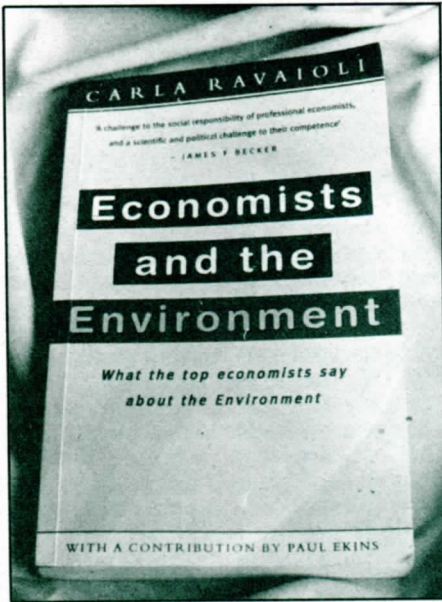


# BOOK REVIEWS

## **Economists and the Environment** **What the top economist say about the Environment**

**reviewed by Susan Y. Morales**

by Carla Ravaoli  
Zed Books Ltd.  
7 Cynthia Street, London NI 9JF, U.K. and 165 First Avenue  
Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey 07716 USA, 1995



*Economists and the Environment* is a crisp compilation of economists' views on the environment. The book is on the main compilation of interviews with leading economists in the world today. Carla Ravaoli, a feminist and former Italian senator interviewed the likes of mainstream economists Samuelson and Friedman and staunch environmental economist Georgescu-Roegen. The transcripts of the interviews were both amusing and revealing in seeing the unease with which most 'big-shot' economists relate to the environmental issue.

The book's format allows the reader to imagine sitting in the middle of a roundtable discussion with all of these economists whom one have known only through the vast books and articles which they have written. The style of exposition which simulated a dialogue among the economists effectively enjoined the reader to this rich exchange of ideas.

A caveat, however, is that it started out from a certain antagonism against the economists and this somehow got in the way of encouraging a bond between the economists and the environmentalists. In this regard, mainstream economic doctrines have always been attacked by those in alternative fields of studies such as by the environmentalists. When asked to comment about "consumerism", for example, and its subsequent contrary effects on the environment, most of the economists tended to start off from a premise that government interventionist policies aimed at curtailing consumption impinge on economic freedom which in turn induces more economic distortions. When asserting this position, economists sound like the lovers of the obscure and the abstract which they are often accused of.

Nevertheless, Carla Ravaoli cautions in her concluding chapter against outrightly assuming that economists are completely indifferent to environmental concerns. Much of the impression of "indifference" in the part of economists is perpetuated by their fetish for neo-classical economic models and the silence of grand mainstream theories and economic methodologies to social realities. Even as such, theorizing on environmental economics has flourished over the years, though most hypothesis may be on the "fringe" - the evolution of new methods and theories and the propagation of new economics will take time. Still, the beginnings that have been undertaken are enough to catalyze the dissemination and distillation of new ideas towards environmental enlightenment. The second part of the book, written by Mr. Paul Ekins is a good survey of theories on resource and environmental economics.

The discussions in *Economists and Environmentalists* cover a wide field of issues. First of all the environmentalists premised their position on the observation that environmental degradation has been increasing exponentially. This is so because, according to them, costs to the environment are not imputed into the prices of goods. The externalities produced by either consumption and production activities are unvaluated in an economy. Thus, if a person invests in a logging firm, the only costs included in its computation is the labor and equipment being used.

