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978-0-521-12511-6 - Building Democracy in Ireland: Political Order and Cultural
Integration in a Newly Independent Nation

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Part I. Democracy in Ireland: Theoretical and Empirical Problems

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1. Introduction: Theoretical Considerations in the Study of Stability in Newly Independent Nations

Why have so many of the newly independent nations of the twentieth century been racked by political disorder and social instability? Why have so few been successful in establishing stable, regular patterns of institutional relations that promote the well-being of their citizens and enhance their nation's position among the community of nations? Why has the ordering of their societies according to democratic principles been so elusive an achievement? These problems of instability and disorder have commanded the attention of scholars at least since the 1960s, when many nations emerged from their dependent colonial status and attempted to develop into politically independent, self-sustaining entities.

This book represents another effort to answer these questions. Yet the approach taken here differs from previous ones in at least two ways. First, rather than focusing on those societies in which instability has prevailed, I direct attention to a newly independent nation of the twentieth century – the Republic of Ireland – where a stable political order has, in fact, been successfully established. By appreciating the success of the Irish political elite in creating a stable political order, it is argued, we may gain a greater understanding of the obstacles that have prevented other new nations from following the Irish pattern.¹ Second, and more fundamentally, the theoretical approach used to examine the accomplishment of Irish stability differs substantively from that of the vast body of modernization literature. Explanations of instability and disorder have generally emphasized structural or institutional deficiencies that have prevented the creation of a stable polity or society. Marxist or neo-Marxist accounts, as a rule, have focused on the uneven distribution of economic resources and concomitant class conflict,² whereas Weberian treatments have identified the underdeveloped political institutions necessary to incorporate and thereby gain the support of various segments of the population.³ In both of these approaches, despite their different theoretical emphases, attention is directed to the deficiencies of the mod-

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ernizing elites or the absence of institutional or material resources necessary to gain popular commitment to the new regime or society. Viewed in this manner, instability and disorder are consequences of organizational underdevelopment and/or material insufficiencies that continue to plague new nations after independence.

There is little question that these factors have all seriously impeded the establishment of political and social order in these nations. Yet, an institutional or structural analysis cannot fully account for the varying degrees of stability among nations with comparable institutional underdevelopment and resource deficiency. These approaches fail to emphasize how these structural variables interact with cultural or normative ones. To attribute instability to insufficient economic resources, underdeveloped institutions, and so on, may not be incorrect, but it is certainly incomplete. We know of poor, institutionally underdeveloped societies that have had more success in achieving stable political orders than wealthier and more institutionalized ones. But we know of no society that achieves stability when the feeling of connectedness and attachment to the nation is absent.

In this analysis, stability is held to depend not only on the development of the nation's institutional capacities but on normative or cultural achievements as well. Modernization theory, in focusing on the problems of underdeveloped institutions and material insufficiencies, tends to ignore the profound challenge that national independence poses for the persistence of traditional cultural orientations and the need to reconstitute them in a new form.

Development and modernity presume the creation of a national community whose members identify with the society and are capable of subordinating their private interests to the demands of national leaders. Although the problem of social solidarity is basically cultural, and not institutional or material, it defines and sets the tone for institutional agendas and social imperatives. In the absence of a unified community, no institution can effectively function or mobilize the available societal resources. Modern solidary relations between individuals in many Third World nations remain fragile or nonexistent, and their absence continually frustrates programs of social, economic, and political development. The critical and fundamental question facing new nations has been, and continues to be, how to create a social community where primary commitment and loyalty are to the nation and not to preexisting religious, regional, ethnic, or familial groups.

This analysis, then, is concerned with the cultural problem of forging modern forms of social solidarity. Yet, to emphasize the normative prob-

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lem is not to deemphasize institutional concerns. It does not suggest an idealist conception of social change. Rather, we assert that the critical focus of institutional actors – the modernizing elites – and the construction of new institutional structures following independence always stand in relation to the prevailing cultural orientations of the society. The challenge of modernization is to establish complementarity between those orientations and modern institutional forms. Normative commitments set the limits for institutional development and, further, define the institutional agendas for the cultural transformations that must occur. The complementarity problem, it might be added, is all the more acute when the ruling elite and the population both expect that the political order will be organized according to democratic principles, and when political authority depends upon free individual expression and collective action. Democratic modernization creates a more precarious relationship between the institutions and the community; the institutionalization of a democratic morality, when the institutions are weak and the pressures are strong, makes the political challenge even more intense.

