

Fabrice Grenard, *La France du marché noir (1940-1949)*, Paris, Payot, 2008, 352 p.

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The Occupation-era is known in English as “the dark years”. There were many things that made the period a somber one, not least of all the black market, which is the subject of Fabrice Grenard’s new book. In all periods of economic difficulty, irregular commercial dealings recrudescence, but they assumed massive proportions in wartime France. Grenard estimates that 20-40% of all agricultural production in 1943 found its way to consumers through black market channels.

Why this should have been so is not hard to explain. The war created circumstances of scarcity, which bad harvests made yet more severe. Vichy attempted to organize markets, a response that was in part pragmatic but also consonant with its dirigiste impulses. A regime of production quotas, price controls and rationing was patched together in the fall of 1940, creating what the authorities hoped would be a closed-circuit system not that difficult in practice to keep a close watch on. It did not help, though, that Vichy set price maxima low and food rations at a caloric level insufficient to keep working people adequately fed. Then there were the Germans who organized purchasing bureaus that sidestepped the Vichy system, buying black market goods to keep their own troops in a state of comfort and plenty. German military setbacks in the East prompted the Occupier, now in increasing economic difficulties himself, to squeeze the French economy yet harder. In the summer of 1943, the Germans backed out of the black market and turned to making Vichy dirigisme work for them. Did Vichy monitor production? The Germans made certain that an increasing portion of what was produced went to the Reich, exacerbating already painful shortages in France. For the average French man or woman, life became more and more about provisioning and, under the circumstances, what choice remained but to turn to the black market?

This part of Grenard’s story will not come as a surprise, perhaps not even the vast scale of the fraud involved. It is not the “why” of the black market that is the real point of interest in Grenard’s book but the consequences of the phenomenon.

The consequences first of all for the Vichy state and, as it turns out, for its successors as well. Vichy did its utmost to police fraud but soon found the scale of the illegality more than it could handle. In March 1942, it began to distinguish petty trafficking undertaken to make life a little better for oneself or one’s family from more ambitious, profit-making criminality. The former was treated as a minor offense, the latter punished with greater severity. At the end of the year, Vichy streamlined its repressive apparatus, creating a Direction générale du contrôle économique (DGCE) to handle most cases of fraudulent activity. Jean de Sully, a former Inspecteur des finances, was placed in charge. He assembled a substantial staff, over 4 500 in all, and then went to work with a remarkable energy. In 1943, the DGCE processed almost four hundred thousand infractions, the great majority involving agricultural goods. The DGCE, it should be noted, was not just a

police agency; it often acted as judge and jury as well. It had the authority to work out plea bargains with accused black-marketers, to impose fines, and, by the end of the war, even to intern offenders or deport them to Reich territory for labor service. For major offenses requiring jail time, Vichy's judicial apparatus was responsible, but it was up to the DGCE to decide when offenses were major. In the event, it opted to handle the bulk of the casework itself, an example of what Grenard labels the growing "*étatisation* of justice" under Vichy (p. 80).

What is remarkable is just how much of this repressive apparatus was bequeathed more or less intact to Vichy's successor regime, the Fourth Republic. Food shortage, rationing and black market activity did not disappear with the return of peace. Liberation authorities decided not to dismantle the *Contrôle économique*, and Saily too was kept on. There was a purge, but it was a light one, effecting a hundred or so persons discredited by their collaborationist zeal. It is important to note that the postwar *Contrôle économique* now deferred to the judiciary when it came to deciding the disposition of cases, and to this degree the *étatisation* of justice was reversed. But in practice, the courts took up just ten percent of cases, referring most of the rest back to the *Contrôle économique* for action. With the revival of the economy in the late forties and the concomitant end of rationing in 1949, the *Contrôle économique* was disassembled, its component parts dissolved or reassigned to this ministry or that. Yet, its legacy endured. It had learned how to monitor illicit market activity, how to track unlawful movements of merchandise, how to infiltrate black market networks, and these techniques proved indispensable to subsequent generations of police. Vichy had also imposed measures to insure the honesty of merchants, requiring them to post prices, to employ uniform book-keeping procedures, and so on. These measures too proved too useful to discard. Vichy's most authoritarian innovations were jettisoned at the Liberation, but that did not mean that Vichy left no lasting imprint on the practice of French statecraft.

