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# The Political Psychology of Balance

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Abstract. This article describes some political consequences of psychological balance theories.

Social and clinical psychological research have provided examples of how significant balance may be for human cognition, motivation, emotion, and behavior. Variants of cognitive dissonance theory have suggested that behavior that violates a belief may create a psychological tension to change the belief so that it is more compatible with the behavior, relabel the behavior so that it no longer violates the belief, or engage in another behavior that affects the belief and perception of prior behavior in a manner approaching balance. Some variants posit that similar changes towards balance may occur without the need to hypothesize a psychological tension and that the items to be balanced may include two or more behaviors or two or more beliefs or other intrapsychic entities.

Variants of interpersonal balance theory have suggested that a network of relationships among people must reflect a balance of positive and negative valences between dyads constituting that network. As dyadic valences change, change to reconfigure balance may characterize larger components of the network--even the network in its entirety.

Variants of cognitive and behavior modification theories of psychopathology and therapies have suggested that illogical and/or irrational combinations of cognitions, motivations, emotions, and behaviors are ipso facto nonadaptive, dysfunctional, or pathological. The road to psychological health--often explicated as a life of satisfactory work and love--is paved with the functional substitution of the logical and rational as exemplars of balance.

Variants of dissociation theory have suggested that the very confrontation with imbalance in self-narrative reactive to real or imagined events can be traumatic. Consequences can include intrapsychic asymmetries, fragmentations of consciousness, and even so-called multiple personalities.

Each of these psychological approaches to balance has applied political significance. Cognitive dissonance can be used by the ward healer to swing a vote. Interpersonal balance theory can be used by the political consultant to generate a wedge Issue. Cognitive and behavior modification can be used in interrogation and cult programming and counterprogramming. Dissociation theory can be used to generate collective violent behavior.

More importantly, however, is the role of balance among large numbers of citizens--the polis--who are asked to hold two political values that are entrenched in a political culture and are dyadically in imbalance. As cogently described by Jean Bethke Elshtain, human rights and diversity of beliefs and practices are two such values in some parts of the world.

Human rights suggests that there are certain inalienable benefits due all people just by virtue of being people. Diversity often suggests that cultural differences are to be respected, including differences about the existence and nature of human rights. So, there's an imbalance and a need to resolve or manage it to maintain the coherence of a political community.

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Can human rights subsume diversity? In other words, can diversity become a human right? The problem is that then the human right not to have human rights for oneself and/or for others inevitably and functionally demolishes other human rights. Can diversity subsume human rights? In other words, can human rights become one of many things about which people can be diverse? The problem is that human rights as a concept is inevitably and conceptually demolished. Can human rights and diversity both be qualified into rapprochement? In other words, can human rights only include certain rights, diversity, certain constituents, both only to a certain extent? This is where most citizens come down in political communities wherein human rights and diversity are paid more than lip service or used for more than Machiavellian purposes. Qualification becomes a matter of precarious and--too often--Sisyphean balance, ever contentious, ever-changing, and ever failing. Qualification becomes an existential challenge that can precipitate an escape from the freedom to qualify and to the ersatz freedom of totalistic thought. And thus the Nietzschean premise that certainty accompanies weakness.

The concept of psychological balance reflects but another aspect of the human condition that masks a deeper, ontological converse. (See Beck, A.T. (1964). Thinking and depression II: Theory and therapy. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 10, 561-571; Davies, J.M. (1998). Multiple perspectives on multiplicity. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 8, 195-206; Elshtain, J.B. (June 15, 1998). The hard questions: The right rights. *The New Republic*, 11-12; Festinger, L. (1962). Cognitive dissonance. *Scientific American*, 207, 93-107; Hampson, S.E. (1998). When is an inconsistency not an inconsistency? Trait reconciliation in personality description and impression formation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 102-117; Iran, Iraq, and dual containment: The unbalanced balance. (December 19, 1997). *IBPP*, 3(20); Off-balance balance theories: The saga of Hun Sen, Norodom Ranariddh, and Pol Pot. (August 1, 1997). *IBPP*, 3(1); Priest, R.F., & Sawyer, J. (1967). Proximity and peership: Bases of balance in interpersonal attraction. *American Journal of Sociology*, 72, 633-649; Prilleltensky, I. (1997). Values, assumptions, and practices: Assessing the moral implications of psychological discourse and action. *American Psychologist*, 52, 517-535.) (Keywords: Balance, Cognitive-Behavior Modification, Cognitive Dissonance, Dissociation.)