What happens if we're not interested in going to the shops when they reopen?

theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/12/not-interested-shops-reopen-retail-covid

Andy Beckett March 12, 2021

Under capitalism, shops are one of the places where our society is supposed to feel most alive. Window displays beckon. Products are piled high. Stock changes constantly. Desires are created and never quite satisfied.

For most of the past year, shops in Britain – one of the economies most driven by consumerism – have not been like that at all. Even the grandest London department stores were often eerie places during the few months they were open last summer and autumn: customers sparse, staff trying to keep busy, the same goods on the shelves for much longer than normal. In its most physical form, British consumerism has slowed down and frequently ground to a halt.

Online shopping seems to have been in the opposite state: rocketing sales, rushes for supermarket delivery slots. In many residential areas, delivery vans have been virtually the only traffic – for much of the day the only activity on the streets at all. The life of a neighbourhood reduced to the highly visible consumption habits of its inhabitants: it's a vision of modern Britain to make the most doctrinaire capitalists and Marxists feel vindicated.

Meanwhile inside our homes, as lockdown efforts to self-improve have dwindled, browsing and buying on screens have become many people's default leisure activity, even more than before Covid. Hallways have filled up with parcels, just arrived or about to be returned. The home as stockroom: another example of consumerism penetrating deeper into our lives.

Yet in other ways online shopping has slowed over the past year as well. In some areas badly hit by coronavirus, such as London and the West Midlands, postal deliveries have often been sluggish and erratic, as the increased number of parcels, social distancing in sorting offices and staff infections hamper Royal Mail. And since January, Brexit has added further obstructions: shipping delays and refusals, and unpredictable, often substantial, import charges for goods from the EU.

The almost omnipotent feeling that online shopping used to give Britons with money, or the means to borrow it – that most of Europe was our shopping mall – has gone. As more and more people wake up to this, the consequences for the government may be awkward. More expensive and more bureaucratic shopping, with less choice, was not what leavers voted for.

Last year, during the first lockdown, some people celebrated what they saw as the retreat of consumerism in favour of less individualistic and environmentally damaging pastimes. Some thought this retreat would be lasting. Yet instead, British consumerism is in a

contradictory state: dramatically less visible in our town and city centres, but more important than ever in many of our heads. In a time of terrible loss, acquiring more possessions can be a small way of pushing back against the emptiness. The escape through consumption that capitalism has always promised has become something bigger, at least for some: a rare source of pleasure in lockdown, even a way of feeling more alive again. A lot of the people currently standing in cold, socially distanced queues for coffee, something they could make at home, are really trying to buy a shot of pre-Covid normality.

A month from now, "non-essential" shops will reopen in England, according to Boris Johnson's possibly reckless timetable. The government, optimistic economists such as the Bank of England's Andy Haldane, and many of the 10% of English employees who work or are on furlough in retail, are all hoping that money not spent during lockdown will start to be spent in shops on 12 April, and will help revive the economy as a whole. In the longer term, shops may lose their central retail role – John Lewis has just announced plans to shut stores – but this spring a lot of emotions are going to be invested in them. If customers stay away after the novelty of reopening wears off, we'll know that the psychological recovery from the virus has barely begun.

Until 12 April, most shops will remain in a state of suspended animation. In the nonessential ones at my local shopping centre in north London, the lights are still on in display cabinets, winter sale stickers are still on windows, and most of the clothes rails are still full, but dust is gathering. A shirt I was thinking of buying before the current lockdown hangs tantalisingly out of reach. During the pandemic this frozen landscape, and the way it thwarts our desires, has become so familiar you can forget how strange and unprecedented it is. It's as if the quiet, rule-bound Sunday England that existed before the trading laws were liberalised a quarter of a century ago has returned and taken over the rest of the week as well.

If you're uneasy about consumerism, all these closed shops can be calming, even inspiring – a glimpse of a society less dominated by commerce. But if you like the bustle and freedom of towns and cities, the sight of these once busy, semi-communal spaces now deserted and out of bounds can be unsettling – a possible future for much of Britain, as our lives shift increasingly from physical to digital space.

And even our online shopping economy has vulnerabilities. Last May, the respected retail analyst Richard Hyman wrote on his blog: "Retail entered this [coronavirus] crisis in bad shape. The industry was bloated with too many stores, too many websites …" After the pandemic, he continued, "We will have a materially smaller non-food sector." Behind that jargon lurk thousands of redundancies and abandoned premises. The great British shopping crisis is not over yet.