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FRANK RAMSEY'S POLITICS

BY: SOROUSH MAROUZI

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CENTER FOR THE
HISTORY OF POLITICAL ECONOMY
AT DUKE UNIVERSITY

Frank Ramsey's Politics

Forthcoming in *the Cambridge Companion to Ramsey*, edited by Pedro G. Duarte and Cheryl Misak, Cambridge University Press

By Soroush Marouzi*

Frank Ramsey is often portrayed as a British thinker immersed in theoretical problems in philosophy, mathematics, and economics. However, as Cheryl Misak (2020) shows, he was also preoccupied with political problems and concerned with practical efforts to improve the world. This chapter focuses on Ramsey's engagement with the politics of his time. It shows that while his interest in socialism and feminism remained relatively stable throughout his short life, his perspectives on them evolved in tandem with his intellectual pursuits and the shifting demands of society. Ramsey struggled to form an articulated view about politics during his school years. But, after he entered Cambridge University in 1920, he gradually leaned toward two political movements: Fabian socialism and the new feminism. Fabian socialism advocated gradualism in political change, the nationalization of the production process, and using expert knowledge and bureaucratic planning to address societal problems. The so-called "new feminism" was marked by two policy demands: first, governmental payments to women in recognition of the economic value of their domestic works at home, and second, providing birth control information and contraceptive methods for women.

Section 1 explores Ramsey's early political interests during his Winchester years (1915-1920), highlighting how his family environment and the political climate of the time shaped his early passion for left-wing politics and women's rights. Section 2 delves into his political activism during his undergraduate studies at Cambridge (1920-1922), detailing his deep engagement with left-wing student clubs and initial efforts to make theoretical contributions to political economy. Section 3 focuses on Ramsey's politics from 1923, when he began to sharpen his views on feminist policy demands, until around 1927, when his engagement with politics waned. Section 4 presents concluding remarks.

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I. Frank, the Schoolboy

Frank was born into an educated family in Cambridge. His father, Arthur, was a mathematician, textbook writer, and president of Magdalene College. His mother, Mary Agnes Ramsey (née Stanley), who studied history at Oxford, was a highly respected political activist in Cambridge. Following her death in 1927, an obituary published in a national weekly affiliated with the suffragist movement paid tribute to her “unselfish life,” highlighting her dedicated service to socialist and feminist organizations.¹ On Arthur’s account, Agnes taught Frank “to take side of the weak and to support the claims of the wage earner and was always on the side of Liberalism.”²

The twelve year-old Frank entered Winchester, a top academic public school, in 1915, and remained there until he left for the Cambridge University in the Fall of 1920. Three bodies of evidence trace his engagement with politics during these years: his letters to his parents, particularly Agnes; diary notes in 1920; and surviving student essays – nine in total – primarily focused on economic and political topics. Frank’s notes indicate that he read a vast number of books on economics and politics, including Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), John Stuart Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), and Karl Marx’s *Capital* (1867). The list also included more contemporary books, such as Irving Fisher’s *The Purchasing Power of Money* (1911), Alfred Marshall’s *Industry and Trade* (1919), and C.M. Lloyd’s *The Reorganization of Local Government* (1919). His favorite authors, books, and magazines were primarily associated with three left-wing political movements: Bolshevism, Guild Socialism, and Fabian Socialism.

Frank was an avid reader of Leon Trotsky and kept up with the news about the recent political developments in Russia. A central figure in the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Trotsky, alongside Vladimir Lenin, organized the armed uprising that led to the overthrow of Russia’s Provisional Government and the establishment of a communist regime. In 1919, Frank emerged as an active member of Winchester’s Debating Society. On February 5 of that year, he became the Society’s center of attention with his emphatic endorsement of Bolshevism. The school’s magazine, *The Wykehamist*, captured his public image, noting that Frank described the need for “a war against Capitalism” and praised “Bolshevism.” The magazine further observed that he “was evidently an ardent Bolshevik” and “upheld them as true democrats, whose only wish was the welfare of the masses.”³

It takes a lot to think of an armed group that ran a coup as “true democrats.” We may discover Frank’s rationale by examining one of his essays. Dated February 1919, it explores the markers of progress in human civilization.⁴ In discussing politics, Frank

¹ *The Woman’s Leader and the Common Cause*, Vol. XIX, No. 31, Friday, September 9, 1927.

² GBR/0272/FPR/2/1/2/66.

³ WCA, *The Wykehamist*, No. 580, February 19, 1919.

⁴ The essay is titled “What are the signs by which you would judge that a people has made ‘progress’ in civilization?” (ASP.1983.01 007-08).

identifies two key indicators of progress: approaching “democracy” and improving people’s “welfare.” The path toward democracy, he warns, is not always straightforward. He illustrates his point by the following analogy: “we must remember the man going up the hill; it would be better if he went straight up the path of democracy, but he may go round into autocracy and still be higher up.”⁵ Frank seems to have thought this is what the Bolsheviks were about: adopting temporary anti-democratic methods with an aim to improve people’s welfare—signs of progress, at least for him.

While Frank remained intrigued by Trotsky’s writings and Bolshevism in his final two years at Winchester, his reflections on them changed rapidly, and his admiration for the Bolsheviks ultimately waned. In a lengthy letter to his mother in summer 1919, he conveyed his enthusiasm for Trotsky’s newly published *The History of Russian Revolution to Brest-Litovsk*, calling it a “really... great book, so exciting you can hardly put it down.” However, he also noted reading an “anti-Bolshevik tract” criticizing the Bolshevik “methods of food control,” which detailed the failings of their price-control strategies. Frank found the approach “an appalling mess” and praised the anti-Bolshevik analysis as “very good.”

