Pushing the pill

Walter Gratzer

Génération Pilule. By Étienne-Émile Baulieu. Editions Odile Jacob (Paris): 1990. Pp.314. FF130.

PHILLIP Larkin put it like this:

*Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(Which was rather late for me) —
Between the end of the Chatterley ban
And the Beatles' first LP*

But in truth liberation came with the Pill, which, in Étienne Baulieu's words, dissociated the act of love from procreation and became at once part of the currency of dinner-table conversation, just like condoms 20 years later. It was rumoured that the august Catholic weekly, *The Tablet*, uneasy at the malign interpretation that might be placed on its name, would soon change its masthead and wags suggested that a fitting alternative would be *The Safe Periodical*.

Étienne Baulieu had already made his mark in endocrinology when the pill came to fruition, and in fact its true begetter, Gregory Pincus, had taken a kindly interest in the young man's career and seen to it that he received recognition and support for his research. France, to be sure, did not afford the ideal climate for work in this area, for the Law of 1920, which forbade the use of contraception, remained in force until 1966. Baulieu played his part in bringing about the repeal of this preposterous anachronism as one of a committee of 13 'sages', set up by the Minister of Health to report on the matter. Yet the fact remained, as Baulieu records, that neither academic science nor the pharmaceutical industry were willing to court social and political opprobrium by engaging in research on contraception; and so Roussel-Uclaf, a company long noted for its excellence in steroid research, hung back and left the market to Schering and Organon.

As a consultant to Roussel, Baulieu took much of the credit for changing the management's posture. INSERM had set him up with a research unit in a medical school and his work there on the progesterone receptor as a target for biochemical intervention in the development of pregnancy led eventually to the discovery of the now celebrated progesterone analogue, RU 486 — short for Roussel-Uclaf's compound 38486; their chemists, as Baulieu observes, had not been idle. RU 486 bound with high avidity to the uterine progesterone receptors, but unlike other analogues did not set in train the events associated with the binding of the hormone itself. This was a slice of luck, which Baulieu and his colleagues knew well how to exploit. Clinical trials followed with remarkable despatch, and eventually, when combined with the administration of a prostaglandin to provoke contractions, RU 486

gave a 95 per cent tally of success in the expulsion of early embryos. Patients and doctors, not to mention Baulieu and Indira Gandhi, were delighted.

Uproar followed. The Cardinal Archbishop of Paris declared that life began at conception, no matter, as Baulieu points out, that no priest ever prayed for the souls of the pre-embryos that are spontaneously eliminated with high frequency, often unnoticed. In a television debate Baulieu was unfavourably compared to Hitler and Stalin by a fellow-professor, the Right-to-Lifers marched in Washington, and Roussel-Uclaf and their masters, Hoechst, took fright and revoked the plans to market their compound. It took a threat from the French government (which has a share in Roussel), that they would reallocate the patent, to bring them to heel. The struggle continues, but RU 486 now gives the brightest hope for containing the population explosions in the East and saving the lives of untold numbers of women, who die each year from botched abortions.

Étienne Baulieu has written an engrossing book. His account of how RU 486 came to be discovered and marketed is complemented by a long appendix — the *Cahier Scientifique* — which summarizes the physiology and biochemistry of the reproductive cycle with exemplary clarity.

Génération Pilule is besides a personal memoir of Baulieu's life and career. His father, a professor of medicine at Strasbourg, had been drafted into the German

army in the First World War and decorated with the Iron Cross; but, like most Strasbourg-bourgeois, he was absolute for France and found an ingenious way of serving his country: he asked the German officers among his patients to record for him at regular intervals after their discharge from hospital — for he was a kidney specialist — the volume of urine that they were producing. The reports came in from the front and allowed him to infer the whereabouts of the units to which his patients belonged. He was eventually found out and forced to run for it, but he lived to receive the *Croix de Guerre* as a reward for his patriotism.

Étienne Baulieu, we learn, is a *nom de guerre*, for in 1942 its young bearer joined a Communist youth group, allied to the Resistance, and took false papers. Later he was assimilated into the army; demobilized, he entered medical school, and resolved to keep the name by which his friends knew him. Moreover, he was conscious that even in the dawn of postwar renewal he stood a better chance of advancement in French professional circles as Étienne Baulieu than Émile Blum.

Baulieu has some telling anecdotes of his early career, of his friends and his patrons, who included the blind biochemist, Max-Fernand Jayle, his enemies (no negligible number, by his own account) and the Byzantine turmoils of French science. Self-effacement is not his style: his relish for a good punch-up, his appetite for competition and for publicity, his enthusiasm for science and the forthright pleasure that he takes in his successes make a striking contrast to the polite reticence of many recent Anglo-Saxon memoirs of the scientific life. □

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Early Egyptology — scientific examination of a mummy at Manchester University in 1908. From *Mummies, Myth and Magic* by Christine El Mahdy (Thames and Hudson) £8.95.