

Looking Back as We Move Forward

The Past, Present, and Future
of the History of Science

Liber amicorum
for Jed Z. Buchwald on his 70th birthday

April 2019

Contents

ix	FOREWORD
1	Trevor Levere <i>JedFest</i>
4	Alan E. Shapiro <i>Jed's 'Experimental Way'</i>
8	John L. Heilbron <i>Of Anachronisms</i>
12	Noel M. Swerdlow <i>Regiomontanus's Prospectus and Defense of Scientific Publishing</i>
28	Kurt Møller Pedersen <i>A Beautiful Map Made of Driftwood</i>
41	Jesper Lützen <i>Contact-connections and Actions at a Distance</i>
47	Jeremy Gray <i>Archive for History of Exact Sciences</i>
53	Sharon Kingsland <i>Becoming a Historian of Science</i>
58	Craig Fraser <i>The Equation Editor</i>

63	Tom Archibald <i>Long Hair, Brisket, and Indicting Chicanery</i>	130	Michael D. Gordin <i>Reading Jed Reading</i>
68	Margaret Schabas <i>Reminiscences of Jed Buchwald</i>	135	Myles W. Jackson <i>Ode to Jed</i>
74	Olivier Darrigol <i>Jed Buchwald: A Joyful History of Science</i>	139	Paul Hoyningen-Huene <i>Philosophy, When Possible and Desirable</i>
83	A.J. Kox <i>From Amsterdam to Boston, Pasadena, and Elsewhere</i>	142	Elaheh Kheirandish <i>'Zodiacs of Paris' Revisited: Verses, Places, and Faces</i>
86	Robert Fox <i>More Elusive Forces at Work</i>	154	Hasok Chang <i>"Why So Much About Batteries?"</i>
90	Kathryn Olesko <i>The Creation of Historical Effects</i>	158	Allan Franklin <i>Discrepant Measurements & Replication</i>
100	Daniel J. Kevles <i>About Jed</i>	167	Diane Greco Josefowicz <i>Into the Blue: Through the Years with Jed Buchwald</i>
102	Jane Maienschein <i>Jed Buchwald and the History of Biology</i>	174	John Krige <i>The Political Economy and/of Knowledge</i>
106	Mordechai Feingold <i>Hypotheses non fingo</i>	180	Elizabeth Cavicchi <i>Effects, Devices, and Adventures</i>
115	William R. Newman <i>On Difficult People</i>	189	Chen-Pang Yeang <i>The "Buchwald School"</i>
117	Liba Taub <i>Some Thoughts from the Ancient, and Not So Ancient, Past</i>	195	Karine Chemla <i>Ancient and Medieval Science in Peril</i>
127	Giora Hon <i>The Art of Thinking History in Science</i>	202	Manfred D. Laubichler & Jürgen Renn <i>Daring to Ask the Big Questions</i>
		213	Alberto A. Martínez <i>Experiences and Experiments in Mentorship</i>

219	Marius Stan	
	<i>De magistro</i>	
222	Kristine Haugen	
	<i>The Story of Cadmus</i>	
238	Mark J. Schiefsky	
	<i>De cameris non liquet</i>	
240	Jeremy Schneider	
	<i>The One with the Beard</i>	
242	Jesse H. Ausubel	
	<i>Microphysics and Macrohistory</i>	
251	JED Z. BUCHWALD	LIST OF PUBLICATIONS
259		LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS
263		INDEX

Foreword

THIS COLLECTIVE HOMAGE brings together forty-one scholars hailing from fifteen countries who endeavor to wrestle with the main intellectual and institutional changes in the history and philosophy of science and technology, of mathematics, astronomy, physics, biology, and economics over the past four decades. Three generations of practitioners reflect on the intersection between their own education, careers, and research and what in their estimate are the most significant contributions to be found in the more than 100 articles, books, and reviews that Jed Z. Buchwald has written or co-authored. Many essays contain personal reminiscences, others are quite scholarly, but all are affectionate and humorous.

The volume has been prepared in advance of an international conference entitled “*Looking Back as We Move Forward: The Past, Present, and Future of the History of Science*,” to be held at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena on 25–27 April 2019. A summary of findings and conclusions of this conference will be published in a separate report, but certain arguments already emerge in this volume.

