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Australian Attitudes to China's Global Role —The Politics of Changing Expectations

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Australian attitudes to China's international behaviour and global role—both those publicly expressed by politicians and those present in the media—have been through three main stages. The first stage, lasting roughly until Australia and China established diplomatic relations in 1973, was of China as the Cold War enemy. Since then, any idea of China as an external aggressor has disappeared.

The second stage lasted from roughly the 1970s until early this century. There are many themes throughout this period—China as commercial opportunity, China as culturally fascinating, China as a transgressor of human rights. But underlying the various themes was that China was still seen as an emerging, developing country.

Over the last decade, a third and distinct stage has begun. China is now seen as a superpower. This brings different and higher expectations. On the one hand, the emphasis on commercial opportunities becomes even greater. But on the other China is now expected to play more of a global role. Participation is no longer enough, now China is looked to for leadership—in relation to trade negotiations, international economic management, global environmental politics and responses to humanitarian crises in failed states.

The changed Australian expectations to China's global role were manifest in two recent political controversies. The first can be seen in Australian media and political responses to the Copenhagen Summit on Climate Change. The second was evidenced in an intense controversy that broke out following the publication of a leading analyst's account of the changing role of China and America in Australian foreign policy.

1. Introduction

Every general is perfectly ready to fight the last war. Human history is replete with cases of success creating new problems, of what worked in one period no longer sufficing to meet the next challenge. Although evolutionary theories in the social sciences are out of fashion, and for good reason, I think that they offer some insight into the contemporary international system which is so marked by dynamism and complexity. In particular, a theory of punctuated equilibrium can help illuminate how political demands

and expectations change. In this paper I distinguish three phases in Australian attitudes towards China, and concentrate especially on the changes in expectations in recent times.

2. Theories of Evolution

Almost as soon as Charles Darwin's theory of evolution became public, people sought to apply it to societies. The results were almost universally unhappy. Social Darwinism became widespread in late Victorian times, and its pernicious and misleading views have made thinking about socio-political developments in evolutionary terms problematic ever since.

From its beginnings it was more an ideology than an empirically based social theory.

Survival of the fittest—a phrase invented not by Darwin, but by the sociologist Herbert Spenser—quickly became assimilated into the racist thinking of the day, and was used to justify white supremacy and the colonial role of European powers. Even when racial thinking was not involved it was used to justify existing hierarchies as the natural order of things. Darwin's theory of evolution is about species rather than individuals (although a few species do have “alpha males”), but social Darwinists used it to explain why some individuals succeeded in society rather than others.

So it was invariably used as a conservative ideology justifying the status quo. Perhaps even more distasteful than its justification of why some were on top was the way it was used as an anti-welfare ideology. The struggle for existence was used to justify social policies which showed no sympathy for the weak and struggling. At the most extreme it was seen as better to let the weak die out in order to make the whole stronger. At its worst, such social Darwinism explained the social in biological terms, and its proponents recommended eugenics programs.

The early social Darwinists borrowed from Darwin's theory of evolution in a selective and misleading way. They fostered a view of social life based upon conflict and competition rather than cooperation and mutual advancement. They also tended to have much too apocalyptic a view of the nature of evolution. In nature, extinctions occurred only rarely, and for long periods, there was rough equilibrium and life was marked by stability rather than upheaval.

In order to proceed then, we must dispose of some misleading views of evolution.

- Cooperation is at least as important in evolutionary terms as conflict.
- Evolution is not about intrinsic qualities but about the adaptation of organisms to their environment. Thus if one animal / group is better suited to one environment it does not follow that they will be better suited to another environment.
- Evolution is not teleological. It is not a theory of ever-improving progress towards some ideal. Rather it should be viewed as evolution from rather than evolution to. It is a series of adaptations. Those which are able to survive and be sustainable will thrive, even though by various other criteria others may be better or worse.

