

Introduction to 'The Basic Law of Social Development'

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Abstract

In 1932, Julius Dickmann self-published a revision to the Marxist account of revolutionary historical change. Arguing that previous modes of production had *not* caused revolutions because of confrontations between expanding productive forces and fettering relations of production, Dickmann held that the contradiction in historical modes of production was between expanding productive forces and their natural limits. Modes of production faced *ecological* crises, necessitating changes in the *relations of production* that then spurred the productive forces. Dickmann argued that this model explained the emergence and decline of antiquity and feudalism. Analogously, capitalism was stagnating because it was running up against natural limits. Monopolisation was not a symptom of overripe capitalism heralding socialism in germ, but a necessary response to the danger of overexploiting fossil fuels. Only by working with the grain of

these fetters could socialists hope to stimulate new post-capitalist forces of production and accelerate the transition to socialism.

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Julius Dickmann: The First Eco-Socialist?

In 1932, the Austrian Marxist Julius Dickmann set out to revise the foundations of Marxism via a new theory of history. The publication was inauspicious: the manuscript was self-published, as Dickmann was politically and personally isolated. He was writing in Austria, where socialism was soon to be suppressed – first by the Dolfuss regime and

subsequently by the Nazis. Dickmann himself was Jewish and was unable to flee the country or arrange for his writings to be kept safe. In 1942, he was likely deported to a death camp, where he was murdered. His remarkable life's work was unjustly overlooked for many years thereafter.

In his lifetime, his work had the most impact in France. Through his compatriot Otto Maschl (who published in France as Lucien Laurat), Dickmann's work was translated into French and published in Boris Souvarine's excellent *revue*, *la Critique sociale*. The work published there included extracts from 'The Basic Law of Social Development', and this version of the work may indeed have been more widely read than the original German. It was the French version, excerpted in *Critique sociale*, that is cited in Löwy 2002 – worth mentioning because this is only a portion of the essay translated below. His work published there was also plausibly a primary interlocuter for Simone Weil in her post-Marxist 'Oppression and Liberty'.¹ In the German-speaking world, his work has recently been revived by Peter Haumer, who published an excellent biographical introduction, a bibliography of Dickmann's work and republished a number of Dickmann's core writings.² I owe much to this volume in my work below

¹ Haumer 2015a, pp. 112–15.

² Haumer 2015b.

and I urge readers interested in learning more about Dickmann to consult it.³

The text translated below is perhaps the most interesting of Dickmann's essays for twenty-first century readers. It is Dickmann's most sustained attempt to set out his critique of Marxism and offer his alternative account of the nature of contemporary capitalism. Here he laid out most clearly his conception of a capitalist system that faces *natural* rather than social, political or economic limits. For this, his work is worth reading and taking seriously today, both for what strikes the modern reader as remarkable foresight and serious or avoidable error. Dickmann spent many years thinking about the meaning of scarcity, monopoly and environmental constraints in capitalism – this in the 1920s and 30s – and eventually applied these insights in a critique of the Classical Marxist model of revolutionary change. 'The Basic Law of Social Development' argued that the famous fetters applied by the relations of production to the productive forces were not always irrational obstacles to be overthrown, but sometimes socially necessary limits to overexploitation. Dickmann argued that Socialism, like capitalism before it, would emerge when distinctively socialist relations of production had arisen within the womb of capitalism and had the chance to engender distinctively socialist forces of

³ Dickmann's work also found an audience on the bilingual *Raum gegen Zement/Espace contre ciment* blog, which offered useful reproductions of several of Dickmann's published and self-published writing in French and German. Unfortunately this blog is no longer active.

production. In doing so, they would render capitalist monopoly, and all the fetters it applies, obsolete.

As a theoretical contribution to historical materialism, these conclusions were challenging and original. But Dickmann's route to these conclusions, via the natural limits to a given mode of production and the danger of overexploitation of a given natural basis of production, was at least half a century ahead of his time. The crux of Dickmann's mature view, unpacked in the second section below, is that *social development is driven by societal confrontations with natural limits*. Dickmann apparently came to this conclusion more or less alone, although it is very difficult to piece together what Dickmann was reading beyond the rather select footnotes attached to his essays.