The principal problem faced by new nations has been to create a new sense of community corresponding to the new forms of social organization accompanying independence: to create new bonds of solidarity between members of the society consistent with the transreligious, trans-ethnic, transregional, and transfamilial character of the new society. Civil ties, by which individuals acquire a more universalistic perspective toward the nation, must supplant more particularistic, primordial attachments as the primary basis of loyalty and identification. Although this may be viewed as the preliminary problem for new nations to overcome, it is also an enduring one. As Clifford Geertz and others have made clear, primordial ties do not die out simply to be replaced by civil ones.⁴ National leaders must continually prevent the resurgence of primordialism. Thus, the achievement of solidarity is an ongoing task of national leaders and, as such, represents a fundamental concern. Without such national loyalties and attachments, economic, political, or social development cannot occur.

It is certainly true that national leaders employ economic, political, and ideological mechanisms to promote the development of the country and thereby enhance popular support, identity, and attachment. It is also true that the resources for such development are often inadequate. But in the final analysis, the failure of a nation to create order and stability cannot be attributed directly to these features; instead, it results from the failure to create a modern national community. It is not the modernizing elites' inability to forge ahead that promotes disorder; disorder

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occurs because individuals and collectivities in the society remain organized according to different principles and criteria, refusing to accept their leaders' failures.

In sum, instability and disorder are seen here as consequences of a disjuncture between the symbolic sphere – where social legitimation may still focus on traditional patterns of organization and affiliation – and the institutional realm, where new social organizations are constructed according to principles contrary to traditionalism.⁵ Some organizational accommodation to traditional understandings must occur, along with a certain degree of cultural transformation that is necessary to legitimate the modern structures. When this does not occur, or occurs insufficiently, the inevitable result is political instability and social disorder.

This linkage of the symbolic and institutional spheres defines the agenda of all institutional elites in new nations. They must construct modern social, political, and economic orders in the face of cultural convictions that oppose these modern imperatives. The need for modern social solidarity, consistent with the values and norms of modern institutional structures, is a preeminent challenge to the modernizing elites. It defines their essential work; the degree of success in this endeavor defines the parameters within which institutional modernization may occur. As Edward Shils writes:

A modern society is not just a complex of modern institutions. It is a mode of integration of the whole society. It is a mode of relationship between the center and the periphery of the society. Modern society entails the inclusion of the mass of the population into the society in the sense that both elite and mass regard themselves as members of the society and, as such, as of approximately equal dignity. It involves a greater participation by the masses in the values of the society, a more active role in the making of society-wide decisions, and a greater prominence in the consideration of the elite. . . . A widespread moral consensus, reaching into the outermost areas of society, maintained, renewed and revised by strong personalities and effective institutions, is a real need of the states.⁶

The Durkheimian perspective and democratic stability

This focus on solidarity and the emphasis on the interpenetration of the cultural and political institutional realms rely heavily upon a Durkheimian perspective. More than any other major sociological theorist, Durk-

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heim, in his political sociology, emphasizes the moral underpinning of modern society and identifies malintegration as a primary cause of social disorder and political instability. He believes that the primary tasks of the modern state are to reflect upon, articulate, implement, and transform the collective consciousness of its constituency. Stability in modern society, for Durkheim, depends upon this achievement.

In describing the features of the democratic state, in contrast to those of the premodern, monarchical state, Durkheim insists that the problems of legitimacy and order are independent of the state's capacity or effectiveness in incorporating the population within its structures. He argues that the central task of the democratic state is the establishment of a particular relationship between the political elite and the society. Whereas the collective consciousness is the "vaguely diffused sentiments that float about the whole expanse of the society," the state, in contrast, must serve as the organ of social thought.⁷ It is the purpose of the state to make conscious and articulate these inarticulate diverse ideas, beliefs, and sentiments, and to act on them consonant with the social values embodied in the state institutions. Political legitimacy depends upon a state structure in which decisions and deliberations are informed by collective sentiments.

