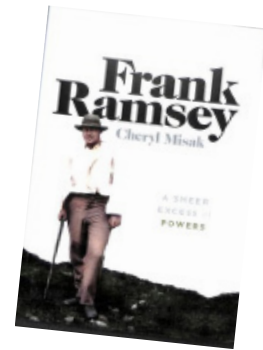


# Book review

## Frank Ramsey: A Sheer Excess of Powers

by Cheryl Misak

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Does socialism add up? This is a mathematical question as well as a political and moral one. A hundred years ago, mathematical economics was dominated by socialist advocates of Soviet-style central planning. Later, in the 1930s, John Maynard Keynes based his interventionist General Theory on a set of fundamental equations. It was only after World War Two that Milton Friedman and other neoliberal economists began to use complex algebra to spread the gospel of laissez-faire.

One of the greatest mathematical economists of the 20th century was the Cambridge academic Frank Plumpton Ramsey, a protégé of Keynes. He is the subject of a new biography by Cheryl Misak, who takes her subtitle from a quote by the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter marvelling at Ramsey's 'sheer excess of [intellectual] powers'.

Ramsey was a socialist and an ecologist who argued that capitalism does not operate in a social or environmental vacuum. The biggest problem facing humanity, he wrote, was the destruction of the planet's resources, or 'discounting the interests of future generations for the sake of present enjoyment, a practice which is ethically indefensible and arises merely from the weakness of the imagination'.

Ramsey's background was professional and upper-middle-class. His father was a mathematics don at Cambridge, and Frank learned to read almost as soon as he could talk. His political sense was precocious, too. As an infant, he complained to his mother that a younger brother Michael – who

grew up to become the Archbishop of Canterbury – was a conservative, adding: 'You see, I asked him, "Michael are you a liberal or a conservative?" And he said, "What does that mean?" And I said, "Do you want to make things better by changing them or do you want to keep things as they are?" And he said, "I want to keep things." So he must be a conservative.'

As a teenager, Ramsey joined the Communist Party and campaigned for guild socialism, according to which a congress (democratically elected by workers in factories) would form a representative body alongside Parliament. During the General Strike, Ramsey supported the dockers and picketed Cambridge railway station to prevent blacklegs from driving the trains. As an undergraduate, he was a member of the secret Cambridge discussion society, the Apostles, along with Keynes, Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore and Lytton Strachey, who wrote, after Ramsey's death, that 'the world will never know what has happened – what a light has gone out.'

At the end of World War One, when the Austrian philosopher Wittgenstein wrote to Russell from an Italian prisoner-of-war camp, enclosing the manuscript of his extraordinarily difficult *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, it was given to the 18-year-old Ramsey to produce an English translation, which Wittgenstein later said was better than the German original.

Ramsey got a job as a mathematics tutor at King's College Cambridge but he only ever published eight pages of pure mathematics in his lifetime. Instead he was celebrated in the

university and beyond for combining cutting-edge economic theory with socialist advocacy, and for clashing with Keynes over state ownership of industry. When Ramsey later wrote up his argument for *The Economic Journal*, which was edited by Keynes, the latter generously described it as 'one of the most remarkable contributions to mathematical economics ever made'.

When Ramsey died, in 1930, at the tragically young age of 26, he was in the middle of writing a book about the mathematical principles of socialism. Unfortunately, in the wake of the Great Depression, economists had more pressing concerns so it was only decades later that the impact of Ramsey's unfinished work began to be felt. Historians sometimes play a game of imagining how 20th-century thought might have been different if Ramsey had survived and his ideas had caught on earlier.

Ramsey designed a mathematical blueprint for studying problems in economics but he would have hated the way it's often been hijacked by free-market zealots. In his 1923 paper 'Socialism and Equality of Income', he argued for state ownership and control of industry to help the disadvantaged in society and to avoid loading excessive debt, environmental degradation and other burdens onto future generations. Inequality could be solved by taxation, he said. Ramsey was also concerned about the 'hereditary class' system, claiming it was inefficient to have 'fools' (i.e. the offspring of the rich) running the country. How could any argument be more relevant to today's debate about climate change and intergenerational justice?

By Hugh Barnes