1. The Road to 'Das Grundgesetz'

Who was Dickmann and how did he come to his conception of an economic system facing natural limits? He was born in 1894, in Habsburg Galicia, though the family subsequently moved to Vienna.⁴ As a young man, he threw himself into revolutionary politics at the end of the First

⁴ Haumer 2015a, p. 14. All biographical data is drawn from Haumer's essay.

World War. He temporarily joined the Communist Party as well as several other revolutionary groupings. Amongst his early polemics, written in the upheaval of the Austro-Hungarian Empire's collapse, was an article attempting to apply the lessons of Lenin's *Left Wing Communism* to Austria – Dickmann advocated that radicals give electoral support to the SPÖ on condition that the latter promise to act as mere delegates for the workers' councils. He soon drifted out of the Communist orbit – his originality and independence of mind had no place in the Bolshevised Third International – and his publications stopped appearing in their journals. But he had been gradually losing his hearing his whole life and, by 1928, he was legally deaf and began to draw a disability pension.

It is around this time that Dickmann the theorist and critic of Marx appeared, writing from his home on Vienna's Favoritenstraße. He began with a self-published pamphlet called *Die Wende* [The Turning Point], the first of two promised instalments taking stock of the present state of Marxism. Only the first issue appeared, but it is enough to reconstruct the core of Dickmann's criticism and his emerging eco-socialism. The basic circumstance of Dickmann's *Marxkritik* was a sense of crisis in Marxism. This sense was motivated *not* by defeat – Dickmann, as readers will see, had more than enough patience to ride out a half-century or two of reaction and stagnation, a period that would hardly register in world-historical terms ('history has plenty of time', as his fellow ex-communist Victor Serge

put it).⁵ Instead, what troubled Dickmann was the *split* in the labour movement. How could Marxism claim to unite theory and practice, to be history comprehending itself, if it couldn't stand as a united movement? He took this – the failure of Marxism's 'unifying force' or *Sammlungskraft* – as a sign that history had moved on and a revision of the doctrine was called for.⁶

This he tried to sketch in 'The Late-Capitalist Era' (1927).⁷ Practically, the aim was to get the radicals and the reformers in the workers' movement to see eye-to-eye by resolving the question of the 'ripeness' of capitalism for revolution in a way that would satisfy both. Theoretically, this meant offering a new account of the phenomenon of monopoly – central especially to interwar Communists – in a way that did not entail revolutionary adventurism. This is where Dickmann first began to think about capitalism's *natural* limits, tied to the specific raw materials and sources of energy that power the system. In 1927, this meant coal and iron above all.⁸

⁵ Serge 1937, p. 228.

⁶ On this theme see Dickmann 1927a, pp. 1–4.

⁷ Dickmann 1927b.

⁸ It would take us off track to evaluate the reading of Marx and Engels on which this argument was premised. There were two key elements. The first was that they thought the objective, material conditions for socialist transition were present already in their lifetimes, and thus the only obstacles to socialist revolution were subjective ones: the preparedness and consciousness of the proletariat. The second element was that Marx and Engels believed in the unlimited potential for growth on the basis of the productive forces capitalism had already furnished. Scarcity was a social problem, not a product of natural limits. Dickmann's first element was controversial even at the time, and the second element has been challenged in recent eco-socialist literature. I address these issues directly in the next section.