John Heilbron states starkly, and amusingly, the dilemmas of the historian, the overarching theme of this volume: “It is the great fault of our discipline that we do not know what we can safely ignore. We are like Bacon writing about color without knowing whether the key to its character resided in a rainbow or a peacock’s tail.” In reply, both Heilbron and Martinez point out that Buchwald cultivated the notion that, in fact, historians ought to proceed as professional agnostics when

Jesse H. Ausubel

Microphysics and Macrohistory

THE MICROPHYSICS OF BUTTERFLIES CAUSES HISTORY. So does the leadership of great women. Others attribute history-making to the deadly sins catalogued by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century—wrath, greed, pride, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth. Christopher Marlowe wrote unforgettably in 1594 that Helen's face launched a thousand ships. Others say that the cardinal virtues, mainly justice and courage, are the prime movers.

No matter what we choose as our prime human historical mover, we have to understand that strong existential limitations greatly reduce the freedom of strategists, whether farmers, scientists, or generals, whether a family, corporation, or nation. In a century so far glorifying the power of human decisions, let us not forget fate.

Let me begin with a doctrine from American history known as Manifest Destiny. The term, first used in 1845 by a journalist, referred to the inevitably continuing westward territorial expansion of the United States through conquest and purchase—or, I would say, diffusion. Maps which all American students saw on classroom walls showed the major spatial changes, encompassing the transition from colonial settlements with foot paths into the forests to a nation integrated by transcontinental railways, interstate highways, gas pipelines, and electricity grids (figure 1).



Figure 1. National Atlas map (circa 2005) depicting U.S. territorial acquisitions. Source: National Atlas of the United States, Department of the Interior.

In a study of the quantitative history of twenty human empires, Cesare Marchetti and I plotted the areal growth of the USA as analogous to the growth in height of a sunflower (figure 2).¹ The fit is beautiful, over 250 years—through wars, depressions, epidemics, and other disturbances.

So no matter what the results of their agency and individual actions may have been, Thomas Jefferson and Lewis & Clark and Sacajawea and so on were also actors in a play. Most people, whether generals or bandits, like to believe they are decision makers, not the blind executors of a blind but all-powerful fate. Greek mythology helps us to understand the problem with this kind of thinking. Because although all gods reported to Zeus, *tuchē*, or fate—abstract, invisible, and

1. C. Marchetti, J. H. Ausubel. Quantitative Dynamics of Human Empires. Adapted from Marchetti and Ausubel, *International Journal of Anthropology* 27(1-2):1–62, 2012. 2013.

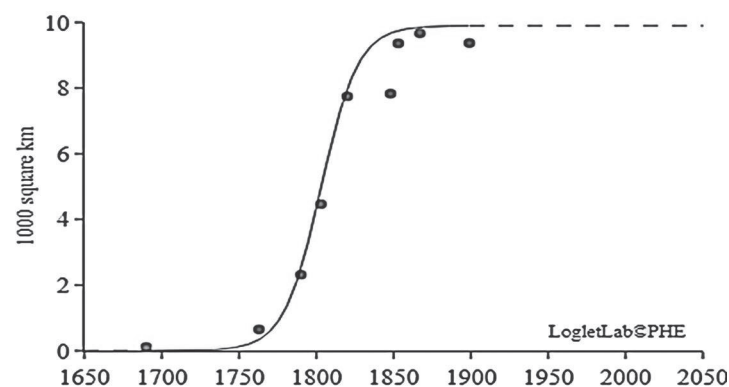


Figure 2. Spatial trajectory of the Roman Empire. Source: Marchetti and Ausubel, 2013, p. 13.

all-pervasive—ran the system, Zeus included. Americans—and scholars everywhere—still have much to learn from the ancient Greeks.

Let me introduce a general concept about how systems grow and evolve. Systems grow by substitution, by mutation and selection. Evolution is a series of replacements. An innovation, a mutation, enters the picture and if it is fitter for the task, it gains a growing and often obliterating share of its ecological niche or market. Often the substitution process follows an s-shaped curve, both in taking over a niche and in subsequently losing it.² A familiar example is recording media, where tapes overtook long-playing records, and in turn CDs replaced tapes, and MP3s and systems of downloading and streaming have now overtaken CDs (figure 3). In addition, the superior competitor often spurs system usage to grow.

2. P. S. Meyer, J. W. Yung, J. H. Ausubel. "A primer on logistic growth and substitution: The mathematics of the Loglet Lab software." *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 61(3): 247–271, 1999.