Frank ended his letter to Agnes with the concluding remarks of Trotsky’s book: “History is working for us. A proletarian revolution in Europe and America will break out sooner or later.” Frank then added: “Surely we ought to help them do it better.”⁶ This comment seems to reflect not only his skepticism toward any notion of historical inevitability as might be implied by Trotsky’s remarks, but also his view that Bolshevism has its own flaws in matters of policy and governance that can be improved upon. In an essay dated February 15, 1920, Frank criticized the view of one who believes that he “can sit down” thinking “that history is on his side, that whatever he may do material forces will achieve his object.” Such a conception of history, Frank argued, fails to account for the role that human will plays in the sequence of events.⁷ Furthermore, in his two essays on education, written in early 1920, he advocated for an education system that promotes free inquiry and tolerance, harshly criticizing those who systematically seek to indoctrinate children with their ideologies as in Bolshevik schools.⁸

⁵ The analogy comes from John Stuart Mill. Frank’s essay begins with Mill’s following remarks: “the progress of opinion is like the advance of a person climbing a hill by a spiral path which winds round it, and by which he is as often on the wrong side of the hill as on the right side but still is always getting higher up.”

⁶ GBR/0272/FPR/2/1/2/97-97g.

⁷ The essay is titled “The Materialist Interpretation of History” (ASP.1983.01 007-02-02).

⁸ He also argued that the government should cover or subsidize schooling costs, particularly for “poor children” – see “Should the State Support Sectarian Education?” (ASP.1983.01 007-02-03) and “Is Self Expression the Right Ideal for Education?” (ASP.1983.01 007-02-01). Frank’s attitude toward education system is a reminder of Arthur’s remark that he was “always on the side of Liberalism.” He reflected on at least two more policy debates around this time. First, in July 1920, he wrote to Agnes that he is against prohibiting the sale and consumption of commercial alcohol (GBR/0272/FPR/2/1/2/103c). Second, he participated in a Winchester’s Debating Society meeting on February 10, 1920, arguing against the view of

On January 8, 1920, Frank received a letter from Roderic Clark, who intended to put Frank in touch with John Rickman. Clark was a key organizer of the Friends War Victims Relief Committee in Britain, an official arm of the Quaker Society of Friends that offered voluntary aid service during the war. A member of this organization, Rickman had served in Russia, publishing *An Eye-Witness from Russia* (1919) upon his return.⁹ Soon after receiving the letter, Frank, accompanied by his mother, met Rickman. Agnes was most likely the reason why Rickman got in touch with Frank in the first place.¹⁰ Frank found Rickman “very interesting” and “strongly pro Bolshevik.”

Frank skimmed through Lenin’s *The State and Revolution* (1917) after meeting Rickman.¹¹ However, his January 1920 reading list suggests that he was now more interested in Guild Socialism, a non-Marxist variation of socialism. Guild Socialism was aligned with the socialist aim of labor emancipation, but it diverged from Marxism by rejecting state ownership or collectivism. It advocated worker control of industry through the establishment and operation of guilds. This movement, though influential for a time, was short-lived, emerging around 1915 and declining after the 1926 failure of the General Strike (see Hutchinson and Burkitt 1997).

Frank’s reading list in early 1920 included the work of S.G. Hobson, who coined the term Guild Socialism and built its theoretical foundation, as well as G.D.H. Cole, another theorist of this movement. He also occasionally read *The New Age*, a weekly magazine which then supported Guild Socialism and expounded the works of its leading figures, including Hobson and Cole.¹² Frank’s interest in Guild Socialism grew in tandem with his interest in history and ethics. In two essays written in May 1920, he argued that politics and ethics ought to be tightly connected, as understood by ancient Greek philosophers, and emphasized the need to respect the natural equality of all human beings. He also asserted that in “the Platonic state economies were entirely divorced from politics, in the sense that the statesmen could not possibly be influenced by the sectional economic interests of their friends.” He added, “this is a strong argument for one form of guild socialism as making for political purity.”¹³

a speaker who had advocated for regulating the press (WCA, *The Wykehamist*, No. 591, March 10, 1920). We do not know the details of his views and arguments in these two instances. But it is likely that they embodied his liberal attitude.

⁹ Rickman underwent psychoanalysis with Sigmund Freud following the war and subsequently became instrumental in advancing psychoanalysis in Britain (see Forrester and Cameron 2017). We will see that his path intersected with Frank’s once more in the 1925 Cambridge group dedicated to discussing recent developments in Freud’s psychology.

¹⁰ Agnes won a medal for her war service at Queen Alexandra’s Royal Army Nursing Corps, the nursing branch of the British Army Medical Services (WO, 372/23/34210). This could have brought her in contact with Clark through professional channels.

¹¹ GBR/0272/FPR/1.

¹² GBR/0272/FPR/1.

¹³ These essays are titled “The Criticisms in Aristotle’s Politics of Plato’s Republics” and “Account for the Greek Habit of Discussing Ethics and Politics in Close Connection” (ASP.1983.01 007-02-01).

In early 1920, Frank's attraction to Guild Socialism was not new, but it perhaps intensified after forming a close relationship with the Guild Socialist C.K. Ogden around that time.¹⁴ Frank praised Guild Socialism in the Winchester's Debating Society meeting of February 25, 1919, some three weeks after defending Bolshevism in front of the same audience.¹⁵ He was enthusiastic about both Bolshevism and Guild Socialism, while showing interest in reading articles that argued for one and rejected the other.¹⁶

Add to the mix his enthusiasm for Fabian Socialism, another non-Marxist strand of socialism, characterized by a commitment to gradual political change. Frank's favorite magazine was *The New Statesman*, the cultural and political magazine associated with Fabianism. His favorite author, measured by the frequency of appearance in his notes, was George Bernard Shaw, the renowned playwright and a leading figure in Fabian Socialism. He read some of Shaw's plays more than once and took careful notes from others. He followed up Shaw's work on politics, discussing his account of the fair division of wealth in his essay on progress in human civilization. In late January 1920, he wrote to the Fabian Society asking for a copy of *Fabian Essays in Socialism* (1889), Shaw's now-classic edited volume. He read it with patience and care in a few days.¹⁷

Frank was also attracted to Graham Wallas's work. Wallas was another leading figure of Fabianism, highly influential in both academic circles and the public domain, and famous for his methodological approach which would become known as political psychology. In one of his essays, Frank borrowed Wallas's conception of socialism as a movement toward social equality.¹⁸ Frank's diary indicates that his mother sent him a copy of Wallas's *The Great Society* (1914) on February 21, 1920, six days after he wrote on Wallas's conception of socialism. We will see that Wallas had a personal relationship with the Ramseys.