Dickmann tried to please both sides – the reformers and the revolutionaries – with a remarkably original and striking answer. Yes, capitalism was a fetter on growth – but it was a necessary one. The problem facing humanity, Dickmann argued, was twofold. Firstly, our mode of production is based on specific raw materials that have a natural limit. This will, Dickmann was confident, eventually be superseded by a new natural basis – perhaps, he speculated, even energy directly from the Sun. But the second problem is that one could not be sure how long we would be waiting for such new technology. This made rational planning and direction of the economy extremely difficult. The danger was that a socialist economy, quite rightly attempting to rationalise production and minimise labour costs, would end up burning through the reserves too quickly: ‘It would not in the least correspond to the fundamentals of a socialist economy ... to expand the productive powers of the economy “without limit”, in order then after rapidly consuming the largest deposits of raw materials to have to shrink production in the end, and to rob future generations of their essential basis of raw materials’.⁹ Perversely, it was precisely because capitalism relied *more* on human labour, he wrote, precisely because it was exploitative and profit seeking, that it could be relied upon to conserve a material basis that socialists might prove prone

⁹ Dickmann 1927b, p. 9.

to overexploit. 'Thus we reach the surprising conclusion that monopoly capitalism still represents the most practical economic system for a regular, economical management of world reserves of raw materials that is capable of adapting to fluctuations in necessary demand'.¹⁰ Some degree of private monopoly was socially necessary for the coal-and-iron phase of history: 'That is then the meaning of the late-capitalist era: capitalism has played out its role as a lever of economic progress, now forming a barrier to the same. But in this role too it has another necessary social purpose'.¹¹

The political upshot was a mixed economy, in which certain industries were to be socialised and subject to rational administration, whereas others – vital raw materials especially – were to be left in the hands of private monopolists. More importantly, socialists could reunite and begin to understand the course of history, and thereby come to master it:

Only when amongst the working class the knowledge ripens that the late-capitalist era is no accidental product of history, but rather forms a natural phase of development of society, will it seek and be able to find the effective means for a socialist reorganisation of the economy. It is above all a matter of understanding that one cannot skip this

¹⁰ Dickmann 1927b, p. 12.

¹¹ Dickmann 1927b, p. 12.

phase either, but that its laws must be worked out, in order to impose the transition to socialism consciously and in a fighting spirit.¹²

The second issue of *Die Wende*, which was to deal with a range of economic and political problems and intended to unite the competing currents of Marxism, was never finished.¹³ But Dickmann did not stop thinking about this question of capitalism's limits and he was clearly not satisfied with the answer he had given. His later writing on the subject offers clues about what he thought were the main problems. In his essay on 'The True Limit of Capitalist Production', which appeared in 1933 in *Critique sociale*, Dickmann reversed a core part of his earlier argument.¹⁴ He was now convinced by the more orthodox argument that capitalism's logic was precisely the kind of economisation of labour and overcapitalisation that he had previously feared socialism would take too far. Now, in the depths of the Great Depression, he argued that capitalism was crashing into just this crisis of overproduction. The system was also suffering because it was running into hard problems of diminishing returns to iron and oil extraction: 'the production of ore required ... growing quantities of capital. Thus, in that part of industry called "heavy industry", there appeared for the first time and in very acute fashion the contradiction

¹² Dickmann 1927b, p. 13.

¹³ Haumer 2015a, p. 97.

¹⁴ Dickmann 1933.

between the rapidly growing need of capital and the no-less rapid exhaustion of the source from which capital draws its growth'.¹⁵ The new story Dickmann told about monopoly was that it was only under such uncompetitive conditions that the oil and heavy industries could function at all. What was the historic function of monopolistic fetters and how would the natural limits capitalism faced be transcended? This question continued to underpin Dickmann's work.

2.The Originality of 'The Basic Law of Social Development'

This translation aims to introduce Dickmann's work to a new audience so they can think and write with him. I am making no claims as to the veracity of his contribution. Clearly it has flaws but since he ranges across the whole of European history, occasionally venturing into world history, it would be beyond my competence to offer critical annotation for the whole essay. Since Dickmann's work touches on just about every dimension of Marxist theory, from political strategy to political economy and philosophy of history, I leave it to readers and other researchers to work through these myriads intersections. 'The Basic Law of Social Development' is

¹⁵ Dickmann 1933, 112 –13

challenging and provocative; if it elicits critical engagement, my translation will have been a success.

