



# **Infiltrating History: Structure and Agency in the Irish Independence Struggle, 1916-1921**

**Donagh Davis**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is a historical-sociological study of the Irish independence struggle, which culminated in the partition of Ireland in 1920, and the secession of most of the island from the United Kingdom in 1922. It asks how the Irish separatist project was able to go from political marginality up to 1916, to the attainment, with widespread popular support, of an essentially independent state covering most of Ireland just a few years later - a violent and unexpected process. Focusing on the years 1916-1921, the thesis explains what happened as a path dependent reactive sequence - that is, a chain of events initiated by a highly contingent happening, setting in motion a series of reactions and counter-reactions. That highly contingent happening was the Easter Rising of 1916 - a surprise attack on British rule in Dublin - and it was the product of the agency of a small band of rebels. The sequence it set in motion brought deep structural tensions to the boil - but this might never have happened were it not for the agency of the rebels. The thesis examines this classic paradox of the structure-agency relationship via a focus on the strategic interaction of the Irish rebels and the British state, and attempts to identify the key causal mechanisms involved. These mechanisms were shaped by key British policy choices as much as by rebel action - from the British government's initial decision to back-pedal on meaningful Irish autonomy, to the subsequent policy drift towards brutal and indiscriminate repression in Ireland. The thesis suggests that were it not for the crucial transformative event that started this fateful sequence in 1916, Ireland might well have stayed within the United Kingdom.

## **Jury:**



Prof Jack A. Goldstone (George Mason University), Donagh Davis (candidate), Prof Donatella della Porta (EUI) Prof Bill Kissane (London School of Economics), Prof Lucy Riall (EUI – by videolink)

## **Bio**

Donagh Davis is currently a Visiting Research Fellow at the Department of Sociology in Trinity College Dublin. His most recent publication is a chapter in the forthcoming volume *Political Violence in Context* (ed. L. Bosi, N. Ó Dochartaigh and D. Pisiou, ECPR Press), entitled 'What's so transformative about transformative events? Violence and temporality in Ireland's 1916 Rising'. He also contributed the entry on 'Revolution' in the Sage Encyclopedia of Modern Political Thought (2013), edited by Gregory Claeys.