

Reflections

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This collection had its beginnings at academic workshops and discussions that took place before the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapters were largely written, read and revised over phases of lockdown and of shifting restrictions in the United Kingdom. The long process of the authors and editors preparing the book for publication began in 2022, as clearer pictures were forming of the pandemic's ongoing impact. Government policy, both directly in terms of lockdown measures, furlough schemes and so on, and the ripple effects of interpretation and response at local level, intervened in people's lives in sudden and profoundly disruptive and dislocatory ways. At the same time, particular forms of connection emerged amid the general disconnection from everyday patterns of life. Entering the final stages of assembling the manuscript in 2023, it seemed to us important to reflect on how the book's themes and questions may look now – and where research in the field could go next. We do so in an open and provisional, but also, we hope, generative way; the production of this volume in the pandemic context has, if anything, brought the value and potential of 'retail and community' as an agenda for multi- and interdisciplinary inquiry into sharper relief.

COVID-19 may appear to fit with, even to reinforce, a familiar phasing of modern retail history with a rapid acceleration of trends already well established by the turn of the century: the decline of the high street in favour of the scale, choice and standardization of out-of-town malls, chains and online shopping. Non-essential shops were closed for extended periods and subject to restrictions when open. In 2021, 11,449 shops across the United Kingdom ceased trading. The following year, this figure had increased dramatically to 17,145. Where on average more than 31 shops a day were closing for good in 2021, this had increased to nearly 47 in 2022, two-thirds of which (11,090) were independent retailers. In sharing these figures, the

Centre for Retailing Research positioned the pandemic as one episode within a ‘perma crisis’ of over a decade’s standing, which began with the financial crash of 2008 and deepened as online retailing undermined the viability of bricks-and-mortar stores.¹ Even charity shops, which might usually benefit from wider economic difficulties, were hit hard by the pandemic. Operating losses led to shop closures for all the largest chains, while those reopening after lockdown saw difficulties in recruiting volunteers exacerbated, with a 24 per cent fall in the number of charity shop volunteers across the United Kingdom in just three years.²

In this collection, we have sought to question and complicate too neat categorizations and periodizations. Writing these concluding reflections with the pandemic as an inescapable context, these efforts seem more relevant, not less so. On closer inspection, COVID-19 is not easily integrated into narratives of perma crisis nor does it serve as a moment of complete rupture. The complexities we foregrounded in the introduction and that authors explored in their chapters are also to be found as we consider the enmeshment of retail and community during and ‘after’ the pandemic. If a central task of this volume has been to examine assumptions of what has been lost in the transition from traditional to modern retailing – and, indeed, what we understand to be traditional or modern – then they are and will remain live issues for researchers for decades to come.

Even as those job losses and store closures were headline news, shop assistants and delivery drivers were grouped with NHS and care home staff as keyworkers, clapped for on doorsteps or thanked on the home-made posters displayed in front room windows. Narratives of service on the ‘front line’ reanimated once again nostalgic tropes of wartime resolve and postwar resilience so amenable to propagandist ends. This sits uncomfortably with a tripling of violence and abuse directed at shop staff, reaching 1,301 incidents daily.³ Yet this designation of retail staff as ‘heroes’, however fragile and provisional, was bottom up at least as much as top down. When neighbours collected groceries, medicines and other necessities for those unable to leave their homes, the shops that could stay open became nodes of new, sometimes hyper-local networks as communities mobilized and coordinated on Facebook and WhatsApp groups.⁴

Supermarkets and many online retailers saw profits – and dividends to shareholders – increase, not without challenge, but the acceleration of the shift to online retailing did not just happen at scale.⁵ Some small producers and local shops quickly shifted to sell online; social media allowed not just retail businesses but also private individuals and creatives to sell items and share content directly with customers locked down in their homes. Delivery to the doorstep or a timed collection from a hatch could follow an online purchase from a home-based sole trader or a local shop as from a global retailer or national chain.

So, the pandemic offered both a suspension of normal ways of living (and shopping) and an acceleration of already established trends – but also some reconfigurations of retail and community that mixed and blended elements of continuity, change and adaptation in combinations that are still unstable. Rather than attempting to accommodate COVID-19 within existing periodizations, or, indeed, to announce the advent of a new phase in the history of retail, we perhaps need to look for different ways to pattern time. One such option is to work with the idea of *practice*, a concept that has proved useful and malleable in a wide range of disciplines. Its very openness is its strength, giving interdisciplinary research a lens through which to view and explore the ways in which different practices – social practices, working and professional practices, charitable and gifting practices, buying and consumption practices – layer and enmesh in and between specific contexts.