Finally, Frank was highly interested in the work of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, two other Fabians who, with Shaw, founded *The New Statesman*. He read Sidney Webb's *How to Pay for the War* (1917) together with Beatrice Webb's *The History of Trade Unionism* (1920) and *The Wages of Men and Women: Should They be Equal?* (1919).¹⁹ The latter critically examined the findings of the War Cabinet Committee on Women in Industry, established to investigate whether women working in "male" occupations were in fact receiving equal pay. It proposed practical recommendations on how to achieve equal pay for equal work.

¹⁴ For the influential role of Ogden in Frank's life, see Duarte (2017); Misak (2020: 38-42).

¹⁵ WCA, *The Wykehamist*, No. 581, March 22, 1919.

¹⁶ For example, he read G.R. Thomson's article on "Metaphysical Presuppositions of Guildism" published in the January 15, 1920, issue of *The New Age*, and found it to be "interesting" (GBR/0272/FPR/1). Thomson's article argues for the superiority of theoretical foundations of Guild Socialism over its competitors, including Bolshevism, on the ground that it accounts for the right ethical values.

¹⁷ GBR/0272/FPR/1.

¹⁸ See, "The Materialist Interpretation of History" (ASP.1983.01 007-02-02).

¹⁹ GBR/0272/FPR/1.

Frank's eagerness to learn about women's rights (particularly in the labor market) did not stop there. In the early months of 1920, he also read George Bernard Shaw's play *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893), George Meredith's novel *Diana of the Crossways* (1885), and Barbara Drake's *Women in the Engineering Trades* (1917). Shaw's play criticized the limited employment opportunities available for women in Victorian Britain; Frank was "very much struck by it." Meredith's novel is now known as a feminist work thematically addressing women's rights; Frank told his diary that this was the second time he had read it, a rare occurrence, indicating his deep interest in the novel.²⁰ Drake's book was a report written in response to an inquiry by the Joint Committee of the Labour Research Department and the Fabian Women's Group, presenting statistics on women's market activity in wartime, especially in engineering industries.

Agnes's influence loomed large over Frank's passion for women's rights. She exposed her son to the suffragist movement by hosting occasional meetings at home. In the diary entry of July 30, 1920, Frank seemed enthusiastic about meeting Agnes's colleagues, suffragists with close Labour Party ties.²¹ Frank's essays reveal his engagement with feminist issues. In one, he speculated that "many evils of the time," including "the employment of children," would have been averted "if parliament had been elected by universal suffrage."²² In another, he found Aristotle's treatment of women "foolish" because, in Frank's interpretation, he believed "virtue is not identical for men and women" and put "women on the level of children."²³

Frank grew up in a place and time that would naturally spark one's interest in the political landscape. He came of age in an educated family during the transformative years surrounding the Great War and the Russian revolution—a period when socialist ideas found widespread support among the British intelligentsia and began to find expression in the country's political system (see Caldwell and Klausinger 2022: 318-322). Frank's letters, diary entries, and essays from his time at Winchester – penned between the ages of twelve and seventeen – paint a portrait of a young man struggling to form his views on complex political issues, yet consistently determined to follow in his mother's footsteps to understand and shape the world for the better. After five years at Winchester, Frank departed for Cambridge University, carrying his fervent political passions with him.

II. Ramsey, the Cambridge Socialist

Ramsey began his undergraduate studies in mathematics at Trinity College, Cambridge, in October 1920. The war was now over in trenches, but not in the minds. After the war, the Cambridge University became a fertile ground for normative theories of human life

²⁰ GBR/0272/FPR/1.

²¹ GBR/0272/FPR/1.

²² The essay is titled "The Influence of Social and Political Factors on the Course of the Industrial Revolution" (ASP.1983.01 007-02-02).

²³ ASP.1983.01 007-02-01.

and society. Student clubs and intellectual circles increasingly focused on how to guide “the masses” in what they saw as the right direction, aspiring to shape the social and political world for the better (see Marouzi: forthcoming). Within a few days after stepping to the university, Ramsey immersed himself in its vibrant political scene. On October 22, he joined the Cambridge University Socialist Society, which at the time operated as an internal branch of the University Labour Club. Originally founded in 1900 as the Cambridge University Fabian Society, the Club’s origins reflected its alignment with Fabian Socialism. During Ramsey’s involvement, the Club sought to represent the Labour Party at Cambridge. The Socialist Society, meanwhile, functioned as a platform for Club members with a particular interest in studying, debating, and organizing educational events around socialism. Institutional records, along with Ramsey’s diary entries and essays, indicate that he was among the most active and influential members of the Socialist Society until late 1922. The atmosphere of this Society was particularly well-suited to Ramsey’s interests for several reasons.

First, the Socialist Society fostered a relatively free-form inquiry. Its primary focus was on the critical evaluation of socialist movements and making proposals that deepened understanding of political ideas. Unlike the Labour Club, which distanced itself from what it deemed the more extreme and unnecessary forms of left-wing politics (such as Communism), the Socialist Society tolerated a broader spectrum of political positions (see Misak 2020: 85-86). It occasionally invited speakers who were considered “too red” for the Labour Club, including members of the Communist Party.²⁴ It also occasionally invited those who did not fully align with its staunchly anti-capitalist vision, such as the economist John Maynard Keynes.²⁵ It is reasonable to assume that this aspect of the Society appealed to Ramsey, whose approach to education and inquisitive mind resisted the confines of a singular set of political views dictated by a grand political agenda.

