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Laudatio: Carl Djerassi - Lives in a Lifetime

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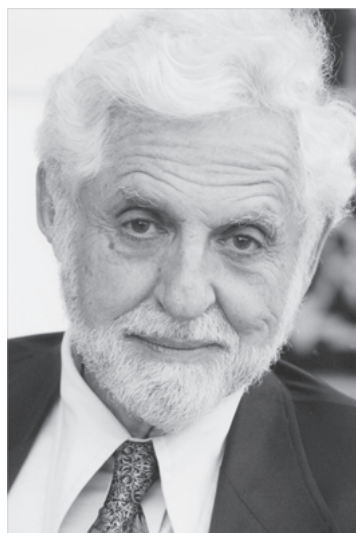
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Laudatio: Carl Djerassi – Lives in a Lifetime

B. Orland

Berlin on a dark, cold and wet November evening – the German Museum of Technology has invited to a discussion on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of oral contraceptives. The controversy appeared to be clear: On the one side, a historian of science and technology (the author of this article), and on the other side, famous chemist and author Carl Djerassi, in the role of the progressive, affirmative, and liberal scientist with respect to reproductive control. Very soon, audience and performers realize that there will not be even the slightest dispute. Instead, the public (including myself) had the pleasure of listening to a multi-dimensional conversation with many instructive moments. This we owed to Carl Djerassi, whose life, thinking and wisdom is free of clichés.



Carl Djerassi

During the discussion, we touched on several issues in the history of the oral contraceptives, Djerassi's contribution to this story, the social and political consequences of the pill, and the technological developments in reproductive medicine since then. Slipping between past, present and future was part of the agenda. Yet Djerassi never simply praises the benefits of fertility control. What makes him authentic is the result of constant reflection of his own subjective perspective. In dialogue he is a partner with a great deal of knowledge about rules of discourses, probably because he was forced by a series of reversals in his life to take a fresh look at things intellectually. During his lifetime Djerassi has experienced at least three professional breaks, and still today he lives a very colourful life. Hence, his intriguing style combined with vast knowledge always exceeds all expectations.

While at one moment he is proud and self-satisfied about his scientific work 50 years ago, in the next he puzzles with the commercial mentality in today's world of reproduction, or the new styles of parenthood. At one time, he sums up the race to detect and design human hormones as a fascinating chapter of science progress, but then talks about the crude rules of having a scientific career, about power, money, and competition. Djerassi switches from past memories to future scenarios, where people will possibly no longer struggle with contraception but plan their reproductive career when they are young. On all points, he gives his audience something in science and society to think about.

The reward for me was being together that evening with one of the busiest and diverse writers both in biochemistry, and "science in fiction", the literary genre he actually invented. The fascinating story of his life has a lot of facets, and there is much more to tell than can be contained in a short laudatio. Here I can

only draw biographical sketches of some of its many aspects and prolific productivity. Encouraging readers to learn more of Djerassi, I recommend reading one of Djerassi's autobiographies – up to now he has written 3 [1–3]!

Born in 1923 into a Jewish family in Vienna, young Djerassi experienced his first biographical break when his family was forced to emigrate to United States in 1938. At a great speed, he completed his education. The 19-year-old refugee graduated from Kenyon College in Ohio and got his PhD at the University of Wisconsin only three years later, in 1945. Already his PhD thesis dealt with the chemistry of sex hormones – the number one topic of his early professional life. After joining Syntex, a pharmaceutical company based

in Mexico City, in 1949 he concentrated on the identification and manufacturing of hormones and other therapeutic steroids. On October 15, 1951 under Djerassi's direction, a team of Syntex chemists was the first to synthesize an orally active progestin. With the immediate publication of the newly found compound, Djerassi would become one of a handful people whose formulation of the synthetic progestogen Norethisterone marked the key step toward the first oral contraceptive pill.

This invention was not only the first but the decisive ticket to fame, as Djerassi himself revealed by entitling his autobiography "The Pill, Pygmy Chimps, and Degas' Horse". The first time I read this, I found it quite eccentric. Yet, my early impressions disappeared. Now I know it was just a rhetorical attempt to address the division of labour within the community of people working on oral contraceptives. In developing drugs there are many parents, Djerassi explains. The progression is always from chemistry to biology to medicine.

Djerassi's success in industrial research led already in 1952 to a first professorship at age 29 at Wayne State University in Detroit. From here he moved in 1959 to a full professorship in chemistry at Stanford, where he stayed until his retirement in 2002 (including a leave of absence in Mexico as Vice President of research at Syntex – his second stint there). Well recognized for hundreds of articles, books, and lectures in different fields of synthetic organic chemistry, the industrial chemist mutated more and more into an academic teacher. Yet his activities as teacher and mentor did not put him off research. The 1950s and 1960s were the "Golden Age" of steroid chemistry, numerous new compounds from nature were detected. Another major field of interest in Djerassi's academic career were the physical methods allowing an easier examination of the molecular structure of organic material – like mass spectrometry, optical

rotatory dispersion, and artificial intelligence techniques. Twenty four honorary doctorates and numerous awards speak for themselves.

