

Black Market: Britain 1939-1955

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In this dense and well-researched book, Mark Roodhouse investigates the 'moral economy' of Britain's wartime and post-war white, grey, and black markets (p. 10). The book offers a persuasive argument that evasion of economic regulations cannot be understood solely through attention to structural factors; along with local community norms, concepts of fairness and ethical behavior were crucial in the functioning of grey and black markets. In presenting this argument, Roodhouse's work accomplishes two major feats. First, he provides the reader with a comprehensive and detailed account of how the black market functioned in day-to-day life. Second, and more importantly, Roodhouse recasts the meaning of evasion and illicit commerce, demonstrating that participation in grey and black markets provides insight into concepts of fairness and sacrifice but does not necessarily operate as an indicator of patriotic sentiment or national unity.

From the book's opening pages, the reader is plunged to the bewildering world of clothing coupons, ration books, and price controls, the confusing nature of which hints at how average British consumers must have experienced the onslaught of new regulations developed from 1939. At the outbreak of war, British officials immediately began implementing economic policies of price controls and rationing. Fearful of reliving the economic downturn that followed the First World War, their goals included both maintaining supplies of essential goods and ensuring that the economy would remain strong after the war's end. For the next 16 years, Britons would make do with limited supplies of everything from petrol to bacon to cosmetics. Products that had been plentiful before the war, such as butter and eggs, became scarce and potentially illegal commodities subject to strict official regulation.⁽¹⁾ Despite narratives of national unity and shared sacrifice, British civilians could and did find ways to circumvent these economic regulations.

A major strand of historiography has concerned itself with the wartime behavior of the British home front, seeking to determine how the experience of the Second World War altered Britain's social and political landscape. While popular images of wartime Britain continue to emphasize national unity and civilian sacrifice, works like Angus Calder's *The Myth of the Blitz* have foregrounded class tension and regional divides and called into question the Second World War as an event that leveled out social inequalities.⁽²⁾ In this body of literature, rationing is often used as one example of an area in which pre-war social divisions remained or even grew worse. Rarely, however, are these questions regarding the social impact of economic controls followed into the post-war period. In this work, Roodhouse seeks to engage with these longstanding

debates surrounding wartime Britain using an economic history of evasion and black markets. As he points out in this volume's preface, economic history has generally studied historical trends using hypothetical rational actors whose choices can be understood as responses to structural economic forces. Despite the influence of E. P. Thompson and others who echoed his calls for greater attention to cultural factors when studying responses to economic trends, economic historians have continued to struggle with the best ways of incorporating such non-structural factors into their analysis.⁽³⁾ As this book demonstrates, wartime and post-war evasion provides an ideal case with which to critique economic histories that fail to take into account personal and cultural factors. As Roodhouse contends at the book's outset, limiting the analysis to the 'structure of control' simply cannot explain why some people chose to participate in the black market and others did not (p. 9).

At the core of Roodhouse's work are the complicated and shifting boundaries between the black, grey, and white markets. As defined by some British regulatory bodies, the black market constituted any evasion of rationing or price controls by consumers or retailers. Other agencies adopted more limited definitions of black market activity. Many activities officially classified as black market by one or more legal bodies, however, occupied the category of the socially acceptable grey market from the perspective of the general public. In addition, the popular definition of black market could include some 'immoral' activities like adulteration of goods, which was illegal but not necessarily categorized as black market by all official bodies (p. 16). These popular categories were not entirely unrelated to the formal legal regulations, but they departed from some official views on the grounds of fairness or necessity. For example, consumers refused to cooperate with regulations prohibiting the gifting of clothing coupons, believing that families and neighbors should be allowed to trade and gift during holidays and other special occasions. Here, Roodhouse vividly illustrates ways that illegal activities became reconfigured as grey rather than black market when done for the purpose of maintaining community bonds rather than for reasons perceived as self-serving.