Second, the topics explored by invited speakers at the Socialist Society often resonated with interests that had already fascinated Ramsey. Additionally, many of the speakers were individuals whose work he was familiar with or whom he knew personally. For instance, during Ramsey’s involvement with the Society, Graham Wallas criticized Guild Socialism; J.D. Goodie defended Bolshevism, hailing Lenin as “the biggest man on the globe;” the communist William McLaine elaborated on the aims of the Communist Party; the philosopher Bertrand Russell advocated the establishment of “International Socialism;” and the Labour Party economist Hugh Dalton discussed means of securing

²⁴ In a meeting of the Socialist Society, dated June 3, 1921, “it was suggested that the [Socialist] Society should hold meetings with speakers too ‘red’ for the Labour Club” (GBR/0265/UA/SOC.47.2.3).

²⁵ Keynes was among the list of suggested speakers in June 1922. For his position on capitalism, see Backhouse and Bateman (2009).

democratic control. Notably, the list of invited speakers included Agnes, Frank's mother, who represented "the Liberal Club," advocating democratic governance.²⁶

Third, Ramsey got along well with his fellow members of the Socialist Society, who shared similar intellectual interests. Among them was the journalist Kingsley Martin, arguably the Society's most popular figure and, for a time, its chairman. Just three months after Ramsey began his membership, Martin delivered a philosophical talk on Guild Socialism, to which Ramsey objected for emphasizing the individual and neglecting "the collectivist standpoint."²⁷ Another notable member was the economist Maurice Dobb, who served as chairman in 1921–1922, during the height of Ramsey's involvement. Dobb was the one who encouraged the Society to invite speakers deemed "too red" for the Labour Club. He was himself "too red" by their standard, ultimately joining the Communist Party in 1922 (Shenk 2013: 33). In a November 10, 1922, talk, on "Socialism and Economics," Dobb contended that the Cambridge economist Arthur Cecil Pigou was "the standout exposition" of the socialist view that favored "the moderate Fabian program," the view that did not want to "change the economic system, but to make it function better by means of state action where necessary."²⁸ Another key figure was Richard Braithwaite, who became a member one year before Ramsey in November 1919. He played a vital role as the Society's treasurer and sometimes secretary. H.D. Dickinson, another active member and later historian of economic thought, attempted to bring strong feminist inclinations to the group. In one of his talks, he advocated a socialist system to include "a system of maintenance allowances for children throughout their whole time of education and endowment of motherhood," supporting a feminist campaign of the time that Ramsey too would later find compelling.²⁹

Martin, Dobb, Braithwaite, and Dickinson were among Ramsey's closest undergraduate friends. His diary and letters reveal that they frequently met over tea to discuss politics and occasionally spent their long vacations together. For Ramsey, the Society was more than a forum for intellectual exchange; it was a community where he felt truly at home. However, his integration into this community was not without its challenges. When he joined the Society, he was seventeen years old: three years younger than Dobb and Braithwaite, four years younger than Dickinson, and six years younger

²⁶ GBR/0265/UA/SOC.47.2.3. Members of the Liberal Club included Keynes, Russell, and Michael Ramsey (Frank's brother). We do not know if Frank attended his mother's talk, as it occurred in March 1925, by which time he was no longer actively involved with the Socialist Society. After Agnes's passing, the Labour Club extended a condolence note to Frank, expressing its sympathy with him "for the tragic death of Mrs. Ramsey," fondly remembered as "an old trusted friend of the Club" (GBR/0265/UA/SOC.101.2).

²⁷ GBR/0265/UA/SOC.47.2.3.

²⁸ Pigou's economic writings would later inspire Ramsey's research agenda in economics, which aimed to formalize the issue of exempting savings from income taxes in a dynamic model, as presented in his "A Contribution to the Theory of Taxation" (1927) and "A Mathematical Theory of Saving" (1928) (see Duarte 2009). For more details on Ramsey's two economic papers, see Ch. 14 and 15. For a comprehensive examination of Ramsey's interaction with Pigou, see Ch. 3.

²⁹ GBR/0265/UA/SOC.47.2.3.

than Martin. His diary entries during the first three months of his involvement with this community reflect his admiration and praise for his new friends (particularly Dobb), while expressing doubt about his own capacities.³⁰

But things changed quickly. On January 24, 1921, Dobb asked Ramsey to join their “Research Group.” Ramsey happily accepted. This provided an opportunity for him to take up serious tasks and meet high-ranking political activists. On February 19, Ramsey, in his capacity as a member of the Research Group, met with Robert Page Arnot, chairman of the University Socialist Federation, the student section of the Fabian Society. At the time, Arnot was the head of the Labour Research Department, which originated in the Fabian Society and studied, among other things, trade union activities and campaigns. Ramsey conducted research on the Amalgamated Engineering Union and the Typographical Association.³¹ A prominent British union representing skilled engineering workers, the former had emerged from the amalgamation in 1920 of several smaller unions. The latter was a much smaller trade union representing typographers. This was only a prelude to Ramsey’s more extensive research on trade unions. One of his surviving reports provided several pages of detailed information about trade unions in Cambridge.³² It seems that Ramsey’s work gained him the trust of his fellow socialists. In the early months of 1922, he was tasked with evaluating the reports provided by the Labour Club’s Research Committee. In addition, he took up some other administrative tasks. On February 4, 1921, he “was elected” to lead a committee with the brief of improving the Socialist Society’s financial position.³³ Ramsey’s duties, however, never diverted his attention from studying politics, expanding his network, actively engaging in meetings, and making theoretical contributions to political economy.

Ramsey read a vast number of books on socialism after joining the Socialist Society. A substantial portion of them was on Guild Socialism, including the work of G.D.H Cole, as this was the thematic subject of the Socialist Society talks of the 1921 Lent term. He also paid special attention to the work of Major Clifford Hugh Douglas, the engineer, economist, and pioneer of the social-credit movement.³⁴ We will see that he eventually decided to write something on Douglas’s views.

Ramsey also broadened his social circle. Braithwaite introduced him to John Maynard Keynes, and the three of them met on a few occasions in early 1921. Greatly enjoying Keynes’s company, Ramsey engaged in discussions about probability, history of economics, and Alfred Marshall’s economics.³⁵ His first meeting with Keynes came at the expense of missing an opportunity to meet Wallas. In January 1921, his father (Arthur)

³⁰ GBR/0272/FPR/1.