The dynamism of socio-political change has helped to spur interest again in evolutionary theories. A recent book by Eric Beinhockerⁱ argues for the importance of seeing the economy in evolutionary terms, adopting the term complexity economics. Conventional economics only sees the economy moving from one point of equilibrium to another point of equilibrium. It does not capture the dynamism of a system where “over 97 percent of humanity's wealth was created in just the last 0.01 percent of our history”; where in material terms, “the Englishman of 1750 was closer to Caesar's legionnaires than to his own great-grand-children.”ⁱⁱ Beinhocker views the economy as a highly dynamic, constantly evolving system, akin to the brain, the internet or an ecosystem.

A later development of evolutionary theory by Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould termed punctuated equilibriumⁱⁱⁱ is particularly useful for purposes of social explanation, because history contains both continuity and discontinuity. This is a model based upon the discontinuous pace of change. For long periods there can be stability or rough equilibrium, but this is interspersed with periods of rapid change.

The punctuated equilibrium model also points to the fact that what works and is adaptive at one point may be dysfunctional or impossible after a pivotal change has occurred.

Pivotal moments of change can be brought on by external changes in the environment, sometimes involving a crisis. Equally they can be brought on by changes from inside the systems. It is seen most easily in the economic sphere, where there is not stasis or equilibrium, but rather each individual company is seeking to improve its products and profits, is seeking to move into new markets, and can find itself on either the right or wrong side of technological change. Sometimes the diffusion of a good or a behaviour through a population changes the scale in a way that has its own consequences. A road system that is sufficient when five percent of the population own cars is not sufficient when 30 percent of the population do. Quantitative change, when occurring on a sufficient scale, brings on qualitative change.

The history of Western democracies in the long period of prosperity since the end of World War II can be interpreted as success bringing new problems. The greater enrichment of the population meant that they could pursue consumption habits which in the past had been too expensive or scarce. So problems of malnutrition have given way to issues of obesity. Tobacco smoking became widespread but then the disastrous health impacts became more obvious. Car ownership spread through the whole society, but the road toll soared, before many policy initiatives reduced it again.

The punctuated equilibrium model captures the non-linearity of social progress. This, emphatically, is not an argument that progress does not occur, but rather an argument against the end of history. New challenges keep coming.

This model can illuminate how Australian-Chinese relations have passed through three broad phases since 1949, and each was accompanied by different perceptions, expectations and operating assumptions. In particular my argument is that now in the third phase, there are higher and different expectations of China than existed in the second.

3. The Three Phases of Australian Attitudes to China

After 1949, the first phase of Australian relations with China was as a Cold War enemy. The 23 years of this phase contained several variations, but the constants were more basic. This involved seeing a monolithic Sino-Soviet bloc, based upon international communist aggression. It necessitated a very close alliance with the United States as the only means of stopping communist advances and guaranteeing Australian security.

Internationally the most famous event of 1972 was President Nixon's visit to China, but in Australia, Gough Whitlam's Labor Party won the election, the first change of government since 1949. One of his first acts was to establish diplomatic relations with China, and this began the second stage of Australian-Chinese relations. Even when just three years later, at the end of 1975, the conservative government of Malcolm Fraser took over, the alliance with China remained. Although the Cold War was at the heart of Fraser's foreign policy, now the Sino-Soviet split meant that Australia did not view China as the enemy.

Throughout this second phase, there was still a very strong domestic anti-communist constituency, and criticisms continued of China's authoritarian rule and attitudes to human rights. However the key consideration was the welcoming of China's entry into the international community, and its greater friendliness to Western countries. Certainly in contrast to the earlier period, it was a time when there was a more rounded appreciation of Chinese culture,^{iv} of Chinese achievements and outlooks, and of the economic opportunities China offered.

In my view, we have now entered a third phase. China's participation in the international community is now taken for granted, but the key difference is that China is viewed not just as a developing country, but as a superpower. No definite event began this phase, but it happened some time in the last decade.

As the theory of punctuated equilibrium suggests, in this new stage some of the old operating assumptions do not suffice. Perceived flaws in Chinese behaviour, both domestic and international, now loom larger, because different standards are applied.