This investigation of the moral economy of the black market is broken into three parts. Part one explores the various methods by which consumers evaded rationing and price controls. Any fantasies the reader may have about a black market run by ruthless gangsters are quickly put to rest as Roodhouse illustrates the somewhat prosaic reality of evasion as consisting primarily of such low-risk transactions as swapping clothing coupons and illegally purchasing eggs. In this first section's detailed exploration of the black and grey markets, Roodhouse seeks to answer the question of how extensive the black market really was and what implications this had for larger issues of wartime and post-war British society. In doing so, Roodhouse seeks to reconcile conflicting perceptions of the black market as either insignificant or pervasive. He arrives at the conclusion that many of the inconsistencies surrounding research into the scale of the black market can be traced to the erroneous assumption that the term 'black market' held the same meaning for all members of society (p. 19). In addition to identifying conflicting use of terms, this section also identifies social tensions surrounding the black market, particularly concerning class.

In part two, Roodhouse argues that enforcement of rationing and other restrictions took an arbitrary form, with truly comprehensive regulation proving impossible without significant public cooperation. This section depicts the bureaucrats tasked with managing the wartime economy as stumbling in the war's initial phases before finally arriving at a relatively efficient and effective system. As Roodhouse frequently reminds the reader, any successes enjoyed by the rationing and price control system can be attributed not to stringent enforcement, but rather to the successful design of an efficient system organized in such a way as to discourage black market dealings (seen in such areas as effective monitoring and disposal of used coupons). While acknowledging this system's effective elements, however, Roodhouse locates significant flaws in enforcement strategies. In keeping with the book's emphasis on community standards and ethics, Roodhouse dedicates close attention to the implications of reporting offenses within the community; in some cases, reporting on a neighbor or shopkeeper could result in social exclusion and increased economic hardship. Importantly, Roodhouse recognizes that regulators and bureaucrats understood many of the flaws within their own rationing schemes, demonstrated in their shift away from depending on reporting offenders and towards public campaigns appealing to the public's sense of fairness and shared sacrifice.

This section on regulation and enforcement also brings to light ethnic and regional divides in wartime and postwar British society. All-too-familiar stereotypes of untrustworthy Jewish and Indian peddlers surface in both popular discourse and in law enforcement strategy. Further undermining the 'Myth of the Blitz' are Roodhouse's examples of disproportionate police attention to Britons of different regions, such as in a far higher rate of petrol checks of Welsh compared to English drivers. As in the book's other discussions, Roodhouse's analysis of ethnic and regional difference in law enforcement illustrates the ways in which personal views and social norms became enmeshed with economic activities. In this case, Roodhouse contends, the biases of the police and the judiciary against groups like Indian peddlers rendered evenhanded economic regulation impossible.

The book's third section delves into the moral decisions and rationales employed to justify illegal or quasi-legal dealings. Diaries and surveys supplied by the research organization Mass Observation form the core of the material used for this part of the analysis. Roodhouse identifies a variety of methods by which people justified their evasion of price controls and rationing, ranging from attacking hypocrisy and unfairness in regulations to redefining the black market so as to exclude their own activities. Local social practices and community ties have particular relevance in this section, as the line between black and socially justifiable grey markets depended largely on local custom.

Along with this emphasis on locality comes an intriguing discussion of oppositional subcultures operating within the black market. Several groups are identified as already excluded from the mainstream and therefore more receptive to participation in black rather than grey market activity; the groups identified by Roodhouse include the 'lumpen poor', Irish Catholics, and petty criminals (pp. 214–16). While Roodhouse makes a compelling case for why certain groups would lack sufficient motivation to conform to the policies of the British state, the lines separating these oppositional subcultures and mainstream society appear suspiciously well-defined. Roodhouse's clear distinction between the 'closed social networks that characterized the underworld' and 'respectable society,' for example, seems to ignore much existing research suggesting that 20th-century working-class communities did not always display such a clear-cut distinction between criminal elements and the respectable poor (p. 220).⁽⁴⁾

While not identified as a category of analysis central to the book's argument, gender appears as an important factor at several points. As numerous other historians have observed about earlier periods, both wartime household budgeting and the maintenance of community relationships were largely a female responsibility. Roodhouse offers strong discussions of aspects of rationing that placed a disproportionate burden on women, such as insufficient clothing coupons. At other points, there seem to be missed opportunities for discussion of gendered policy choices; an anecdote surrounding a propaganda film chastising a fictional housewife for evasion, for example, implies that women were sometimes singled out as a driving force in the black market, but this is not developed into a more in-depth analysis.