But, the continued denudation of forests has wide and far reaching consequences which no single person takes responsibility for. According to some economists, a way to put a handle on this situation is through government intervention regulations and policies. However they also recognize that leaving the logging industry alone to the market would mean the rapid depletion of trees and the subsequent destruction of the ecosystem surrounding it. Hence, the type and extent of government intervention is a point of contention. Some economists who are believers of the free-market argue that intervention should be minimal. In fact, an extreme position would be that, as long as a system of property rights are in place, then the resulting level of environmental degradation is optimal. This level is what the people have chosen. On another level, to be able to prevent pollution in production, government support to training and technological innovations should be funded. (continued next page)

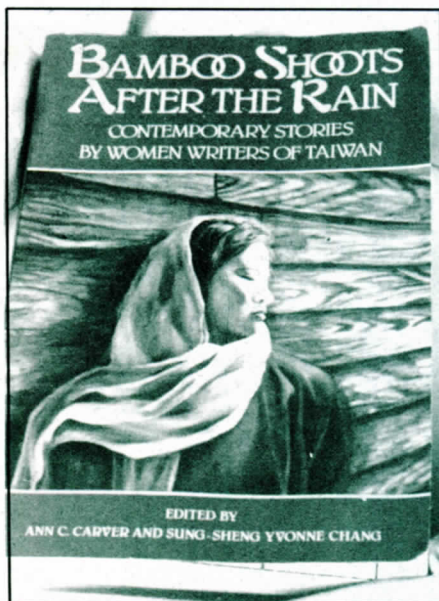
# BOOK REVIEWS

Two important issues raised in the discussions were sustainable development and "consumerism". Sustaining development, according to the environmentalists, would mean accepting that the world is finite and thus, development should consider this constraint. Merely depending on national income as a measure of economic well-being is myopic. The fixation with economic growth without looking into the core of an economy's resource base is a prescription for disaster. While production growth should reach infinity, resources are finite and therein lies the contradiction.

On the other hand, the economists argued that the exploitation of natural resources is imperative for economic growth. One should not prevent the growth of incomes. This same growth-centered development paradigms complements the rising "consumerism", an attitude promoted in the present world economic order. In this regard, the views of environmentalists and economists regarding the role of advertisements also differ from each other. To many of the economists, advertisements only influence consumers in as much as they are informed of the possible. To the environmentalists, advertisements imbibe a quality of life and therefore, heightens the sale of products through a conscious creation of demand for these products.

To weave these concerns raised in the Economists and Environmentalists with the basic environmental problems that confront Third World Countries is necessary. As the breadth of proposals which have been forwarded by the world's premiere economists provide compelling insight, the dynamics of the environmental problem in Third World Countries needs to be considered. Tax policies on pollution is widely recommended. When applying this to the Third World Situation, the effect becomes distraught and taxes on pollution may only imply more costs to the poor. On the other hand, for government to properly regulate polluting activities and to invest in technological advance towards less environmental hazards would mean that government should be willing to channel more of its budget for environmental protection. With basically cash strapped governments the environment is left to be exploited. Moreover, the fact is that developed countries relegate polluting activities to developing countries.

The roundtable discussions and interviews conducted by Clara Ravaioli with premier economists and environmentalists has bridged the large gap between mainstream economic theorizing and environmentalism. On this note, Economists on the Environment should be treated as an enlightening introduction towards further reflections.▲



## **Bamboo Shoots After the Rain** **Contemporary Stories by Women Writers of Taiwan**

**reviewed by Tess Raposas**

edited by Ann C. Carver and Sung-Sheng Yvonne Chang  
The Feminist Press at the City University of New  
York, 311 East 94 Street, New York, N.Y. 10128 1990

"*Bamboo Shoots After the Rain*" reflects much of the post war cultural-evolution of Taiwan. Edited by Ann C. Carver and Sung-Sheng Yvonne Chang, the title suggests birth, and new life. Its depiction of the travails, aspirations and persuasions of Chinese women from Taiwan is a welcome introduction to their everyday situation and literary life.

The collection also managed to provide the reader a strong sense of history by covering the works of three generations of women writers—the first generation of the 1950s - 60s, middle generation of the 1960s, and the younger generation of the 1970s,—and in the process, highlighting the value systems in each. Carver's

essay, "Can One Read Cross-Culturally?" and Chang's critical introduction of the works are by themselves illuminating. Chang provided the background by which these works were produced but also outlined the specificities of each generation. Also useful are the writers' personal introductions via the biographical headnotes in each of the works.

The writings of the older generation who are described as "largely privatistic, non-subversive and uses idyllic lyricism and sentimental structure of feeling" comprise descriptive short stories portraying the