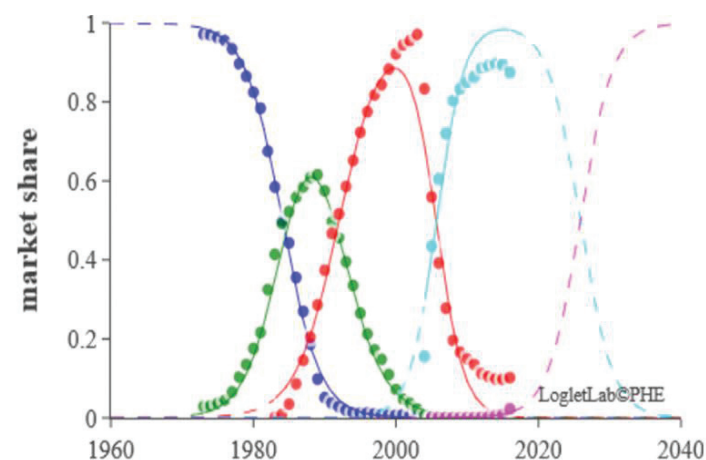


Figure 3. Substitution of recording media in the US market. Media are records or vinyl (dark blue), cassettes or tape (green), CDs (red), downloads (light blue), and paid subscriptions or streaming (purple). Plotted by Perrin Meyer and David Burg. Data available at <https://logletlab.com/?page=index&preload=library.get.1>

Consider a substitution process from the said-to-be free-for-all world of high technology and venture capital. Eight generations of sales of Dynamic Random Access Memory (DRAM) chips increase in Prussianesque order from 1973 to 2000 (figure 4).³

Another—in this case grim but elegant example of substitution—comes from the causes listed on death certificates. Think of causes of death such as heart attacks, cancer, and infections as competitors for corpses, a market that we all seek to shrink. Charts we plotted twenty years ago found an orderly evolution in America during the seemingly disorderly 20th century and thus

3. N. M. Victor, J. H. Ausubel. "DRAMs as a model organism for study for technological evolution." *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 69(3): 243–262, 2002.

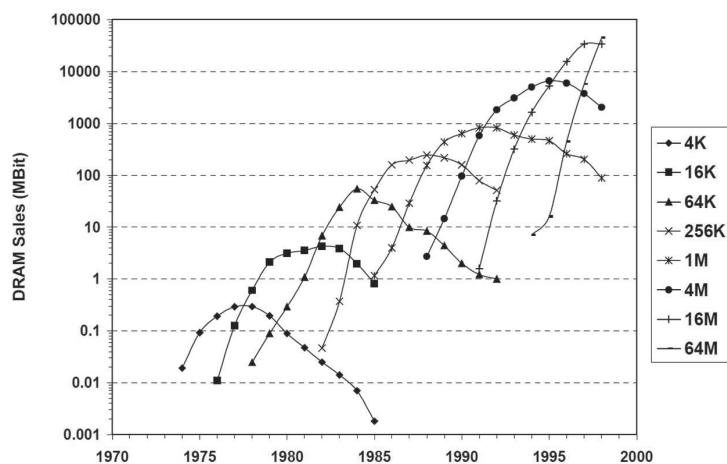


Figure 4. Logistic substitution of sales of Dynamic Random Access Memory chips. Victor and Ausubel 2002.

allowed us to predict that cancer would become the number one cause of death by about 2020 (figure 5).⁴ America is fulfilling this destiny, too. Only the fittest causes of death survive.

These four examples span the Louisiana Purchase, presidents and generals, turnpikes, railroads, and telegraphs; corporations such as RCA and KLH, phonographs, magnetic tape, and optical disks; personalities from Thomas Edison to Steve Jobs; inventions and patents at the IBM Watson Lab and then ferocious competition by Intel and other players in the silicon game, in Taiwan and Japan too; and a great flu pandemic, sewage treatment, vaccines, and hundreds of drugs and millions of surgeries. They embrace countless lawsuits, regulations, mischief, crimes and conspiracies, janitors and billionaires.

