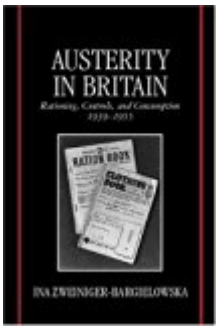
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska. *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption 1939-1955.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. xiii + 286 pp. $65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-820453-4.

Reviewed by John Singleton

Published on EH.Net (July, 2000)

Zweiniger-Bargielowska's readable study of rationing and austerity in mid-twentieth century Britain is a mixture of economic, social, and political history. Her principal conclusion is political rather than economic. British housewives' disgust after 1945 at the continuation, and indeed intensification, of certain aspects of rationing was successfully exploited by the Conservative Party, and contributed materially to Labour's defeat at the 1951 general election. In stressing the deep division between Labour and the Conservatives over austerity, Zweiniger-Bargielowska strengthens the case against the popular thesis that postwar British political life was marked by cross-party consensus. Along the way, she provides a thorough account of the rationing mechanism, the intricacies of the black market, and the effects of rationing on the health, welfare, and morale of different groups of the British population.

Rationing, price controls, and subsidies were introduced during World War Two to ensure that supplies of food, clothing, and certain other consumer products were distributed on an equitable basis at fair prices. To a large extent, this policy was successful. Although people grumbled at the monotonous wartime diet of bread, potatoes, and vegetable pies, it was both nutritious and adequate in terms of bulk. In fact, the poor were better fed during the war than they had been in the 1930s. The war and early postwar years witnessed significant improvements in physical health, especially among children in poor urban areas. The consequences, if any, of austerity for mental health are not mentioned.

After the war, most people could not understand why rationing could not at least be relaxed. The world food crisis, balance of payments difficulties, and the need to feed the starving Germans were used by ministers as justifications not only for the retention of controls, but for the introduction of bread rationing which had not been considered necessary during the war itself. Housewives generally bore the brunt of austerity, giving up some of their rations for the sake of their husbands and children. Pets also suffered disproportionately. It was an offence to feed wild birds with breadcrumbs, as well as to give pets food that was fit for human consumption. Men were more toler-

ant than women of rationing, perhaps because they had more opportunities to buy non-rationed meals at works canteens, and did not have to do the family queuing, shopping, and cooking.

Throughout the 1940s there was a thriving black market. One of the simplest scams was to claim to have lost one's ration book. Officials suspected that 90 per cent of claims for new ration books were fraudulent but, as it was difficult to prove dishonesty, the authorities usually provided a replacement. Forgers took full advantage of the fact that ration coupons were easier to copy than bank notes. However, the black market in Britain, unlike that in the USA, was not dominated by organized crime. Zweiniger-Bargielowska suggests that administrative procedures were tighter in Britain than in the USA. Britain also lacked the American tradition of organized crime.

Public attitudes towards the black market were ambivalent. People condemned others who engaged in illicit dealing, but saw no reason why they should not occasionally indulge in 'under the counter' transactions themselves. My grandfather, who was a stonemason in Lancashire, used to receive fresh meat in partial payment for supplying headstones to farmers. The activities of farmers, who often held food back from official channels, were among the main concerns of the rationing authorities. As Zweiniger-Bargielowska points out, the black market undermined, but did not negate, the egalitarian purpose of rationing.

Zweiniger-Bargielowska does not go into the microeconomics of rationing, although contemporary economists had plenty to say on this theme. Nor, more importantly, does she really tackle the question of whether the austerity of the late 1940s was unavoidable. Would the British economy have collapsed in the late 1940s if meat or butter rations had been increased? Paraphrasing the title of Roy Harrod's tract on austerity, were these hardships really necessary? On the face of it, it seems unlikely that a few extra rashers of bacon would have led to national disaster, whatever ministers may have said. A more searching analysis of the extensive literature on the economic policies, both internal and external, of the 1945-51 Labour government would have helped Zweiniger-Bargielowska to find an answer to Harrod's question.

Draconian food rationing was not absolutely essential after the war. Savings could have been made in other areas of the external accounts. For instance, tobacco was prominent in Britain's imports from the USA at the height of the dollar crisis. This poison was not rationed, apparently because of its morale boosting and revenue raising qualities. Clearly, if less had been spent on importing tobacco, the British would have been able to enjoy a slightly more appetizing diet. There were other highly questionable drains on the balance of payments after 1945, such as the cost of occupying Palestine, Greece, Germany, and those parts of the empire that did not produce a dollar surplus. Certain uncontrolled outward capital flows, for instance to South Africa and Australia in 1947, also put strain on Britain's capacity to import basic foodstuffs. In other words, rationing was necessary because the government and its supporters preferred to allocate resources to the maintenance of tobacco supplies and Britain's status as a world power than to the provision of a wider choice of food. Whether or not this ordering of priorities was in the best interests of ordinary people is a matter of opinion.

While comparatively weak on the rationale for the persistence of austerity after 1945, Zweiniger-Bargielowska supplies a wealth of information on the administration of rationing, the struggle against the black market, the effects of rationing on morale, and Churchill's manipulation of housewives' frustration with austerity. I strongly recommend this book to anyone interested in British history of the mid-twentieth century.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at http://eh.net/

Citation: John Singleton. Review of Zweiniger-Bargielowska, Ina. *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption 1939-1955.* EH.Net, H-Net Reviews. July, 2000.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4364