

# Filofaxions

The filofax has become the symbol of yuppiedom on the Left, despised and denounced. But why? **Beatrix Campbell** and **Wendy Wheeler** investigate

**T**he filofax has clearly become - as they say - a contested symbol of 'new times'. We've got a friend, who was given one for Christmas, who has steadfastly refused to use it because it connotes yuppiedom. One of us has one (blessedly old, with bits missing, so it's pre-yuppie) and the other is still working up to it (and may yet resist). What does it signify for us? What does it tell us about the social meaning of commodities? And why has it become such a bitterly contested symbol on the Left?

Since the early 1970s, following the initiatives of the late Raymond Williams, marxism has tried to overcome the economism of orthodoxy by mounting a critique of the idea of the commodity as a simple object. Over and above the relations of exploitation and the investment of labour embedded in the commodity, this cultural theory has tried to show how commodities are also saturated with social and psychic meanings. This tradition primarily concerned class, but particular clarity also comes from a feminist focus.

This is not only because men and women's access to resources and use of commodities is highly gendered, but also because in our society, across many generations, the sexes are assigned different fantasies as well as functions in relation to consumption.

Both class and, less visibly, gender were at stake when the miners' president, Arthur Scargill, appeared at the Labour Party conference this year brandishing a filofax in one hand and a party card in the other. He was throwing down the gauntlet, but against what exactly?

Apparently he was mobilising tradition against modernity. But was he also implying that all the possessors of this

commodity, the filofax, could not be, or rather should not be, the holders of a party card, too. And if so why? Is there a fear that the filofax is so contaminated with loadsamoney ideology that it subverts the culture that goes with the party card? Does he see both in terms only of *identity* rather than *utility*? Does the party card as well as the filofax, in Scargill's scenario, imply an identity over and above acts of allegiance, approaches to life, connections and commitments?

For sure, the filofax does in some contexts carry the insignia of class, the mark of the yuppie. But it is also typical of the mass market and consumer goods - the market gets bigger and they get cheaper. The filofax is like the washing machine, the computer and the video, it has priced itself *into* a mass market. You can now get one for a third of the price of the prototype - you can buy one for the price of a compact disc or a night in the pub.

All sorts of folks have them, and from our experience in our own families their reasons are as revealing as they are diverse. One includes a retired Bolshevik who shares that pride within the working class for commodities beautifully tailored to a specific use, like a watch or a ship.

The great thing about the filofax is that its efficiency is part of the pleasure, because it's like a purse or a pram, you use it all the time. It combines in one commodity functions that were dispersed: a diary, an address book and a notebook. There's space for contacts, appointments, tasks, shopping lists and thoughts. And it all fits into a handbag or a pocket.

That helps explain why it is also owned by a relative who is a political organiser and a mother who has recently resumed waged work. All

these people use the filofax to organise their social existence. It is their personal system for organising their public lives. That's the point about the filofax - it signifies a *public* rather than a *private* life, a social rather than a solely private citizen.

**More important it signifies a social citizen** whose life is not serviced by subordinates. Like Arthur Scargill, all of us are busy, participating people. The boundaries between our private and public, professional and political worlds are blurred. But most important of all, unlike Arthur Scargill, we have to do it all ourselves. We are not serviced by an army of secretaries and wives who arrange our diaries and dinners, our private and public responsibilities.

This is where not only class but sex comes in: this personal system is only a commodity, it is not a hierarchy of social and sexual relations based on service and subordination. The filofax doesn't shadow the personal power that goes with the public man and his office, usually full of women at his service.

It is this nexus of sex and power which is masked by Scargill's scorn for the filofax. His possession of a party card doesn't redeem him because there's nothing much in the culture of labourism that has required men to take responsibility for their own lives. How often do you see a trade union leader turning up for a meeting with shopping bags or staying home because the kids were sick? The leader of the Labour Party - admits to only occasionally defrosting the fridge, and the president of the NUM admits to doing no housework. That's his wife's job. Housework isn't on their agenda.

**T**he revolt against the filofax masquerades as a revolt against new times. If that weren't bad enough, something more serious is at stake, for it closes the conversation about what is happening at work and at home between men and women. In the olden days it was a lament against the demise of a certain class of person - the servant.

This suggests another dimension to the current debate - which concerns the contested meanings of commodities in the history of classes and sexes, and in the history of private and public, paid and unpaid work.

One of our grandmothers used to reflect on the coincidental rise of consumer goods and the demise of the domestic servant. Another used to lament on the crisis that caused in the middle class - 'can't get a maid I'm afraid.'