The policing of the black market changed, sometimes in enduring ways, how the French state went about its business. It also had a massive impact on public opinion, and Grenard has a number of thoughtful observations to make on the subject. Vichy's almost instantaneous failure to make its rationing system work caused the regime immediate problems. Shopkeepers protested price maxima. Housewives took to the streets to complain about the meagerness of rations. Peasants resisted requisitions. From the very beginning, Grenard concludes, Vichy's botched food policies insured that the regime never enjoyed a "consensus" of favorable opinion (p. 70). People, however, did not give up altogether on the system, at least not right away. As the pace of fraudulent activity picked up, unhappy citizens turned to denunciation in the hope of setting things to rights. Vichy authorities received an estimated three to five million such denunciations, most of them leading nowhere, and the black market phenomenon continued to mushroom. It was now no longer the well-off on the look-out for something extra who made up the bulk of the black market's customer base but one and all, impelled by pressing material hardship. The alienation of public opinion, however, was not quite complete. That required German intervention. The Occupier's decision to pursue a stepped-up requisitions policy gave black market activity an anti-German sheen. The Resistance caught on to the political potential of the situation, sometime in 1943 changing its line on the black market. Illicit transactions were no longer shady, dubious

affairs but dubbed “a patriotic duty”, a form of resistance to German exploitation. The new line paid the Resistance rich dividends in growing public support. Resistance networks had been city-born, but in the closing years of the war they made inroads into the countryside among a restive peasantry who didn't want to do labor service in Germany and who resented Vichy and the Occupier's joint crusade to wring ever more produce from the farmer.

There is a certain tendency in recent historiography to understand the experience of ordinary French men and women under the occupation as an experience of suffering, citizens more and more repelled by the wider world of politics and more and more homed in on the private business of just getting by. What Grenard shows is that “getting by” willy-nilly implicated people in anti-regime activities and that the Resistance made a concerted effort, with a measure of success, to politicize those activities. He does not go so far as to say that food issues made France into a “nation of Resisters”, but he complicates the image of Occupation-era France as a “nation of sufferers”.

There is a third issue that Grenard's research illuminates, having to do with the changing place of social groups - in this instance peasants and shopkeepers - in French public life. Think of the Third Republic, and it is these very strata, the men and women who populate Marcel Pagnol's movies and novels, that come to mind. Under the Occupation, they were tarred as principal players in the drama of the black market. Think now of the family of *crémiers*, the Poissonards, in Jean Dutourd's *Au Bon Beurre*. Grenard confirms that public perceptions were not wide of the mark. Farmers and small-business people were in fact involved in black market activities in large numbers. But he also shows that, pinched by need as many of them were, they did not get rich off of such dealings. There were great fortunes to be made, but it was middle-men or organized gangs, not small fry like the Poissonards, who made them.

Still, as Grenard demonstrates, that's not how the public and the Liberation-era state saw matters. In the hungry days of 1944, on the eve of the Liberation, peasant farms whose owners were suspected of hoarding became the targets of pillaging expeditions, although it was not always clear whether the attackers were Resistance commandos or angry consumers. And the troubles continued into the postwar. Bad harvests and bad weather caused food shortages in the spring of 1947, resulting in a rash of bread riots. The government came down hard on shopkeepers in an effort to stabilize food prices, and the shopkeepers themselves, egged on by Léon Gingembre's new-born Confédération générale des petites et moyennes entreprises, answered back, organizing protests of their own in what Grenard labels “a sort of pre-Poujadisme” (p. 279).

The scarcity of essentials and suspected black market profiteering sharpened social tensions, pitting consumers and the state on the one side against shopkeepers and peasants on the other. Nor would this divide heal with the coming of abundance in the 1950s. On the contrary, the “process of modernization”, as Grenard calls it (p. 287), would make life harder for many small-owners, and pre-Poujadisme in due course metamorphosed into Poujadisme tout court. Shopkeepers and peasants had once been the backbone of the Republic; thanks to the black market, they got through the Occupation in better shape than many, earning themselves, however, an unwelcome reputation in the process; and then in the fifties, tainted by a dubious past and squeezed by modernization, they found themselves exiled to the margins of public life.

In the conclusion, Grenard worries that the story he has told does not reflect well on the French but then reassures the reader. There were black markets in postwar Britain and Germany too. They may not have been as big as the black market in wartime France, but then again, the British were never occupied and the Allied occupation in Germany was not predatory the way Germany's in France was. International comparison is not the strong suit in Grenard's presentation.

But whether the French were more or less civic-minded than the British or the Germans is to some degree beside the point. Grenard's book demonstrates that the black market was important, not so much as a moral barometer, as for what it has to say on a range of critical historiographical issues. How did the Vichy state change over time, and what legacy did it leave to succeeding regimes? Was France a nation of resisters after all? How did the war years affect social relations and with what consequences for France's social and political development in the postwar? On all these issues, Grenard has interesting arguments to make, and herein lies the real value of his book.