The greatest strength of Roodhouse's work lies in his painstaking depiction of the black and grey markets as nebulous and shifting categories dependent largely on popular consensus rather than the letter of the law. Rather than adopting a single perspective or definition of 'black market,' such as that employed by law enforcement or by the general public, Roodhouse focuses directly on the points at which conflicting concepts of legality and fairness collided. By including analysis of both street-level economic activities and the regulatory bodies that shaped those activities, this book is able to illustrate the tension emerging from the clash between economically necessary regulations and informal, longstanding social norms governing trade and economic interaction on a day-to-day basis.

Roodhouse also displays careful attention to the more deceptive elements of his source material and finds creative ways of drawing conclusions from deeply flawed data. The book's first section contains a thorough discussion of the different methods used to estimate the size of the black market, ranging from straightforward prosecution statistics to more unconventional studies identifying price and supply fluctuations that could only be attributable to significant black market activity. While this part of *Black Market Britain*

's analysis is dense and potentially baffling for readers without a solid background in economics, it contains valuable insights into methods of identifying weaknesses in official data collection, particularly in cases when discrepancies may be due largely to inconsistent definitions and categorization of offenses.

Despite the strength of the evidence presented and the persuasive use of the moral economy model, the book suffers from some minor organizational problems. One wonders why the narrative is not arranged chronologically or broken into distinct periods such as 'wartime' and 'post-war'. While a compelling case could be made for treating the entire rationing period as a time of relative continuity, Roodhouse provides evidence at several points that his subjects 'differentiate[d] between "during the war" and "after the war."' (p. 208). Other organizational issues become apparent in moments when an anecdote is repeated multiple times without reference to previous discussions, such as in multiple mentions of a regulatory scheme involving red dye in petrol.

In addition to these organizational issues, questions regarding Roodhouse's use of sources remain. As previously discussed, Roodhouse approaches quantitative data with a healthy dose of skepticism; personal accounts like diaries, however, are not always sufficiently interrogated. While Roodhouse makes good use of Mass Observation diaries, one wonders if different moral justifications for grey and black market dealings might have emerged if they had been paired with a larger body of more conventionally private diaries and other personal accounts. Roodhouse briefly considers the problem of subjects lying or exaggerating in diaries or questionnaires, but dismisses the issue by emphasizing the subjects' 'commitment to M-O's ideals and their positive experiences of the way M-O handled their replies.' (p. 196). Without the inclusion of significant quantities of other private documents to serve as supporting evidence or a comparative case, however, this conclusion seems unsupported. Even if a large body of non-Mass Observation diaries would have been too scarce or difficult to employ for the purposes of this project, a more detailed discussion of the potential weaknesses and pitfalls of the Mass Observation sources would have been enormously helpful.

These minor weaknesses, however, do not overpower the general strength of Roodhouse's analysis. With this work, Mark Roodhouse has provided a comprehensive and thoroughly researched study of the functioning of black and grey markets in wartime and post-war Britain. More importantly, he has identified the importance of ethics and concepts of fair play in the success of rationing schemes. As a result, Roodhouse is able to illustrate the ways in which the boundaries separating white, grey, and black markets were in fact negotiated within British society rather than strictly imposed from above. This work is a significant contribution to both economic history and the cultural history of the British in the Second World War.

Notes

1. See Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain, 1939–1945* (New York, NY, 1969), pp. 69–72.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See Ibid, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London, 1991); see also Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939–1945* (Oxford, 2003), p. 36.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See E. P. Thompson, 'The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century', in *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*, ed. E. P. Thompson (New York, NY, 1993), p. 187.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain 1890–1960: Race, Class, and Ethnicity* (London, 1994), p. 45, in which she argues for a blurred line separating respectable and disrespectable in the specific area of juvenile working-class culture.[Back to \(4\)](#)

The author thanks Jamie Stoops for his/her review, but does not wish to comment further.

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