Thinking about what themes a practice-oriented approach might suggest in a post-lockdown context, after Brexit and during a cost of living crisis, inequality seems among the most pressing. Retail, as some chapters have explored, provides spaces and contexts in which inequalities are experienced and managed, displayed and hidden. What does the shopkeeper as ‘banker to the poor’, or community level solidarity between retailer and customer, look like in Britain today? Analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies recognized that the ‘specific nature of the economic shock associated with COVID 19 has interacted with many old and deep inequalities’, including gender, race, socioeconomic background and region.⁶ History has something important to offer here in understanding the interactions between deeper histories of inequality and the moments in which those histories are refracted through the lens of policy crisis. That means, perhaps, historians writing more explicitly about the contemporary, political lenses through which we inevitably view our sources. It may also mean casting our nets widely, for example, drawing on the diversity of research undertaken on and with communities ‘in real time’ on the effects of COVID-19, incentivized by funders’ rapid pivoting of schemes towards pandemic-focused research.⁷

Practices are not easily defined nor their boundaries demarcated, but therein lies the strength of such an approach; to ask about practice is to move beyond the retail transaction to attend to lived experiences, affective worlds, senses of agency and identity and so on. Thematic work on inequality inevitably does this, and we see many opportunities to bring the lens of practice to the study of retail and community. It may, for example, lend a different cast to ideas such as professionalization, particularly prominent in literature on charity retail. For the local retailer or small charity moving online, recreating a sense of particularity and place in digital spaces to build connections with potential customers may be a form of professionalization without the implications of scale and infrastructure the term may conventionally carry. Perhaps of particular interest to historians are collectively held understandings

of fairness in buying and selling, which may be more elusive when locality and community are enacted across in-person and online spaces, or as profit-seeking businesses mobilize notions of the collective good or partner with charitable causes.

Notions of practice may prove illuminative in thinking through the meanings of buying and selling. Chapters in this volume have touched on how the retail transaction – in many different settings – can signify something important: a display of loyalty or solidarity, an enactment of compassion or empathy (or, indeed, of patriotism, evangelism or enlightened self-interest); a sense of mutual benefit or interdependence, albeit at times uneasy or unwelcome. Sites of consumption may also be sites of retailing. The ‘encounter at the counter’, to borrow Keval’s phrase from [Chapter 11](#), is structured by the space in which it happens, as well as by political cultures, social codes and expectations and economic judgements, behind which many pasts and their meanings are layered. Such approaches offer rich potential for bringing spatial and historical attention together to broader retail contexts.

Such a nuanced layering of retail as practice requires continued interdisciplinary effort, particularly in terms of collaboration between historians – understood inclusively – and social scientists. The present collection lays some foundations here. In attempting to outline an agenda for histories of retail and community in the 21st century, however, we see the potential for moving from conversations among disciplines to a more engaged approach at methodological and conceptual levels. For example, future histories would undoubtedly benefit from sustained attention to shared concerns with categories of experience such as class, race and gender, and to concepts that help us explain the phenomena we study, for example, inequality or globalization. Interdisciplinary dialogue can only aid efforts to understand and move between the myriad levels at which the social contexts and meanings of retail are made and remade.

We need each other more than ever, as such efforts have acquired new complexities in recent years. Deep-rooted debates on what immigration and global trade say about Britain and its place in the world were placed firmly on the agenda by Brexit, framed and guided by contrasting and contested views of the British past.⁸ It was in this context that we compiled this collection of English retail histories in global contexts, guided by an understanding that not only does locality not preclude globality but that the two are inseparable. The end of empire was the central change of our period in Britain’s relationship with the rest of the world and we cannot understand the social contexts within which contemporary retail is embedded without grappling with colonialism and its ongoing legacies. These wider implications and resonances have not always been a feature of the increased interest in Britain’s global history. ‘Even as imperial historians offered interpretations of the 2016 referendum on Britain’s membership in the European Union’,

the editors of *Twentieth Century British History*'s 2023 special issue on *Marking Race* noted, 'few confronted directly the deep investment in whiteness behind fantasies of "Global Britain"'.⁹

'How might historians narrate Britain's past', they asked, 'if we centre imperial racial formation and its contestations?' Historians of retail surely have much to offer in response. Taking, as this collection has, a broad understanding of retail – buying and selling, charitable, cooperative and commercial, shop floor and behind the scenes, working lives and customer conduct – creates many spaces to think 'with and through race'.¹⁰ The racialization of staff behind the counter, of recipients of charity shop proceeds or of imagined producers of imperial goods are immediate examples. *Centring* race and racialization as an essential analytical tool, however, invites all those concerned with retail and community to rethink and reframe their working practices.