4. Trends in Australian Public Opinion

Australian public opinion polls reflect the changing nature of the relationship. In the first period, there was a majority of people believing that there was an external threat to Australia's security, and the greatest single proportion of these believed that the threat came from China.^v The sense of threat reached its peak in 1966—the year of Australia's "Vietnam election", when the conservative coalition under Harold Holt won their largest ever victory. By the time of the change of government to Labor in 1972, after much disillusion with the Vietnam War, the sense of threat had subsided substantially.

From the 1980s there was less sense of a threat from anywhere despite US- Soviet tensions still being very high. Over many years, the polling organisation Roy Morgan Research has asked the same question: "In your opinion are there any countries which are a threat to Australia's security? If Yes, which countries?" The last time this was asked, in 2009, 39 percent said there was no threat, and another six percent couldn't say. The three most commonly named threatening countries were Indonesia (20%), Iraq (12%) and Afghanistan (10%). China ranked fourth at eight percent, just ahead of five other countries on six or seven percent. This is around the same level as it has been since the early 1980s, and shows the sense of any direct threat to Australia from China has been reduced to an irrelevant rump. A similar run of questions taken in conjunction with the Australian Electoral Studies show a majority do not think China is likely to become a security threat to Australia. This peaked in 2004 at 61% saying it is not very likely, down slightly to 54% in 2007.^{vi}

Nevertheless when more penetrating polling is done, for example by the Lowy Institute,^{vii} a discernible cooling towards China is apparent. On the one hand, three quarters (73%) of Australians think that China's growth has been good for Australia (up by ten points in two years), which reflects the recognition of how important the Chinese market is for Australian exports. (The new phase in the relationship is evidenced by the much greater attention to China. A search of the four quality daily newspapers in Australia found 133 articles with references to China's economy in 1990; 774 in 2000; but over 1600 in the first half of 2010 alone.^{viii})

On the other hand, attitudes to Chinese investment in Australia became less favourable in the last year. If we compare those thinking that Australia was allowing too much Chinese foreign investment compared with those thinking it was about the right amount or too little, then the split in 2009 was an almost even 50-45, but by 2010 it had increased to a 57-37 split against. At the same time, the percentage of those who believed that China's aim is to dominate Asia rose from 60 to 69 percent. On a question which measures the "warmth" of feelings towards other countries, between 2007 and 2009, Australians felt less warm towards China, down from a mean of 61 to 54.

It would be wrong to exaggerate the solidity of such changes. Public opinion in some respects is very malleable, influenced by whatever events have been in the news in a recent period. For example in 2009, there was a series of controversies—the problems between Rio Tinto and Chinalco. Nevertheless what has been a longterm movement towards more positive public attitudes to China appears to have halted, and may have declined somewhat.

5. Current Controversies

Because of the greater intensity of the relationship, and its more multi- dimensional character, it is likely that there will be more rather than fewer disputes between Australia and China. It is unlikely that any of these will develop sufficiently to threaten the relationship as a whole, however.

The key factor is that while a developing country can pursue its nationalist view with little reaction from the rest of the world, a superpower is judged by different standards. So China's policies towards say Myanmar, North Korea and Iran now occasion much more critical attention than previously.

Ironically while this means that in material terms, the power balance has now moved in China's direction in various of its bilateral disputes, any exercise of that power is likely to be judged more

critically by the international community. Contrary to what “realist” theories of international relations would suggest, I think that rather there is less, not more, latitude in how China exercises its power, because antennae are more attuned to any threatening use of it. Where international problems demand a common approach, superpowers are expected to play a central role, to take a responsibility for the functioning of the system.

6. Security Issues

Recently in Australia, a brief but intense controversy arose following a publication by one of the country's leading security experts, Professor Hugh White, which argued that there is a problem with Australia's vision of its future, namely that it has an investment in China growing quickly and indefinitely into the future, but also expecting America to remain the strongest power in the region.^{ix}

The greatest controversy was over White's prescriptions for how Australia should balance itself between America and China,^x but I must confess that my most basic reaction to the publication and the subsequent debate was the unreality of “realist” thinking about international relations, that the international system has evolved in ways that have left realist assumptions behind. The writing about nation states as if they were billiard balls was always problematic and simplistic. But as relations between countries have become ever more multi-dimensional—where state to state relations are proportionally a much smaller part of the sum of international relations, where there is not only far more intermeshing of economies, but multiple and diverse transactions in civil societies—it has become even more misleading.