I want to set out a provisional and partial assessment of Dickmann's originality, as a starting point for further research and debate. Dickmann's distinctive view was that *social development is driven by societal confrontations with natural limits*. This amounts to a remarkably precocious synthesis of two strands of debate in Marxist theory: the question of transitions between historical modes of production, and the question of the dialectic between human society and nature. In two places – the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and the *Communist Manifesto* – Marx (and Engels) had left a basic model of revolutionary change, of the historical transition from one mode of production to the other. In the *Manifesto* it was laid out:

At a certain stage in the development of these means of production and exchange, the conditions under which feudal society produced and exchanged, the feudal organisation of agriculture and manufacturing industry, in one word, the feudal relations of property became no longer compatible with the

already developed productive forces; they became so many fetters. They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder.¹⁶

Dickmann used the concept 'productive forces' somewhat inconsistently, and not quite as Marx used it, something we will expand upon below.¹⁷ Nevertheless, it is Dickmann's contention that no such conflict or contradiction has taken place in an historical transition and that this conflict hardly makes sense. If a technology was truly socially disruptive and even dangerous, how does it ever gain a foothold and grow strong enough to confront the well-established old interests? How did the feudal relations of production first engender and then fetter the development of specifically capitalist productive forces? Marx's own work does not provide an unambiguous answer to this question – and indeed the question of the relationship between forces and relations of production, and of both with the superstructure, is still contested by Marxists.

In Dickmann's interpretation of the quote above, the image was of the relations of production as scaffolding within which the productive forces can be developed. Eventually, the building outgrows the scaffolding, which has to be removed or 'burst asunder'. The Classical Marxist view was that capitalism would produce socialism in germ through a process of

¹⁶ Marx and Engels 2002, p. 225.

¹⁷ Although the term is disputed in the scholarship. For a brief overview, see Harris 1991.

concentration and centralisation of capital. Lenin believed this had already happened by the Great War: 'When a big enterprise assumes gigantic proportions, ... then it becomes evident that we have socialization of production, and not mere "interlocking"; that private economic relations and private property relations constitute a shell which is no longer suitable for its contents'.¹⁸ In other words, the forces of production were now so concentrated that they made capitalist private property anachronistic. These property relations were now positively an obstacle to further economic progress. Therefore a socialist political revolution was inevitable and would release the forces of production from this cage. Dickmann did not believe that capitalism had emerged from feudalism this way and he did not believe that socialism would be the product of a similar process.

We have already seen that Dickmann was acutely aware of the essential scarcity of a variety of key elements in the capitalist productive process. If the Classical Marxist view in the period was of *de facto* socialised production merely awaiting relations of production that corresponded to it, of abundance and plenty hidden behind the poverty and want of capitalism, Dickmann's view was much more cautious. He had already argued that Marx and Engels had been wrong to think that

¹⁸ Lenin 1947, p. 739.

the development of the productive forces had gone as far as it could under capitalism – their work was before the age of the automobile, of the production line, today we could add the internet and satellite technology. Dickmann had argued in ‘The Late-Capitalist Era’ that part of the problem is that we simply could not know how much more development capitalism had in the tank. By 1932, he had the beginnings of an answer which he presented as an alternative account of the transition from one mode of production to another.

For readers today, the question of historical transitions probably brings to mind the Brenner debate.¹⁹ Since Dickmann’s concern was not simply the origins of *capitalism*, but a general model of historical change, a more interesting comparison can be drawn with Perry Anderson’s project in *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* and *Lineages of the Absolutist State*. These books, like Dickmann’s, set out to revise the historical materialist narrative of the basic outlines of European history and furthermore to rethink the way in which the new emerges out of the old in this theory of history. Dickmann’s project is narrower and wider than Anderson’s: narrower, because he does not consider the nature of absolutism; wider, because he attempts to explain the transition to capitalism, which is excluded from the scope of *Lineages*.²⁰ The depth of

¹⁹ Aston & Philpin 1985.

