

Energetic Exercise<sup>1</sup>

William L. Abler  
4234 N. Hazel St.  
Chicago, IL 60613

Received 13 August 1990

The Eighth Day is like a jewelled crown, boldly yet simply conceived, richly set with chalcedonies and diopsides, sprinkled in odd places with a brilliant ruby or emerald, and a little too big for the head of the king. It is the goal of this book to develop a theory of history unified under a single metaphor - the self-organization of energy - which is the one force that is common to all sciences. Author Richard Newbold Adams picks up his topic on The Eighth Day, after evolution of the hand and speech, but before the domestication of plants and animals, and carries it to the present and into the future. "These dynamics - - - are carried on now under immense flows of nonhuman commercial energy, catapulting human society into some possibly final stages of evolution." Whether such a prediction is triumphant or apocalyptic, it reveals the bedrock upon which this singleminded, monotheistic book is founded.

Energy, the force common to all sciences, flows through physical systems (societies, organisms, machines), preventing such systems from reaching a state of equilibrium, i.e., a state of inactivity or death. The universal mechanism which controls the flow of energy is the trigger. For a system to remain self-perpetuating, its triggers must release a flow of energy which is greater than the energy required to operate the triggers. For example a nerve cell is a trigger which releases the energy of a muscle; a foreman is a trigger who activates the workers in a factory; the assassination of an archduke was a trigger which started World War I. Physical systems are self-organizing. For example a dust devil and a sewing circle started as systems with self-organization.

Civilization developed as a sequence of energy flows released by triggers. The hand acted as a trigger which allowed humans to incorporate nonhuman energy into human culture. Speech and language allowed one individual to act as a trigger in releasing the activity of several individuals, thus creating two classes of persons, a leader (trigger) class and a follower (energy) class. People used plants opportunistically at first, but as Near Eastern grasses added energy into human societies, communities developed where the grasses grew. Society grew as energy was added into it, and as it increased its ability to find and incorporate new sources of energy. New political structures come into existence as leaders (trigger individuals) form alliances for mutual benefit.

But in spite of its towering ambition and occasional brilliance, The Eighth Day ultimately over-reaches itself. It is skimpy on data except at the end, almost as an afterthought; and crucial words, especially trajectory (as in the human evolutionary trajectory) are used without definition. The jewel in the crown of The Eighth Day is "Taken in the perspective of the history of life on earth, human expansion has been little short of phenomenal. It is not out of place, therefore, to move directly here to the era of industrialization."

The book glimpses its own weaknesses distantly, but never comes to grips with them. Any monotheory of civilization or history may be too strong to be instructive because history and civilization are not monolithic. Civilizations rise and fall, and newer ones are not continuations of older ones. The idea of the present as the ineluctable culmination of something is an illusion produced by chronicity, because history did not have to turn out the way it did. For example if the son of Jenghiz Khan had not died so inconveniently while his armies were in Poland, Europe would have been conquered all the way to England by a culture that never conceived industrialization as we know it.

While The Eighth Day contains good ideas, such as the universality of the trigger mechanism, and the universality of boundaries and self-organization, its severe monotheoretical outlook is as grey as the monotheoretical outlook of its author's favorite author, Karl Marx. History is more eclectic, more chancy, more intimate, more pagan than that. Adams's uniformitarian views may be applicable to limited situations within a single culture.

<sup>1</sup>The Eighth Day.

Richard Newbold Adams. 1988. Univ. of Texas Press.  
xvii + 292 pp. ISBN 0-292-72060-2. Hardbound \$35.00.  
ISBN 0-292-72061-0. Paperback \$12.95.