4. J. H. Ausubel, P. S. Meyer, I. K. Wernick. "Death and the human environment: The United States in the 20th century." *Technology in Society* 23(2): 131–146, 2001

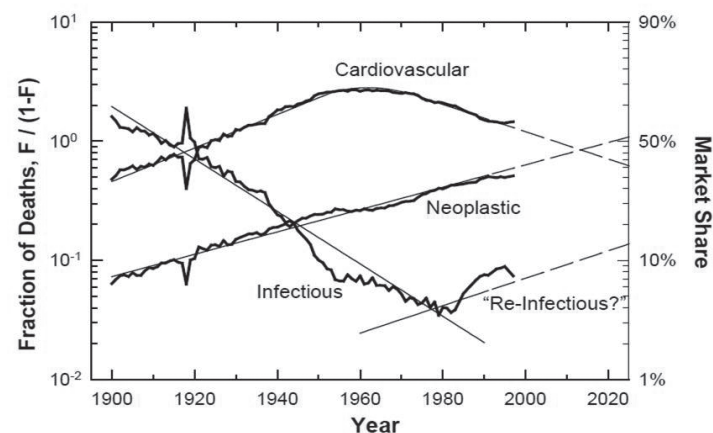


Figure 5. Competition for corpses among major causes of USA deaths during the 20th century, plotted on semi-log scale (normalized to one hundred percent of the market). Dashed lines show a fit with the logistic substitution model, including a forecast. Ausubel, Meyer, and Wernick 2001.

Let me add one more—environmentally crucial—example from primary energy, where human behavior has managed to defy the script for three decades or so after long, faithful repetition. For about 150 years, until about 1990, the substitution of hydrogen for carbon in the energy system, and from wood and hay, to coal, to oil, to gas, and the resulting decarbonization, beautifully described the ongoing energy transition (figure 6).⁵

The explanation for this long-term pattern is simple. The evolution of the system is driven largely by the increasing spatial density of energy consumption at the level of the end user, that is, the energy consumed per square meter, for example, in a city. As high-rise urbanization lifts spatial density of energy consumption, fuels must conform to what the end user will accept, and constraints become more stringent. Rich, tall,

5. J. H. Ausubel. "Where is energy going?" *The Industrial Physicist* 6(1): 16–19, 2000.

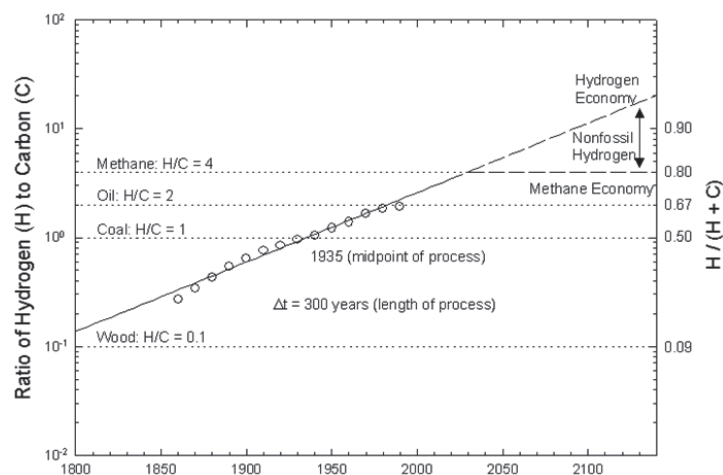


Figure 6. Decarbonization of the global energy system measured as the ratio of hydrogen atoms to hydrogen + carbon atoms in primary energy sources. “Policy” appears to have deferred decarbonization by about a generation. Ausubel 2017.

dense cities accept happily only electricity and natural gas, and, incipiently, hydrogen.

About a generation ago, humans managed to stall decarbonization through a series of incredibly contrived energy policies favoring the evolutionarily unfit. Had the energy system not become so self-conscious, it would probably be far closer to its low-carbon destiny today. In the energy system, reflexivity has mobilized interest groups whose interactions have favored the *status quo*. But finally, after many rationalizations, clean supply systems that benefit from economies of scale will produce the lion’s share of the electricity and gases we will need. If you might dismiss scale, think of Facebook, Amazon, and Google, or Samsung and Alibaba. In a society of flash trading and flash mobs, perfect power—that is, ultra-reliable electricity—also wins in the Darwinian game.