²⁰ Anderson 2013a.

research in *Lineages* cannot be compared with Dickmann's rough sketches in the 'Grundgesetz', and with respect to this second volume their conclusions diverge significantly. Yet *Passages* is consistently reminiscent of Dickmann's essay. Various more or less incidental arguments are shared (for example, the role of the Church in the transition to feudalism). More important is the general theoretical conclusion reached in *Passages*, which Dickmann precisely anticipated:

For one of the most important conclusions yielded by an examination of the great crash of European feudalism is that – contrary to widely received beliefs among Marxists – the characteristic 'figure' of a crisis in a mode of production is not one in which vigorous (economic) forces of production burst triumphantly through retrograde (social) relations of production, and promptly establish a higher productivity and society on their ruins. On the contrary, the forces of production typically tend to *stall* and *recede* within the existent relations of production; these then must themselves first be radically changed and reordered before new forces of production can be created and combined for a globally new mode of production. In other words, the

relations of production generally change *prior* to the forces of production in an epoch of transition, and not vice versa.²¹

This is precisely the sense of Dickmann's claim that the emergence of a new mode of production is 'the consequence, not the cause' of its predecessor's demise, and his assertion that 'a conflict between the productive forces and the relations of production ... in the transition from one mode of production to a higher one has never taken place'.²² The Brenner debate shows that the question of the transition from feudalism to capitalism remains one of the most contested questions of the materialist conception of history. Anderson and Dickmann give us reason to believe that the apparently simpler cases of the emergence of antiquity and feudalism itself present theoretical problems, especially insofar as they have been taken as the model to be projected forward for the emergence of socialism out of capitalism.

How Dickmann proposed to solve this problem brings us to the second element of his original synthesis: natural limits. In the last two decades, a series of ground-breaking studies have done much to dispel the myths of a 'Promethean' Marx unconcerned with the ecological basis of human society.²³ In rediscovering Marx's notion of a 'rift in the interdependent

²¹ Anderson 2013b, p. 203 –4.

²² [Put Reference to Text When Publishing](#)

²³ Burkett 1999, Foster 2000, Saito 2017.

process of social metabolism', John Bellamy Foster has shown that Marx had quite concrete ideas about nature as a site of capitalist contradiction; for example the great expense necessary to combat soil exhaustion in a world market for agricultural goods.²⁴ Kohei Saito has taken the argument to a higher level of abstraction, arguing that Marx's *Capital* simply is a theory of ecological crisis. Capitalism will systematically generate ecological crises because of its 'one-sided' focus on 'a specific historical form of labour'.²⁵ Fundamentally *Capital* is a theory of reification, and 'the logic of reification ... organizes a social practice increasingly hostile to nature'.²⁶ It is in the nature of capital to upset the sustainability of the human-nature metabolism because this process is 'radically reorganiz[ed] ... from a perspective of maximally squeezing out abstract labor'.²⁷ Foster has taken the argument further in a different direction by tracing the genealogy of Anglophone Marxist-ecologists across the first half of the twentieth century.²⁸

Based on this one might be tempted to dismiss claims that Dickmann was doing something special in this essay. That would be misguided. It is true that Marx and Engels both recognised that human society stood in a complex, interactive and ever-changing dialectical relation to the wider

²⁴ Marx 1981, p. 949–50, cited in Foster 2000, p. 155.

²⁵ Saito 2017, p. 102.

²⁶ Saito 2017, p. 119.

²⁷ Saito 2017, p. 120.

²⁸ Foster 2022.

world. This is demonstrated by the work of Foster, Saito and others. Dickmann's originality consists in his attempt to put this insight at the centre of the materialist conception of history, and not just the critique of political economy. Doing so led him to make two original claims: first, he insisted that this was a problem facing *all* modes of production, not just capitalism (*against* Saito's Marx) and that it is the confrontation of a mode of production with the limits of its specific material foundation that drives social development.