³¹ GBR/0272/FPR/1.

³² See, ASP.1983.01 006-07-11.

³³ GBR/0265/UA/SOC.47.2.3.

³⁴ GBR/0272/FPR/1.

³⁵ GBR/0272/FPR/1. On the Ramsey-Keynes intellectual friendship, see Ch. 2.

arranged a lunch with Wallas and invited Frank to join. Frank was unable to attend, as he had already committed to meeting Keynes that day with Braithwaite – “bad luck,” in his words. Fortunately, the Socialist Society provided him a second chance to meet Wallas in early March 1921. Around this time, he also met with Cole, following his lecture at the Socialist Society.³⁶

Ramsey was an active participant in meetings, occasionally contributing thoughtful comments to the debates following paper presentations at the Socialist Society. On one occasion, he argued that the transition to Guild Socialism must not come at the cost of chaos. On another, he subtly reminded his socialist peers, who had shown signs of interest in psychology, that ethics cannot be entirely reduced to psychological principles and concepts. In yet another instance, he expressed a strong desire for the severest punishments for men who seriously harmed on their wives.³⁷

In April 1921, Ramsey attended an Oxford socialist conference, organized by the University Socialist Federation in partnership with the Socialist Society, with Dickinson facilitating the collaboration.³⁸ We know that he attended the conference as it was noted in Agnes’s correspondence with Wallas. Wallas had sent Agnes a copy of his newly published book, *Our Social Heritage* (1921). According to Agnes, Frank “begged so hard” to take the book to the conference that she could not decline his request. She then had to “postpone the pleasure of reading” the book herself “for three days.”³⁹

Ramsey attempted to make theoretical contributions to political economy. Three of his undergraduate essays deserve our attention. First, he gave a talk on “Ethics and Politics” at the Socialist Society on May 13, 1921. The topic suited the meeting’s agenda, as it began with the Society’s decision to support the Save the Children Fund, a newly founded non-governmental organization with the goal of raising money to improve children’s lives – an instance of the possibility of the ethics-politics entanglement at the institutional level.⁴⁰ Only a fragment of Ramsey’s essay has survived, but the meeting minutes recorded by Braithwaite provide valuable insights into its content.⁴¹ Recall that Ramsey had previously explored the relationship between ethics and politics in his Winchester essays. He now presented a more articulated version of his thoughts, thanks to his extensive readings in philosophy—a subject that had increasingly dominated his intellectual pursuits since the Spring of 1920.

³⁶ GBR/0272/FPR/1.

³⁷ These meetings were held on February 25, 1921, October 21, 1921, and January 27, 1922 (GBR/0265/UA/SOC.47.2.3).

³⁸ GBR/0265/UA/SOC.47.2.3.

³⁹ Wallas/1/66 LSE Library.

⁴⁰ Ramsey knew some key figures of the Save the Children through the channel of Agnes. He met some of them on July 30, 1920, at the gathering of feminist-socialists at their house (GBR/0272/FPR/1).

⁴¹ For the first few pages of Ramsey’s essay, see ASP.1983.01 006-07-10. For minutes of the meeting, see GBR/0265/UA/SOC.47.2.3.

Ramsey lamented that many, among them G.D.H Cole in his *Social Theory* (1920), had grounded their political theory in a flawed conception of ethics. He then advanced his own account of how ethics might inform politics. According to Braithwaite, Ramsey contented that “the mass of men” lack “moral and intellectual excellence”—a common view in Cambridge of the time (see Marouzi forthcoming). He then argued for a “scientific management” of the government by an intelligent group of people, accompanied by parliamentary democracy. His view aligned very closely with Fabian Socialists. His essay likely resonated strongly with his fellow socialist friends; within a month, he was shortlisted as one of three potential speakers of the Society, tasked with presenting a paper should an invited speaker decline.⁴²

Second, Ramsey authored an essay dedicated to criticizing the work of G.D.H. Cole.⁴³ It likely originated as an extension of his earlier essay, “Ethics and Politics.” Like its predecessor, it addressed the challenge of grounding political theory in ethics, but with a specific focus on how Cole tackles this issue in *Social Theory* (1920). Cole’s book outlined a vision of society rooted in the principles of Guild Socialism, emphasizing the decentralization of power and the organization of economic and social life through cooperative associations. Ramsey contended that Cole’s vision is undermined by the absence of a “definite ethical basis,” referring to G.E. Moore’s ethics as a potential model for such a basis. He rejected what he called Cole’s “individualist theory” that focuses on the value of individuals in society on the ground that an appropriate political theory should include an account of the value of state, which, for Ramsey, cannot be reduced to the value of individuals. He further criticized Cole for failing to grasp the conceptual relationship between human will and right action. He also took issue with Cole’s view of the role of guilds in democracy, and hinted toward Cole’s lack of attention to the role that independent judges and experts could play in resolving political conflicts—a point emphasized by Fabian Socialists of the time.

Third, Ramsey wrote an essay titled “Douglas Proposals.” Major Douglas, the founder of Social-Credit theory, argued that modern economies suffer from a chronic imbalance between purchasing power of wages and the prices of goods and services, leading to economic instability and societal inequities. Then, Douglas advocated issuing additional money to consumers and rendering subsidies to producers. Douglas presented his views in *Credit-Power and Democracy* (1920) and *Economic Democracy* (1920). Ramsey read both in January 1921 and found them completely disappointing and decided to write a critical piece on Douglas’s proposals.⁴⁴ Unlike the previous two essays, this essay was published – in the January 1922 issue of *The Cambridge Magazine*. Ramsey was now confident enough to play a role in the public intellectual landscape, actively striving to caution his fellow socialists against embracing Douglas’s vision which had

⁴² GBR/0265/UA/SOC.47.2.3.

⁴³ ASP.1983.01 006-07-09.