But Djerassi never reduced himself to academic research. The pharmaceutical industry always played an important role in his life. Even after starting his career as university professor, he worked in both areas. Carefully he tried not to overlap both duties, for instance not to exploit graduate students and post-docs for his industrial research. However, he convinced Syntex to move parts of its research to Stanford Industrial Park. As a result, the university teacher of the morning could work as industrialist in the afternoon. Djerassi grew into the role of a contraceptive entrepreneur, concerned among others with patents, government funding for industrial research, and investment prospects of pharmaceutical companies.

During the 1970s, he was one of the few researchers in contraceptive chemistry discussing the social and political consequences of birth control [4]. Especially in the early years of introducing the pill to market, many religious people, gynecologists, lawyers, politicians etc. had strong opinions about oral contraceptives. On the one hand, Djerassi became a tireless promoter of the birth-control pill. Well aware that he and his fellow colleagues had deeply influenced the lives of millions of women, on the other hand, he did not see all the outcomes completely positively. For instance, he suggested (without success) the development of a “pill for men” in order to get more contraceptive alternatives for both females and males. By and by the “unredeemed chemist” (Carl Djerassi), involved solely in the technical aspects of reproductive research, broadened his world perspective and teaching. At last, the pill made him a “softer chemist”, one who felt more and more uncomfortable about the effects of science in society. But not only public policy affected the further course of life.

Until the end of the 1970s everything proceeded in its proper course. In 1978, however, a terrible incident shook Djerassi's life, when his daughter, a 28-year-old artist, committed suicide. A few years later, another traumatic event, a diagnosis of colon cancer, compelled Djerassi “to a period of introspection”. It caused him to write his first 2 autobiographies: one almost entirely scientific dedicated to a chemical audience, and the other written for a general, non-scientific audience. To write 2 instead of 1 volume is typical of Djerassi's style of self-reflection. From the very beginning of his third career as a writer, Djerassi was very keen about the personal aspects of writing history. The vast majority of scientists reflecting their lives would not care about it, but Djerassi wrote, “*Autobiography is a special genre of fiction because of its heavy component of automythology*” [5]. When the chemist and meanwhile professor emeritus slipped in the next professional costume, he did not do this naively. Starting with autobiographical writing, he step by step experimented with different styles of literary writing in order to explore the many identities of a scientist. Because autobiographies are never “true stories” of a personal life but a literary genre, it was only a short step to write completely fictional stories as another way of reflecting one's own experiences. Writing dialogues instead of monologues, preferring storytelling to scientific prose or cultural constructions instead of “historical truth” became a new task in life. Djerassi knows

about the fictional character of facts. Nevertheless, his first novel “Cantor's Dilemma” provided a careful and honest analysis of the ethics, politics, and practise of academic research, starring a professor and his team in everyday conflicts.

The success was overwhelming, and “Cantor's Dilemma” was not the only opus of Djerassi the writer. “Science in fiction” was born, a couple of years later the “science in theatre” followed. Djerassi as playwright, novelist and dramatist was as triumphant as the chemist. And yet he never lost being grounded, although there were plenty of opportunities to become self-satisfied and pleased with himself. Still today, he is the workaholic of his early career, ever improving his skills to become a better writer. His books demonstrate this attempt to find a stimulating balance of fact and fiction. They are the work of someone, who knows the business of science and industry as well as the craft of writing plays. The many tensions between gaining knowledge and the credit system of the academia, which he experienced during his life as a chemist, may explain why he still wants to succeed.

Moreover, there is a pedagogical claim whose main focus has shifted from students to the general public. I have already mentioned Djerassi's long-standing interest in the political effects of technological family planning, which he has treated with the same scientific ethos as chemistry. No doubt one of the most important scientific virtues, Djerassi believes in is “the disinterested pursuit of truth” as he calls it [6]. But the lessons one learns from politics are quite different. The chemist knows about the vicissitudes of life and the contingency of history. Djerassi modelled the ambiguities of scientific and technological development into a specific style of realistic drama. In some of his latest science-in-theatre-plays he designed different scenarios of assisted reproduction that confront the public with the taboos and inconsistencies of sex in an age of technological reproduction [7]. Djerassi does not want to act as a moralist and even less to become a late bioethicist. For Djerassi the technological options of the reproductive medicine are nothing more than “reality”, even if most people today do not use them. To make technologically determined decisions has long become part of our sexual life and family planning affairs, he argues. To him, it is not just a statistically proven truth that several million humans worldwide were born completely without sexual intercourse, and not all of these children have infertile parents. He goes further, thinking about the new mentality and morality that have entered the world with IVF, ICSI and PID. If abortion is becoming more and more dispensable, reproductive options are changing dramatically. Who is infertile might have no options. But nowadays a woman can get a child anyway practically in the single attempt.

The impending separation of sex and fertilisation is one of the most important problems for Djerassi today. The results of his struggle with this issue can be studied in some of his plays. Here, the many ways to get a child are kept in perspective, prosaic and tangible. Djerassi is persuaded that commercialized technological reproduction will become generally accepted, particularly with women in the western world. The only way a writer can hope to convey a message on this development of reproduction (if there is one) is to hold a mirror up to society. Djerassi once described his motives to write science-in-fiction

“to smuggle scientific facts into the consciousness of a scientifically illiterate public”. Yet his dramas can also be read vice versa as messages to politically disinterested insiders of science and medicine. Anyway, these are the lessons of an “intellectual polygamist” – Djerassi’s perfect label to describe the man who is open minded, reflective and well informed enough to do this job [8].

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