So the grid—that White places over everything else—of power relations between nation states, as if they were simple, unified entities and as if power per se is the aim of nation states often misconstrues actual choices and attitudes. (Note for example he refers to the interdependence of American and Chinese prosperity as an “economic ‘balance of terror’”,^{xi} an absurd phrase.)

One of the key misconceptions in realist thinking about the contemporary international situation is the exaggerated importance of military power. As White notes, “no major Asian power has been involved in substantial military operations in East Asia since China ‘taught Vietnam a lesson’ in 1979.”^{xii} Outside the Middle East and Africa, the major use of force to settle disputes between states^{xiii} has become increasingly unthinkable,^{xiv} because the costs to all other of a country's national interests even of a successful use of force are too great to contemplate. Nevertheless much of White's concern is with military power, especially naval power.

The empirical referents for several of his claims are hard to establish. Witness the following: “optimists” think that China “will continue to accept US leadership”; the last 40 years “have been underwritten by the deals struck by China and Japan to accept American leadership”; China “would rather risk disorder than accept that it has no more influence than it was accorded in 1972”; “A ‘Concert of Asia’ would offer the Chinese people much less than they would like.” Not only is no evidence offered for any of these less than self-evident propositions, but it is hard to spell out exactly what some of them mean.

But the unreality of realist doctrines given the totality of international relations is evident also in his claim that: “America would have to abandon its residual doubts about the legitimacy of China's political system and become much more circumspect about criticising its internal affairs. That means no more lecturing China about dissidents, Tibet or religious freedom.”^{xv} Whatever the American (or Australian) governments might decide about this, the greater intensity of transnational civil society is such that continued scrutiny will be placed on these issues. Moreover while the realist logic is that the greater the power the more freedom a state has to act as it wishes, it seems to me that once a country is perceived as a superpower rather than a developing country, there is more scrutiny, and in some ways less scope for it to exercise discretion without challenge by others.

7. Global Warming

Evolution is not just about the characteristics of organisms, but also of how they adapt to changes in their environment. Remember one theory is that the dinosaurs died out not because of the smallness of their brains, but after an asteroid hit the earth, severely altering the whole planet's climate and environment. So change occurs because a change in the environment makes old patterns less tenable. One such change is what the world is now facing with global warming. Another involves how the relative scarcity of different factors affects pricing, most particularly the likely rising price of oil in coming decades.

There have been few events in recent history in which so many hopes have been invested as the Copenhagen Summit on Climate Change in December 2009. As it transpired, Copenhagen epitomised many of the worst characteristics of global summits, the unrealistic expectations, an impossible juggling in procedures which left many feeling excluded, and then the domestic political exploitation of its failure by all those wanting to pursue their own agendas.

In Australia, there were two very strong opposing constituencies who had in common that they were both pressing the view that Copenhagen was a disastrous failure—the environmentalists were expressing their disappointment that a stronger and more binding outcome was not achieved, while the conservative opposition to the Labor Government was determined to embarrass it politically by saying what an abject failure the Copenhagen Summit had been.

In retrospect, the Summit was less of a failure than seemed at the time. But the political consequences of that perception of total failure had very real political consequences in Australia. Many reasons were given—including criticisms of the processes by which it was conducted; in the eyes of some, it was a triumph for climate sceptics and / or demonstrated that many countries were not serious about taking action to combat climate change if there were any costs involved.

Nevertheless, in the eyes of Australian politicians and in the coverage by the Australian media, if one country was to be singled out for the Summit's failure, China was the number one culprit. China's style at the Summit—probably in retrospect more than the content of its stance (where after all the four developing countries—Brazil, South Africa, India and China—agreed with the US) — contributed greatly to this attribution of blame. In particular it seemed as if China's stance was take it or leave it, and it was not prepared to negotiate.