**The filofax of the 50s was television and the washing machine.** No two objects have so strongly symbolised the transition of the working-class woman and her work. In the 50s they were represented as symbols of affluence which were variously regarded as the promised land - a classless capitalist

society (a contradiction in terms, of course); and by some on the Right, the liberal Centre and the Left, too, as implying a working class bought off and bourgeoisified.

None of this was true - they no more meant the end of class than the filofax today. But what is certainly salient is that these commodities mark dramatic transitions in the relation between public and private, work and home, men and women.

**T**elevision, like the wireless, brought working-class

women access to, rather than exclusion from, a national culture. The front-loading washing machine mitigated millions of women's exhausting, unpaid labour. One of us can recall the thrill, shared by millions, of buying a cheap offer, on the HP, which not only lightened the load, but meant that as a young mother, there was a new freedom to play with the children on the floor, go out, do something else.

But the meaning of the washing machine was more complicated than just that. Working-class women had always done the washing - either in the form of waged labour or domestic service, or her own unpaid labour. This personal machine marked the decline of a public service - we can recall the days in the 1950s or early 1960s when mothers could leave the laundry outside the front door to be picked up and delivered again days later by the co-op van. Public paid labour returned to the private domain.

The revolt against the modernism of the filofax is misplaced because it ignores the utility and pleasures of the filofax for social citizens without subordinates and servants.

**Which brings us back to gender again.** Consuming - the taking in of the object - has repeatedly been associated with women, both superficially and practically as dispensers of the family budget and as the major targets for most advertising.

Within a male-dominated Left there has been a certain purism which has set itself against consumption, or if not consumption itself, then against a self-aware politics of consumption. A politics of consumption is seen by some as contaminating, dangerous, dirty even. But what sort of object is being imagined here in these thoughts and passions?

It is surely significant that Arthur Scargill's filofax stunt at the party conference masked another symbol of consumption, saturated with symbols of both class and gender, one dearer to his heart - the motor car.

(Incidentally, the rise of the car is also associated with the fall of another domestic service, which is now only socialised for the rich - grocery deliveries. We can recall, as children, being despatched to the local co-op store with the weekly messages, which would then be delivered to our door,

Home deliveries died with the rise of the supermarket and the family car, or rather the father's car.)

Arthur is well known to have been the proud owner of Jaguars. We can understand his passion for exquisite engineering, his need, as a travelling man, for maximum comfort, and his belief that nothing is too good for the workers. But compared with the front-loading washing machine, the telephone or - dare we say it - the filofax, the Jaguar is irredeemably both phallic and conspicuous consumption. The Jaguar is more than a *utility*, it is a commodity impregnated with symbols of *identity*.

**At a deeper level, consuming has been** associated with women in the persistence of the largely unconscious associations which, within a patriarchal culture, make feminine sexuality an all-devouring, all-consuming danger to the (male) cultural order. The desiring, wanting woman, is a dangerous woman. There's an unconscious domain in which both woman and commodity occupy the same dangerous space of desire. There's got to be a scapegoat. And today it's the filofax.

So strong is the association between consumption and femininity that on Left and Right, women have been thought of *only* as consumers, and consumers *only* as women. Labourism's last *unashamed* patriarch, Jim Callaghan, went into the 1979 election aware of the need to engage millions of women voters who were estranged from the labour movement. He addressed them as the people worried about prices. Both the main political parties had, since the war, addressed the women of the country entirely as consumers. Those traditional politics of consumption constructed an ideology of woman as precisely not man because man produced and woman consumed. It was nonsense, of course, because both sexes did both. But the separation secured an ideology of sexual difference and subordination shared by both the patriarchal Right and Left.

Is the difference now that men are represented anew as consuming citizens? Does this imply to some anxious male identities, somewhere deep down, a dangerous emasculation of the once-proud and virile worker?

Curiously though, cars are apparently exempted from the array of objects and the new politics of consumption which ignite such ire among some on the Left. It's as if they'd all been invented only by renegades and revisionists like *Marxism Today*. Or even worse, by women.

Clearly, there are Real Men's Commodities which are excluded from that certain puritanism we find around the male-dominated Left about the implied contagion of consumption. Maybe it's because filofaxes - unlike Jaguars or secretaries - are about personal *responsibility*, rather than personal *power*.

**'Unlike Arthur Scargill, we are not serviced by an army of secretaries and wives who arrange our diaries and our dinners'**