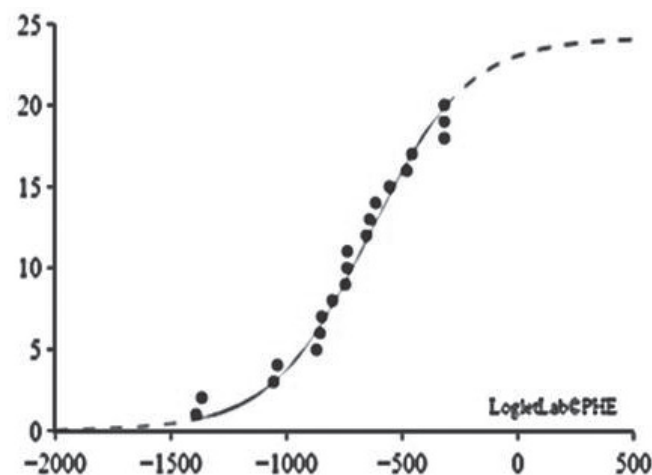


Figure 7. The writing of the Hebrew Bible charted as logistic growth process by the estimated birth dates of the authors. The process took 906 years to go from 10% to 90% completion, should have involved about 24 authors if fully realized, and reached its midpoint about 667 before the Christian era. Wernick 2016.

In the case of the USA, the script for energy supply is simply to favor natural gas (with some carbon capture and sequestration), nuclear, and hydrogen.⁶ Although few have noticed, USA hydrogen production is climbing nicely. And fuel cells, engines on hydrogen, will greatly increase their market, as wise automakers understand. On the demand side, we naturally seek to raise the rates of efficiency gain, to shrink usage, to decouple energy from GDP and carbon from BTU. A key is to focus on systems and practices with big upsides, such as the share economy which can lift capital utilization, and magnetically levitated trains and other vehicles which carry

6. J. H. Ausubel. “Density: Key to Fake and True News About Energy and Environment.” Presented at a meeting of the American Association of Petroleum Geologists, *Next 100 Years of Global Energy Use: Resources, Impacts and Economics*, Houston Convention Center, 4 April 2017. Published in AAPG’s *Search and Discovery*, as contribution #70272, 28 June 2017.

neither engine nor fuel and thus weigh far less per kilo of passenger than traditional cars, trains, and planes. We can lessen the jack rabbit excursions around these ultimately inevitable trends often proposed and organized by politicians and stakeholders.

Historians traditionally view their subject as unfolding in an essentially random way, contingent upon the violent, retributive whims of a citizenry and the political machinations of a handful of influential individuals. But history is more accurately seen through a more deterministic lens in which it obeys its own internal logic, unbeknownst to those staffing the think-tanks or Sandinistas.

We feel a freedom of decision inside ourselves whose legitimacy economists and politicians assume as sacred dogma, in the face of the obvious determinism of many global or national outcomes such as Manifest Destiny. The situation fits the famous analogy between the somewhat free and unobservable behavior of single molecules and the beautifully clean relationship of pressure and volume in a gas on a macroscopic scale. The determinism and feeling of liberty may not be contradictory. For example, the system requires the kamikaze behavior of entrepreneurs to evolve. But in the end we all feel the breath of fate. The writing of the Bible is a beautiful S-curve, accomplished by 24 authors over about 900 years (figure 7).⁷

Most of history, including the history of science and technology, is preprogrammed. Don't forget the system. It won't forget you.

Acknowledgements: Thanks to David Burg, Cesare Marchetti, Perrin Meyer, Nadejda Victor, and Iddo Wernick.

7. I. K. Wernick. "Jews in Time and Space." *International Journal of Anthropology* 31(1-2): 93–109, 2016.

Jed Z. Buchwald

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- 1977b "Ottaviano Fabrizio Mossotti." *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* 9: 547–549, ed. C. C. Gillispie et al. (New York).
- 1977c "Leopoldo Nobili." *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* 10: 134–136, ed. C. C. Gillispie et al. (New York).
- 1977d "Sir William Thomson (Lord Kelvin)." *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* 13: 374–88, ed. C. C. Gillispie et al. (New York).
- 1977e "Emilio Villari." *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* 14: 32–33, ed. C. C. Gillispie et al. (New York).
- 1977f "William Thomson and the Mathematization of Faraday's Electrostatics." *Historical Studies in the Physical Sciences* 8: 101–136.
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- 1979b "The Hall Effect and Maxwellian Electrodynamics in the 1880s: The Discovery of a New Electric Field." *Centaurus* 23: 51–99.
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- 1980b "Optics and the Theory of the Punctiform Ether." *Archive for History of Exact Sciences* 21: 245–278.