The legitimacy problem, then, requires the democratic state to adopt a specific institutional form and adapt norms dictating the operation of state structures. It requires, first, a state that is interactive with the public yet differentiated from it. Durkheim writes, "The state is nothing if it is not an organ distinct from the rest of the society. If the state is everywhere, it is nowhere."⁸ In addition to imposing constraints on the institutional features of the democratic state, the legitimacy problem makes demands on the normative operation of the political system. The state must establish procedures through which public sentiment can be expressed, considered, and potentially reflected in state action. Constitutional norms must be established whereby procedural mechanisms are created and political change is routinely effected.

Durkheim's assertion that the symbolic and institutional spheres must converge to achieve political order distinguishes this theoretical perspective from those of both Marxists and Weberians, for in neither of these scholarly traditions does the moral order – the realm of collective consciousness – possess analytic or substantive autonomy. Not granted independent existence, it is subsumed within an institutional analysis. Even when these traditions of thought seek to explain an essentially social psychological phenomenon like political legitimacy, they exclude

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the independent role of moral attachments and understandings between members of the society and the structures and procedures of the political system.

The dominant strain of Marxist analysis presumes integration and legitimacy, albeit a false one, when the political system articulates with the economic realm.⁹ In Weberian thought, solidarity is essentially viewed as a function of a state in successfully incorporating the population within its structures.¹⁰ Neither tradition accords the symbolic world of individuals – their collective consciousness – a role in the construction of a democratic order, in the interpenetration of that order with given social understandings, or in its significance in the maintenance and reproduction of the political system. In short, the Durkheimian perspective, although not ignoring the problem of institution building in forging a democratic order, asserts the need to place institutional problems in their cultural context. It appreciates not only that the collective consciousness is constrained, molded, and transformed to suit the needs of the democratic political institution but also that the institutions themselves are shaped and constrained by given social understandings and patterns of relatedness. Democratic institutions, in sum, reflect the cultural context in which they operate; they embody the peculiarities of their national constituency and its history. In those nations where the political institutions have proven to be ineffective and unstable, it is also a function of the elites' failure to accommodate to the prevailing cultural norms.

This Durkheimian interest in the role that collective meanings hold for modern orders is more closely related to those researchers who identify political culture as a critical independent variable in the construction of political order. Inspired by the rapid explosion of newly independent nations in the late 1950s and 1960s, their focus on political culture became a powerful tool to account for the enormous difficulty new nations face in establishing stable political orders. Appreciating the power of cultural meanings in political processes, political cultural scholars sought to identify and understand "those critical but widely shared beliefs and sentiments that form the 'particular patterns of orientation' that give order and form to the political process."¹¹ "Political culture," Sidney Verba writes, "regulates who talks to whom and who influences whom. It also regulates what is said in political contacts and the effects of these contacts. It regulates the ways in which formal institutions operate as well."¹²

Stable political orders, in short, were identified as possessing a political culture concordant with the given political forms, whereas unstable systems were unable to forge belief systems compatible with modern po-

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litical structures. Attention was directed, on the one hand, to the political cultures of Western democracies, demonstrating their successful accommodation of political cultural beliefs to institutional forms and, on the other hand, to non-Western systems less successful in forging political stability.¹³ Through this focus on political culture, it became possible to identify several typical crises – the identity crisis, the legitimacy crisis, the participation crisis – seemingly inherent in the process of nation building.¹⁴

The political culture tradition, however, lost much of its momentum in the ideological maelstrom of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It became strongly identified with the larger body of modernization literature, which assumed an ideal-typical Western model of development as the standard by which to evaluate political processes in newly independent nations. Modernization theory, critics charged, had implicitly adopted an evolutionary schema, in which nations achieving political and social order, like those in the West, were seen as having successfully made the transition from a traditional society to a modern one.¹⁵ Political culture was viewed as a theoretical analogue to research efforts identifying the economic, political, and personality correlates of the development process; the objective was to detail the “cultural” components needed for modernity to occur.¹⁶ In spite of many disclaimers by political cultural theorists insisting on the need for cultural sensitivity, critics of the political culture concept prevailed.¹⁷

The power of the critique paved the way for a broad challenge to the presumptions of evolutionism expressed in modernization theory. The political culture school, along with modernization theory in general, was overshadowed in the 1970s by Marxist-inspired social science. Attention now shifted to the dependent status of Third World nations and their economic domination by the colonizing centers. Relying heavily on an analysis of class formations in the periphery, this explanation rejected a political-cultural approach to political stability.¹⁸ Expressing a similar distrust of cultural analysis, the 1970s produced, in addition, world systems analysis, a materialist and historical account of the role of capitalist penetration in non-Western nations. This perspective rapidly gained new adherents, and political and historical sociology have been powerfully informed by this theoretical orientation in the study of new nations.¹⁹

