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

Jeffrey Prager

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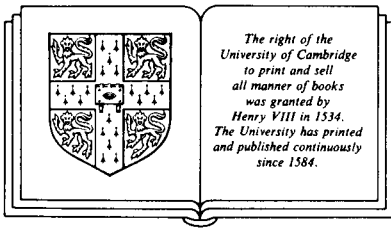
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# Building Democracy in Ireland

## Political Order and Cultural Integration in a Newly Independent Nation

**Jeffrey Prager**

*University of California, Los Angeles*



**Cambridge University Press**

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TO THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER, THEODORE PRAGER

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## Preface

This book explores the achievement of democratic stability in Ireland during its first decade of independence from Britain, 1922–32. A newly independent nation of the twentieth century, Ireland is among a select few nations that has succeeded in transforming political and cultural divisions into a common base of support for the democratic government. The reasons for this Irish accomplishment are the subject of the following analysis. The purpose is both to better understand the Irish case and to shed new light on the problem of democratic stability (and instability) in newly independent nations of the twentieth century.

In the following chapters, I pose two questions: First, how were deeply divided political cultural traditions coexisting in Ireland transposed into support for democratic institutions? This question explores the problem of political institutionalization when social groups adhere to systems of meaning hostile to the existence of those institutions. The second question considers the same problem from a different angle: How do political institutions, guided by a particular ruling elite, succeed in developing democratic institutions that express and confirm patterns of thought and belief in the political community? This question leads to a consideration of the ways in which social meanings in the political community shape and influence the functioning of a political apparatus. The book examines how new democratic institutions, in their quest for broad-based social support, are constrained and molded by prevailing social understandings. In order to understand the achievement of democratic stability in Ireland, I argue, it is necessary both to study political institutions from the point of view of social meaning and to study social meaning from the perspective of those institutions.

This two-part approach to the study of political order is intended to bring the cultural problem to the study of politics. Institutions both shape and are shaped by the cultural universe or universes that orient social action. The particular forms of political institutions, and their capacity

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to assert authority, are functions, in part, of their correspondence to ongoing patterns of social meaning. My task in this book, then, is to capture and interpret the patterns of belief and conviction that framed Irish men's and women's relation to a changing political environment. By analyzing available texts – parliamentary debates, public speeches, political documents – I describe the Irish cultural framework; in so doing, I evaluate Ireland's political achievement with respect to these systems of meaning.

But I am also aware of how social meaning is molded, constrained, and transformed by people's experience within institutional arenas. Rather than treating culture as standing outside material reality, as preexisting categories of thought independent of time and space, I define culture and social understandings on the basis of a vital scholarly tradition that posits culture as a historically constituted system of meanings. This notion of culture, best articulated by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, has affected many fields of inquiry and has promoted a new movement in the social sciences. My book on Irish politics and culture in the 1920s is part of this new approach, although designed as a contribution to political sociology. The book seeks to reclaim the problem of meaning as a legitimate and important domain of macrosociological analysis. By exploring the interconnections between political structure, social activity, and cultural legacies, its intention is to promote an appreciation of the meaning-making dimensions of political life and institutions.

In the course of writing this book, I have incurred many debts, both personal and intellectual. It is one of the real pleasures in seeing this work to fruition to be able to thank publicly those who were so generous in their support. This book began several years ago as a Ph.D. dissertation at the University of California, Berkeley. There I was fortunate enough to come under the intellectual orbits of Neil Smelser, Reinhard Bendix, Thomas Lacquer, and William Kornhauser. Each played a distinct role in shaping my orientation to Irish politics and, perhaps more importantly, each revealed his own exacting standards of scholarship to which I continue to aspire. Through a Dean's and a Regent's Fellowship, I was able to complete the research necessary for the dissertation.

Many people in Ireland generously gave their time to educate me on the intricacies and complexities of Irish politics, a gift for which no amount of reading and research could have substituted. In particular, I would like to thank Tom Garvin and Maurice Manning of University College, Dublin, for spending time with me, for reading portions of the manuscript, and for patiently correcting the misconceptions of an Amer-



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ican while, at the same time, encouraging me to proceed. Differences in opinion and interpretation about certain matters remain; nevertheless, they have been extremely gracious in their support of the project. To those many people in academics and politics who granted me interviews and to those who, in chance encounters, continued to impress upon me that an understanding of Irish politics and society was not a simple matter, I am especially appreciative. The staffs at the National Library of Ireland, at the State Records Office in Dublin Castle, and at the University College, Dublin Archives, were all uncommonly cordial, making my several research trips always pleasant and productive.

At UCLA, I have benefited from the excellent work of my research assistants – Michael Hui, Paul Colomy, and Michael Suman. I would especially like to thank Geoffrey Gilbert-Hamerling for his assistance; he familiarized himself not only with the details of the decade but also with my interpretation of it, and therefore proved to be an important intellectual resource during the course of my writing. The Academic Senate Research Committee provided much-needed and much-appreciated financial support to see this project to its completion. Melvin Pollner's and Melvin Oliver's interest in the research, and their always generous personal support, cannot be underestimated, and I am happy to acknowledge their important role. I have been fortunate to have Jeffrey Alexander as a friend and colleague. His contribution to this project is inestimable; a friendly critic and generous intellectual resource, he has provided the consistent support that every scholar seeks.

The final preparation of this manuscript was done while I was a member of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. I am indebted to Clifford Geertz, Albert Hirschman, and Michael Walzer for their hospitality and support. Lucille Allsen and Peggy Clarke aided me greatly in preparing the final draft, and I am appreciative of their efforts. I would also like to thank Stephen Boliver for his assistance in bibliographic work.

There are a few individuals whose importance in my life over the past years makes simple acknowledgment inadequate. To my mother and my father, to Abraham Gottesman, and to David and Tziona Silverman, I am especially grateful for providing the personal support and sustenance that allowed work to progress. My wife, Debora Silverman, has provided the milieu that has given special meaning to my work and for which I will ever be grateful. Her own devotion to the world of ideas and scholarship has been both a challenge and an inspiration.

This book is dedicated to the memory of my father, Theodore Prager, whose own calling in life required that I find my own.