination reverts back to the owner.²⁾

At a glance, such a simple structure is the foundation of the fetishism and fetish character of daily life. Religion and the secular political state, which are, according to Marx, abstract and alienated forms of human desire, can be criticized from the same viewpoint; therefore, the critique of religion is for Marx the starting point for all other criticisms.

References

- Feuerbach, Ludwig. 1971. *Kleinere Schriften III (1846-1850)*. Vol. 10 of *Gesammelte Werke*, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 1913. *Hegels Schriften zur Politik und Rechtsphilosophie. Sämtliche Werke* Bd. VII, Leipzig: Verlag von Felix Meiner.
- Marx, Karl. 1975a. *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*. Vol. 3 of Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Marx, Karl. 1975b. *Critical Marginal Notes on the Article "the King of Prussia and Social Reform by a Prussian"*. Vol. 3 of Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Marx, Karl. 1975c. *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction*. Vol. 3 of Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Marx, Karl. 1996. *Capital, Vol. I*. Vol. 35 of Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*. New York: International Publishers.
- Marx, Karl. 1998. *Capital, Vol. III*. Vol. 37 of Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*. New York: International Publishers.
- Shibata, Hideki. 2012. "Fetishism of Commodities and the Forms of Value," in *The Journal of Economics* (Chuo-University). Vol. 52 No. 5 & 6, pp. 31-43.
- Shibata, Hideki. 2013. "Money and Class: A Reexamination of the Class Struggle in Marx," in *The Journal of Economics* (Chuo-University). Vol. 53, No. 2, pp. 1-15.

2) The development from the elementary to money form is described in Shibata 2012.

Shibata, Hideki. 2014. "The Sublation of the Dualism of the "State-Civil Society by Marx and Hegel," in *The Journal of Economics* (Chuo-University). Vol. 54, No. 3 & 4, pp. 35-52.

Shibata, Hideki. 2019. "Marx and Hegel's Dialectic Differences," in *The Journal of Economics* (Chuo-University). Vol. 59, No. 5 & 6, pp. 35-52.

(Professor, Faculty of Economics, Chuo University, Dr. of Economics)