⁴⁴ GBR/0272/FPR/1.

attracted a lot of attention. He defended recent criticisms of Douglas's proposals, insisting that they remained unanswered. He criticized both Douglas's formulation of the problem (that there exists an increasing gap between purchasing power and prices) and his proposed solution to that problem (that issuing additional money and rendering subsidies will fill this gap).⁴⁵

Ramsey was a prominent figure in the Socialist Society in 1921, though his active participation began to decline over the course of 1922. During his involvement, he showed no strong interest in Bolshevism or Communism, expressed skepticism about the merits of Guild Socialism, and expanded his political activism and theoretical pursuits in a direction that aligned with Fabian Socialism. Ramsey's diminished involvement with the Socialist Society during and after 1922 should not be understood as a retreat from politics. He continued his political engagement in other venues, particularly the Heretics Society and the Apostles Society.

III. Ramsey, the Heretic-Apostle

The Socialist Society was not the only student club where the undergraduate Ramsey pursued his political interests. He occasionally attended meetings of Magpie and Stump, Trinity's oldest debating society, which sometimes hosted political debates with invited speakers, including Graham Wallas. At a meeting on November 5, 1920, Ramsey spoke in favor of a "socialist commonwealth," and at another on May 27, 1921, he addressed the topic of democracy and governance.⁴⁶ While his involvement with Magpie and Stump was less intensive than with the Socialist Society, his participation in the Heretics Society was on a comparable level.⁴⁷

The first mention of the Heretics Society in Ramsey's diary dates to late January 1921, expressing his enthusiasm about becoming involved. He was to become an integral member of an intellectually stimulating environment that included either already close friends or others with whom he would soon forge meaningful connections. The founder and president of the Heretics was C.K. Ogden. Its treasurer was Lettice Baker, whom Ramsey would marry a few years later. Its secretary, W.J.H. Spratt, would become a close friend. Ramsey found its list of speakers equally compelling. He particularly noted Keynes, the painter and art critic Roger Fry, Moore, and the philosopher Susan Stebbing in his diary.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ For more details on Ramsey's essay on Douglas proposals and its reception, see Duarte (2017); Misak (2020: 121-127).

⁴⁶ REC.8.10; see also Misak (2020: 93).

⁴⁷ On Arthur's account, there is "no doubt" that Frank took a "prominent part" in discussions of the Heretics Society (GBR/0272/FPR/2/1/3/115).

⁴⁸ GBR/0272/FPR/1.

The Heretics Society primarily discussed philosophy, religion, and art. It was also a good place to discuss topics on political economy for two reasons. First, its members included socialist activists such as Dobb and Martin. Second, between 1921 and 1927, it maintained an economics section that convened at the home of economist Philip Sargant Florence, who also occasionally hosted meetings of the Socialist Society. This arrangement attracted some further left-leaning economists, Joan Robinson among them, who became frequent attendees. It is thus no wonder that Ramsey chose the Heretics Society as a venue to present his essay “Mr. Cole’s Social Theory.”

The Society appealed to Ramsey not only for its political atmosphere but also for its distinctive internal culture. This culture championed bravery to challenge and transcend the orthodoxy rooted in Victorian religious and moral codes – an ethos that lay at the heart of what it meant to be a *heretic*. Ramsey’s deep involvement with this Society reflected his comfort and alignment with this approach. We will see that embracing heretic tendencies played a pivotal role in the development of his political thought.⁴⁹

On February 22, 1921, Ramsey celebrated his birthday by attending a Heretics meeting, where he met the writer and critic Lytton Strachey. Later, the discussion continued in Keynes’s rooms and joined by Moore, Sprott, and Braithwaite.⁵⁰ Unbeknownst to Ramsey, all attendees were members of the secretive Apostles debating society, with Keynes serving as its president at the time. A key responsibility of prominent Apostles was to identify promising students who might be a good fit for membership. Being a heretic (in attitude) mattered, since the Apostles routinely challenged religious, moral, and sexual norms, often infusing their discussions with a touch of humor. Ramsey was being watched, if not at this particular meeting in Keynes’s rooms, then at others. In his presidential address to the Apostles, on June 21, 1921, Keynes lamented that “there is at this moment no active brothers [Apostles] in Trinity.”⁵¹ The stage was set to recruit Ramsey, a promising Trinity student who had already made a strong impression on several Apostles. Four months later, on October 22, 1921, Ramsey would join the Apostles on Braithwaite’s recommendation.⁵² He soon became *the* most dedicated member of its meetings until around the mid-1925 and remained active in it up until the end of his short life (see Marouzi and Ebrahimpour: forthcoming). He found a welcoming place to pursue his joint interests in philosophy and politics.

Throughout his engagement with the Apostles, Ramsey hosted several meetings in his rooms, presented at least eight papers on philosophy, politics, and psychology, and influenced the selection of discussion subjects. Most notably, he gave the following four Apostle talks between 1923 and 1925: “Socialism and Equality of Income” (1923 [1991]),

⁴⁹ For more details on the Heretics Society and Ramsey’s involvement with it, see Duarte (2017: 657-658); Forrester and Cameron (2017: 104-112); Misak (2020: 93-96).

⁵⁰ GBR/0272/FPR/1.

⁵¹ GBR/0272/JMK/UA/36/8.

⁵² GBR/0272/KCAS/39/1/14.

“An Imaginary Conversation with John Stuart Mill” (1924 [1991a]), “Sex from the Point of View of Society” (1924 [1991b]), and “Civilization and Happiness” (1925 [1991]). Taken together, these essays reveal that Ramsey sharply focused on defending policy demands of a group of feminists. This might sound strange, for Ramsey is known to have said that “feminism” is “bad for the race” and “women” (Ramsey 1925 [1991]: 324). A brief exploration of the relevant social context is in order before delving into Ramsey’s remarks on feminism.

In the early interwar years, a large group of feminists, later known as the “new feminists,” led by Eleanor Rathbone argued that motherhood and housekeeping were legitimate careers, entitling women to get paid for domestic works in the form of family endowment. Although the campaign for family endowment quickly gained national attention, it became an economic reality only in the aftermath of the second world war. This delay was partly due to resistance on at least two fronts.