Putting the human-nature dialectic back into *societal* development was a highly unusual step. Even Engels in 'The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man' had limited his narrative to the question of human *evolution*, rather than *societal development*. His story ended with human 'master[y] of [nature]'.²⁹ While this should not be misunderstood as Promethean hubris, his argument was that at some social escape velocity, natural limits recede into the background as developmental factors. This is certainly how he was read by subsequent Marxists in the early twentieth century, especially those outside the natural-scientific genealogy traced by Foster. This generation was in any case wary of accounts of 'nature' in human history, which all too easily descended into social Darwinism or Malthusianism. This was the focus of Karl Kautsky's

²⁹ Engels 1996.

engagement on the topic.³⁰ Dickmann managed to avoid straying down these dead-ends. There is no doubt, too, that the Marxist tradition sometimes was simply Promethean, regardless of its founders. Anton Pannekoek in his essay on Marxism and Darwinism adopted the view that social development unfolded according to a logic of its own, more or less insulated from the pressures of the natural world. Socialism, he argued, would:

no longer be a struggle against our own kind, but a struggle for subsistence, a struggle against nature. But owing to the development of technique and science, this can hardly be called a struggle. Nature is subject to man and with very little exertion from his side she supplies him with abundance.³¹

Finally, unlike Nikolai Bukharin's *Historical Materialism* – which did address the natural foundations of all human production – Dickmann kept his discussion concrete and historical. Bukharin by contrast wrote in general terms about energy 'input' and society-nature 'disequilibrium'.³² Dickmann was perhaps the first Marxist to argue that capitalism *is the*

³⁰ For example Kautsky 1895, Kautsky 1910.

³¹ Pannekoek 1912, p. 58.

³² Bukharin 1969, pp. 112 –14. Bukharin talks about disequilibrium but not about crisis, and does not posit these disequilibria as sources of development, but simply as moments of decline.

mode of production of fossil fuels, and that this had consequences for its development.

To reiterate: Marx and Engels were always aware that human societies had a basis in the natural world, and that without this material foundation they would not exist. That was the point of the materialist conception of history. Consequently they always acknowledged natural limits, at least implicitly. At the same time, the other point of the materialist conception of history was that class struggle was the motor of societal development (a fact of which the literature on eco-socialism sometimes loses sight). This may lead readers to wonder whether Dickmann's theory of history can be considered Marxist at all, or whether the displacement of class struggle in the narrative amounts to a break with it.

There is no definitive answer to this question. My own view is that this is clearly how Dickmann saw himself, and that 'The Basic Law of Social Development' only makes sense as a contribution to Marxist debate. Its vocabulary and frame of reference are drawn from that tradition and it is attempting to solve a problem native to it: the transition from one mode of production to another.

The model is the following: new productive forces, whether that be new raw materials or new technologies, or even new ways of co-ordinating human labour power, will sooner or later become overexploited and exhausted; at this point, barriers to social overexploitation will be erected,

allowing a new, stable ecological balance incorporating some elements of the advances made in the boom times; further development of the productive forces within this conservative, fettering phase will adjust to the reality of scarcity, and either find much more efficient and sustainable ways of applying the resource or will foster the discovery of entirely new sources of growth; in either case, the old material basis of production becomes superfluous. In Dickmann's words: 'the relations of production decide the course of technological development'.³³ Overuse of a productive force leads to a crisis, an initial decline of its material foundation. In response, a new mode of production emerges, one better adapted to the new natural economic limits. The relations of production respond *first*, adapting to social necessity or crisis, and the forces of production adapt within the new frame. In the case of slavery in antiquity, for example, Dickmann tells us that the institution of slavery as a social relation came first, initially spurring technological progress by spreading rare expertise and not prone to overexploitation because of tough logistical barriers to slave raiding inland. It was only with the Romans, Dickmann argued, that slavery grew large enough to displace the independent yeomanry of republican Rome –and subsequently ran into its true human limits when the largest pools of free non-citizens had been

³³ P.10 of document pre-edit, exact new citation to be set when typeset with translation

thoroughly plundered. This whole discussion amounts to a contribution to the specifically Marxist question of the interplay between forces and relations of production.