In recent times, there has been a steady stream of stories reporting on China's commitment to reducing greenhouse gases. None of this has achieved the prominence of course that China's behaviour at the Copenhagen Summit achieved. But China's serious approach is now a fact that those constructively engaged with the debate in Australia acknowledge. Leon Gettler went as far as to say “the only real leadership on the issues appears to be coming from China”,^{xvi} while one of Australia's leading environmental reporters, Adam Morton, and Beijing correspondent, John Garnaut, have similarly reported on the substantial commitments of the Chinese Government,^{xvii} most recently in the latest five year plan.^{xviii}

8. Conclusion

The international system will keep on evolving in ways that no-one can reliably predict. But it seems certain that Australian-Chinese relations will never be simple again. That reflects the relationship's growing complexity and intensity. It should be stressed that the politics of changing expectations is not a rational or consistent or fair process. China is now such an important part of Australian political reality that its behaviour becomes subjected to normal partisan debates in Australia. This was particularly true of climate change.

At the same time, now that China is a more important player on the world stage, there are higher expectations surrounding its actions. Perhaps ironically— and in contrast to what a realist theory of international relations would predict— greater power is accompanied by greater demands for transparency,

and for increased demands that its actions advance the international common good, even though there will always be debate and contention over how to do this.

References:

ⁱ Eric Beinhocker, *The Origin of Wealth. Evolution, Complexity and the Radical Remaking of Economics*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2006.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid* p. 11.

ⁱⁱⁱ A more readable version can be found in Stephen Jay Gould (who is an excellent science writer) “Punctuated Equilibrium—A different way of seeing”, *New Scientist* 94, April 15 1982, p. 137-139.

^{iv} An interesting overview of views at different periods can be found in Colin Mackerras, *Western Images of China*, Griffith University, Brisbane, Centre for the Study of Australian-Asian Relations, Australia-Asia Papers, No 41, 1987.

^v Murray Goot, “Red, White and Brown: Australian Attitudes to the World Since the Thirties”, *Australian Outlook*, V24, N2, 1970, p.188-200.

^{vi} Ian McAllister and Juliet Clark, *Trends in Australian Political Opinion: Results from the Australian Election Study, 1987-2007*, Canberra Australian Social Science Data Archive, 2008, p.36.

^{vii} Fergus Hanson, *Australia and the World. Public Opinion and Foreign Policy*. The Lowy Institute Poll 2010 Sydney, Lowy Institute; Andrew Shearer Sweet and Sour, *Australian Public Attitudes towards, China*, Lowy Institute Analysis, August 2010. Some similar trends can be seen in others of China's neighbours: The Pew Global Project Attitudes China's Neighbours Worry about its Growing Military Strength, Washington DC, Pew 2006.

^{viii} Shearer op cit p. 5.

^{ix} Hugh White, “Power Shift. Australia's Future between Washington and Beijing”, *Quarterly Essay* 39, Melbourne, Black Inc., 2010. My colleague Dr Bob Howard was a most helpful guide through some of these issues.

^x Perhaps most vociferous was the Australian's foreign editor Greg Sheridan, who called the essay “truly weird” and “the single, stupidest strategic document” by someone with official credentials he had ever seen. See “Distorted vision of future US-China Relations”, *The Australian*, 11-9-2010.

^{xi} Op cit p. 32.

^{xii} Op cit p. 3.

^{xiii} So this does not include civil wars. There can also be internationally sanctioned military interventions as with Australian and other UN forces in East Timor in 1999.

^{xiv} See Hugh White, “Why War in Asia Remains Thinkable”, *Survival*, 50: 6, 85-104; Richard A. Bitzinger and Barry Desker, “Why East Asian War is Unlikely”, *Survival*, 50: 6, 105-128.

^{xv} White op cit p.37-38.

^{xvi} Leon Gettler, “Carbon can't be stored in limbo, but that's where the major parties want it,” *The Age*, 4-8-2010.

^{xvii} Adam Morton, “Sorry state of play when China leaves us for dead on climate change,” *The Age*, 18-8-2010; John Garnaut, “China gets tough on energy,” *The Age*, 18-6-2010.

^{xviii} Michael Jacobs, “The China Factor,” *Inside Story*, 28-4-2011. <http://inside.org.au/the-china-factor/>.