The first wave of resistance emerged from the Labour Party and its allied, male-dominated institutions. The new feminists substantiated their right-based arguments for family endowments with economic arguments. They challenged the concept of the family wage—a uniform amount paid to men, deemed sufficient to support the economic needs of an average five-person family. The family wage was motivated by the assumption that men have dependents to feed. The new feminists opposed the family wage, arguing, among other things, that it failed to account for the varying number of dependents a man might have (see, e.g., Rathbone 1924: 14-38, 136). They challenged this concept because it was fundamentally incompatible with the idea of family endowment: if women were to receive allowances in recognition of the economic value of their domestic works, the premise that men had dependents to feed would no longer hold, weakening the rationale for men receiving family wage. Thus, family endowments could undermine men’s bargaining power in wage negotiations, a prospect that sparked considerable alarm within the Labour Party and its allies. Consequently, they stood firm against the family endowment campaign (see Marouzi 2022).

The second wave of resistance came from within the women’s movement. Many established “liberal feminists” believed that family endowments would not enhance women’s position and would possibly make it worse. Liberal feminists, such as Millicent Fawcett, fought for equal pay for equal work, not family endowment. Rathbone’s campaign was viewed as a self-defeating move for the women; it would promote the gendered division of labor by incentivizing women to stay home and leaving wage-work for men (see Pedersen 1993: 145-149). The disagreement between the two feminist camps eventually resulted in an institutional split. In 1919, Rathbone became president of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC), arguably the most influential feminist organization of the time. The growing influence of the new feminists became evident in 1925 when NUSEC incorporated the family endowment into its general program. Disillusioned with NUSEC’s new direction, some liberal feminists resigned and

sought to organize their voices in alternative institutions in 1927 (see Kent 1988: 240-243). It was in this social context that Ramsey took the stage in the Society.

Ramsey's habit of reading political news, together with his deep interest in women's labor-market rights, likely provided sufficient exposure to familiarize him with the debates surrounding the family endowment campaign. There were additional potential points of acquaintance. His socialist comrade Dickinson, as noted earlier, defended the family endowment campaign in the Socialist Society. While Agnes Ramsey's position on the family endowment remains unknown, she was a close friend of Clara Dorothea Rackham, a key promoter of the campaign in Cambridge and a collaborator of Rathbone (see Maroula 2023: 92). Furthermore, Ramsey knew some members of the Advisory Committee on Motherhood and Child Endowment, formed by the Labour Party to evaluate the family endowment proposal, which was ultimately rejected by the Committee in 1922. Among them were Hugh Dalton and Barbara Drake. Dalton was an occasional invited speaker of the Socialist Society and the past president of the Labour Club. Drake's book *Women in the Engineering Trades* (1917) discussed the family endowment proposal and was noted in Ramsey's 1920 diary as part of his reading.⁵³

Ramsey approached the family endowment controversy from a specific angle. In "Sex from the Point of View of Society" (1924 [1991b]), he noted the gradual decay of "moral feelings about monogamy," which would imply that marriage is not to be regarded "as a long arrangement" anymore (1924 [1991b]: 327). He then wondered what would happen to the economic life of "women and children" in such a situation. Recall that he was presenting his views to the Apostles. His audience were known for their "brotherly love" (Taddeo 1997). Some had romantic relationship with each other and others practiced free love. It is no wonder that a substantial number of them were members of the Heretics Society. Ramsey was himself a practitioner of that local Bohemian culture. As early as his school years, he quoted Edward Jenks approvingly: permanent marriage is motivated by man's desire to "*secure for himself exclusively the labour of the women and her offspring*" (ASP.1983.01: 007-02-02). When Ramsey and Lettice C. Baker married in 1925, they agreed to maintain freedom in their individual sexual lives (see, Misak 2020: 205-215).

Noting the emerging local norms about sex and love, Ramsey suggested that the government should secure the economic life of women and children. A similar worry and solution were echoed in his "Socialism and Equality of Income" (1923 [1991]), where he wondered "whether the cost of a family should be borne by the father or the State," and then gestured toward the positive effects of "maintenance of the children by the state" (Ramsey 1923 [1991]: 318). Ramsey thus called for the family endowment policy on economic grounds. But he went further by defending this policy on non-economic

⁵³ Ramsey occasionally met with Dalton outside of the Socialist Society as well, given Agnes's personal acquaintance with him (Misak 2020: 10, 289).

grounds. Having lamented that “by marriage a woman loses much of her independence,” he contended that “if women were paid by the state for having children, and for housekeeping and so on... they would be in [a] much more independent position” (Ramsey 1924 [1991b]: 328).

Ramsey had one more reason for his interest in the family endowment campaign: he, like the new feminists, tolerated the gendered division of labor. This tolerance was largely due to an underlying conception of what constitutes masculinity and femininity. While pre-war feminists understood them as cultural products, the new feminists conceived them as biologically determined. This changing conception was driven by the psychoanalytic and sexological literature of the time (Kent 1988: 233; Kent 1990: 71). The new feminists drew on this literature to assuage concerns about the gendered division of labor, which in turn made liberal feminists worried about the direction embraced by the new feminist movement (see Kent 1990: 67; Kent 1993: 125, 134). The new feminists, for example, drew upon Sigmund Freud’s work, contending that women’s “happiness and health” depended on “motherhood” (Kent 1990: 73). One of the most elaborate expressions of this view appeared in Rathbone’s presidential address to NUSEC in 1925. She believed the moment had come for the emergence of “the new feminism” with its new conception of gender equality:

At last we can stop looking at our problems through men’s eyes and discussing them in men’s phraseology. We can demand what we want for women, not because it is what men have got, but because it is what women need to fulfill the potentialities of their own natures and to adjust themselves to the circumstances of their own lives (Rathbone 1925: 52).