It is worth concluding by considering some of the implications of his theory, viewed from the third decade of the twenty first century. First, there is a remarkable combination of pessimism and optimism in Dickmann's work. Pessimism because, in Dickmann's rather mechanistic conception of history, the human race has never proven capable of avoiding the temptation to overexploitation of a given mode of production. Capitalism will go not *because* it has natural limits, but because those limits have been *breached*. The adjustment will be made only in the face of a real, final crisis which has already started to bite. Insofar as the historical materialist method rests on a clear-eyed, unsentimental view of class-interested human beings, this conclusion may be a disturbing challenge for other eco-socialists.

Dickmann himself supplemented this pessimism with a remarkably optimistic view of the historical process. This view was widespread at the time but perhaps finds fewer advocates today. Capitalism *would* meet its crisis, it would collide with its natural limits sooner or later, but *only when* the result would be a revolutionary transformation of the mode of production that finally subjected the chaos of capitalist poverty-in-plenty to conscious social control. As Peter Haumer notes, this optimism was

contested even at the time, as Simone Weil responded to Dickmann's essay with a consciously post-Marxist line of enquiry.³⁴ What happened, she asked, if there is nothing after coal, oil and gas? What if this was a one-off bounty, and there are no rabbits waiting to be drawn from the world-historical hat?³⁵ This is closer to the questions eco-socialists ask today – without realising what a rupture with Marxism it represents. Perhaps the rationalising process of history ends in rationing, rather than freedom and plenty.

Dickmann's response to this would be a reminder that we sit in the middle of a historical process lasting thousands of years, and a phase of that process likely to last hundreds. He believed that this process had a logic, but also that it would have many ups and downs and would not always make sense from the inside. The danger for the impending ecological catastrophe is that we do not have time to waste. And that is an awkward position for an historical materialist to be in.

Although this is not the place to explore them in great detail, this text has significant shortcomings. Dickmann's reading of Marx is occasionally questionable and at times sloppy, as when he misquotes the 'Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy'.³⁶ There is also some ambiguity (and perhaps imprecision) in Dickmann's use of the term

³⁴ Haumer 2015a, pp. 112–15.

³⁵ Weil 1958.

³⁶ Marx 1996. [See note 13 of the translation below.](#) [TO EDIT IN PROOFING](#)

‘productive forces’. In places – for example in the discussion of guild production versus cottage industry in Section 3 of the essay – this takes on a narrowly technological-mechanical definition, rather than encompassing innovations in the organisation of labour itself (properly speaking a form of technology and a part of the forces of production).³⁷ For a text like this, it would be unfair to criticise too harshly the shaky foundations of some of the sweeping historical generalisations. It is nevertheless worth highlighting that Dickmann offers no evidence for his speculations about prehistory. Recent literature has warned us to be careful of such ‘just so stories’ of humanity’s infancy.³⁸

It is nonetheless worth reiterating what he did achieve. Dickmann was decades ahead of his time in recognising that capitalist production would eventually collide with natural limits, above all of supplies of its distinctive sources of energy: fossil fuels. Already in 1932, he saw that the major contradiction in capitalism is between it and ecology, and that this contradiction would generate a crisis it could not overcome. He came to this conclusion independently, and avoided many of the pitfalls that characterised previous Marxist attempts to apply natural laws to the broad sweep of human history. Dickmann managed to show how the forces of nature continued to influence *social* development, rather than proceeding

³⁷ Harris 1991.

³⁸ Graeber and Wengrow 2021.

as if the environment only affected a mythical, pre-social humanity which overcame it with the development of agriculture. Dickmann tries (not always successfully) to show how people acted within societies to drive its evolution, reacting to problems in a mode of production with creativity and agency, not as pieces moved around in a Darwinist game. Even where it fails in this endeavour, Dickmann's essay is a success in highlighting the difficulties of integrating a story of two different complex systems – the social and the ecological – into a coherent account of human development. If this is the most pressing task facing historical materialists, Dickmann's challenge will be a useful starting point for this monumental task.

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