As part of such an undertaking, we can actively and critically engage with the power asymmetries built into the collections we use. Archivists have, rightly, critiqued historians and the humanities scholars using archival collections for their disinclination to engage with 'actually existing archives' or with the literature and professional knowledge and practice emerging from the field.¹¹ Historians willing to develop a working knowledge of archival practice and a foundational grasp of critical archives scholarship acquire tools to identify and interrogate the multiple interventions in the journey of a record from creation to access. There are vital interpretive clues and insights to be gained from considering a document's *archivality* – description, organization, arrangement – not least in enabling us to see power dynamics at work, whether in terms of racialization or other forms of minoritization and marginalization. When we are working on the records of an operational retailer that holds its own archives, the expertise of the business archivist is invaluable to help understand the historical organizational contexts in which the records we use were created and designated archival. As noted in [Chapter 8](#), the same issues are at play in charity archives, within which we find fragmentary and obscured traces of charity retail's history.

The archival record is inevitably a partial one, in both senses of the word. Where few archival sources exist, reading 'against the grain' has been a technique employed to reveal and centre hidden and silenced lives in the documents created by their oppressors and in defiance of the record creator's original intentions.¹² For those working within living memory, addressing gaps and silences in existing collections by recording new oral histories and developing proactive donation plans with staff networks and community groups holds rich potential (and companies prizing their equality, diversity and inclusion credentials may even fund their archives to pursue such projects). Historians of retail have much to gain from contributing to and engaging with these welcome enrichments of the archival record.

The foregoing reflections offer possibilities rather than prescriptions for writing histories of retail and community in the 21st century. The three overarching themes of the collection – the social and community dimensions of retailing, the place of charity alongside commercial and co-operative retailing, and the significance of wider international connections and global contexts – remain, we would argue, relevant and resonant for historians, sociologists, anthropologists, archivists and others engaged in such a task. The importance of these histories is not confined, however, to scholarship concerned with retail or business history more broadly. It is the enmeshment of retail within social relationships at every scale that ensures connection to a wide range of major questions and concerns across the humanities and social sciences. Modern retailing and consumption encounters have not entirely lost their social, cultural, moral and political dimensions, even if they are sometimes well hidden by economic ones. Buying and selling remain rarely, if ever, purely transactional. Economic activity continues to be not only shaped by its social embeddedness, but also inscribed with social meaning. The transformations of the long 20th century changed but did not end the deep relationship between retail and community. What trends and transitions the rest of the 21st century brings will, we hope, be the subject of the kind of rich, interdisciplinary conversations that have animated this book.

Notes

- ¹ Centre for Retailing Research, ‘The crisis in retailing: closures and job losses’ (2023), <https://www.retailresearch.org/retail-crisis.html> (accessed 19/06/2023).
- ² L. Legrain, ‘Number of charity shop volunteers drops by nearly a quarter in three years’, *Civil Society*, 03/10/2022, <https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/number-of-charity-shop-volunteers-drops-by-nearly-a-quarter-in-three-years.html> (accessed 17/07/2023).
- ³ British Retail Consortium, *Crime Survey 2022 Report*, <https://brc.org.uk/media/679954/crime-survey-2022.pdf> (accessed 14/07/2023).
- ⁴ For a discussion of local community organizing, including hyper-local coordination on social media platforms, see A.R. Green, R. Warren, S. Woodward and D. Wiltshire, *North East Essex Communities Responding to Crisis COVID 19, Social Action and Our Local Neighbourhood* (2021), <https://www.community360.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Covid-Report-Final.pdf> (accessed 14/07/2023).
- ⁵ Oxfam, *Not in This Together: How Supermarkets Became Pandemic Winners While Women Workers Are Losing Out*, Briefing Paper, 22/06/2021, <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/not-in-this-together-how-supermarkets-became-pandemic-winners-while-women-work-621194/> (accessed 14/07/2023).
- ⁶ R. Blundell, M. Costa Dias, R. Joyce and X. Xu, ‘Covid-19 and Inequalities’ (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2022), 3.
- ⁷ See, for example, <https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/what-we-have-funded/find-covid-19-research-and-innovation-supported-by-ukri/> (accessed 14/07/2023).
- ⁸ D. Thackeray, A. Thompson and R. Toye (eds), *Imagining Britain’s Economic Future, c.1800–1975: Trade, Consumerism and Global Markets* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 4–5.
- ⁹ M. Matera, R. Natarajan, K. Hammond Perry, C. Schofield and R. Waters, ‘Introduction: marking race in twentieth century British history’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 34:3 (2023), 407–414.

- ¹⁰ Matera et al, 'Introduction', 409.
- ¹¹ M. Caswell, "'The archive'" is not an archives: acknowledging the intellectual contributions of archival studies', *Reconstruction*, 16:1 (2016).
- ¹² M. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence and the Archive* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); R. Carter, 'Of things said and unsaid: power, archival silences, and power in silence', *Archivaria*, 61 (2006), 215–233.