Ramsey argued along similar lines. He believed that women have “fundamental instincts for marriage and motherhood” (Ramsey 1925 [1991]: 323). In “Civilization and Happiness” (1925 [1991]), delivered eight months after Rathbone’s presidential address, he echoed Rathbone’s remarks, revealing his worries about the path taken by liberal feminists:

Women... are trying to imitate or rival men in vocations for which they are on the average less fitted by nature.... [T]hey are not trying to raise the position of the female sex, by making themselves more important to men in a feminine way, so that men’s lives revolved round women. This they could hardly manage; so that they are naturally trying to better themselves by the alternative method of becoming as far as possible men instead of women (Ramsey 1925 [1991]: 323).

Of course, this is not a progressive view by the standard of our time, but a legitimate position within the British women’s movement of the early interwar years. Ramsey’s position was a manifestation of his passion for psychoanalysis, the theory that he found much more advanced than Mill’s psychology in “An Imaginary Conversation with John Stuart Mill” (1924 [1991a]), delivered in January 1924. Later that year, he was psychoanalyzed by Theodor Reik, Freud’s student, in Vienna. After his return to

Cambridge, he became a formative member of the Psych an Society, a group consisting of members, such as John Rickman and the Apostle Lytton Strachey, who had been psychoanalyzed and wanted to educate themselves about the recent works on psychoanalysis (see Forrester and Cameron 2017: chapter 6; Misak 2020: 150-170, 220-226).

We are now in a better position to understand Ramsey's controversial remark: "Not merely is feminism bad for the race but it is unfortunate for the women also, who are forced away from the kind of life which they are fitted by nature to enjoy, to one which can only give them secondary satisfaction" (Ramsey [1925] 1991, p. 324). Two clarifying comments are in order.

First, the "feminism" that Ramsey refers to must be liberal feminism, not the new feminism. This is because he says "feminism" forces women away from doing what they are "fitted by nature." It is supposedly motherhood and domestic works that fit women's nature. Ramsey's target was the feminism that encouraged women to work outside (i.e. liberal feminism), not the feminism that was comfortable with assigning the tasks of motherhood and domestic works to women (i.e. the new feminism). One should note that "liberal feminism" and "the new feminism" were not common terms in the political discourse when Ramsey delivered his Apostle talks. Rathbone introduced her position as "the new feminism" in her 1925 NUSEC presidential address. The difference between the two branches of feminism became more explicit and widely identifiable only after the institutional split within the British women's movement in 1927. Similar to Ramsey, the psychoanalysts Freud, Karl Abraham, and Ernest Jones (Ramsey's fellow member of Psych an Society) used "feminism" to refer to liberal feminism (see Freud [1925] 1927: 142; Kent 1990: 74; Forrester and Cameron 2017: 179n228). Thus, what was later known as "the new feminism" was excluded from Ramsey's harsh criticism of "feminism" mentioned above, for the new feminists themselves drew upon the works of psychoanalysts to justify their tolerance with the gendered division of labor.

Second, Ramsey believed that liberal feminism could have adverse effects for "the race." On Ramsey's account, liberal feminists encouraged intelligent women to be educated; and educated women tended to have fewer children (Ramsey 1925 [1991]: 323). Eugenic concerns could be raised for the family endowment policy, too, as it could decrease the relative proportion of privileged and educated class by increasing the working-class population. Fully aware of this concern, Rathbone addressed it in a chapter of her book (Rathbone 1924: 232-247). The primary solution that she and the new feminists endorsed was providing birth control information and contraceptive methods to married women. Ramsey endorsed this solution. In "Socialism and Equality of Income" (1923 [1991]), after making some positive remarks on "the maintenance of the children by the State," he wrote: "the chief objection to" family endowment "is that it would probably tend to increase the population." He continued, "but whether that objection will

maintain its force when people know about birth control and are educated enough to practice it seems to me very doubtful” (1923 [1991]: 318–319).⁵⁴

By 1925, the new feminists had successfully incorporated birth control advocacy into NUSEC’s agenda. Shortly thereafter, they collaborated with women of the Labour Party to lobby the Ministry of Health, ultimately securing permission for public clinics to provide birth control information (Kent 1993: 131-132). Agnes Ramsey contributed to the movement in Cambridge, playing a pivotal role in founding the Cambridge Women’s Welfare Association, formally launched in May 1925. The first annual report of the Association defined its aim as “to consider means of bringing knowledge of contraceptive methods within the reach of all married women.” Agnes was listed as a member of its Executive Committee, with Frank Ramsey, Braithwaite, and Keynes among its General Council members. The Association established the first birth control clinic in Cambridge. Its third annual report was compiled in 1928, after Agnes’s death. Finding it “a great loss,” the report stated that Agnes “perhaps more than any other individual, deserves credit for the successful launching of the Birth Control Clinic.” The report also indicated that Frank Ramsey stayed active in the organization and was now joined by Lettice (his wife) and Rackham (a central figure of the family endowment campaign).⁵⁵

By 1925, Rathbone sought to incorporate two new reforms into NUSEC’s immediate program: family allowances and birth control (Smith 1990: 56). Ramsey’s Apostle talks together with his later activism in the Cambridge birth control clinic contributed to both reforms. He had well-defined targets in the political landscape.

IV. Concluding Remarks

Ramsey developed an interest in socialism and feminism during his Winchester years. His political views took shape more definitively after he entered Cambridge University, where he became increasingly drawn to Fabian Socialism and later to the new feminism. His mother, Agnes, played a pivotal role in introducing him to the world of politics. Moreover, the societal demands of the early interwar years, combined with his reflections on theoretical underpinnings of socialist positions, shaped the development of his political thought. During the 1920s, Ramsey made profound contributions to economics and philosophy. However, the extent to which his politics intersected with and informed his economics and philosophy remains an open question.

⁵⁴ He reiterates this point in “Sex from the Point of View of Society” too, adding more complex details to it (see, Ramsey [1924] 1991b: 327).

⁵⁵ For annual reports of the Association, see (Reports by the Cambridge Women’s Welfare Association, LSE Digital Library, Inter-war British Feminist Collection). Lella Secor Florence (Philip Sargent Florence’s wife), a member of the Association, wrote on its activities in *Birth Control on Trial* (1930), pointing to Agnes’s and Lettice’s contributions in the Acknowledgement and the Introductory Note.

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