Recently, however, the complex impact of culture on politics has stirred new interest. This research has emerged not from political or historical sociology, but rather from a central school of historical studies.²⁰ During the last several years, the chief concern of social history has shifted from

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the quantitative reconstitution of population, food supplies, and social mobility studies to the qualitative question of the role of culture in the political process. Indeed, many historians trained in and influenced by sociology in the 1970s are now probing the linguistic, anthropological, and symbolic bases of meaning and how these shape political action in particular historical moments. This research has typically centered on the interaction of culture and specific sectors of the national community, such as working-class or peasant politics.²¹ More recently, historians have begun to explore the interaction of culture and politics at the macrosocial level, analyzing, for example, the way that an anti-industrial and aristocratizing ethos shared by England's governing classes became the central factor in England's inability to remain a primary economic power.²² Another example is a study tracing the forging of political legitimacy during the first French Republic through debates over the proper allegorical symbol to represent the new nations of French citizens.²³ Still another example is a study of post-World War II Greece in light of the continuities and tensions of the Greek tradition.²⁴

Political sociology can benefit from this form of historical scholarship; indeed, a central aim of this book is to reinvigorate cultural analysis as a way of understanding newly independent nations. Yet, a sociological encounter with cultural variables, in comparison to a historical interest, requires a more self-consciously theoretical agenda. Any sociological appreciation of the achievement of modern political order requires that the political accomplishment be understood in relation to the character of the political community – its value and normative commitments, its emergent political structures, the quality of political leadership, and the relationship that is forged between the political order and the broader national community upon which stable politics ultimately depends.²⁵

In more concrete terms, an analysis is required that considers the role of the political elite in forging a modern, solidary nation. Careful attention must be paid not only to the work of institution building but, in addition, to the efforts of the political elite in creating a public consensus to sustain the new institutions. Further, an analysis of political order requires an appreciation of the powerful role of collective meanings in the very shaping and functioning of the new institutional order. Political stability results from an emerging correspondence between institutional forms and processes and from what Parsons has referred to as the "system of legitimate order."²⁶ The researcher, then, must pay careful attention to special meanings that politics and political life hold for citizens as they shape the institutional arrangements that govern their lives.

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Stated differently, the aim here is to understand the relationship between collective meanings and what David Easton calls “regime stability.”²⁷ Although it is generally agreed that the existence of a political community depends upon a consensus by its members on, for example, national identity, it is less widely appreciated that political stability also depends upon the emergence of a consensus concerning the political underpinnings of political rule. Without agreement on constitutional principles, for example, a democratic regime could not survive. This problem of the achievement of democratic stability is at the heart of this research enterprise.²⁸

The case of Ireland

The Irish Free State, during its first decade of independence (1922–1932), was a nation that successfully forged democratic stability in spite of extreme political, economic, and cultural obstacles. The Irish state has remained firmly democratic in its orientation and succeeded in imparting democratic convictions to the nation. But, as I shall argue throughout this book, that achievement can hardly be viewed as an example of premodern, traditional convictions giving way to modern, universalistic ones; rather, the Irish example of stability demonstrates the accommodations made by political institutions to already existing social understandings. Without such adjustments, stability would not have occurred. In the remainder of this chapter, I will first place this cultural approach to Irish nation building in the extant social scientific analyses of Ireland’s political development and will then return to the theoretical question about politics and culture previously raised.

By and large, those who study world politics have largely ignored Ireland. In fact, except for Irish academics’ own interest in understanding their society, modern Irish politics has largely been ignored. This is, of course, less true of Northern Ireland. Since the reemergence of religious hostilities well over a decade ago, a considerable body of literature has appeared, attempting to comprehend its sorry history and politics. But the twenty-six-county republic to the south and west of Ulster has remained out of the academic limelight, at least since it gained its independence from Great Britain in 1921.

There are many explanations to account for this obscurity. Ireland is a small country and largely inconsequential in the world order. It has always played a peripheral role in the European community of nations [though less so today, since its entry into the European Economic Community (EEC)], and its politics, when compared to those of other new