

S o c i o l o g y

A Fragmented Class Structure?

Quantum 06

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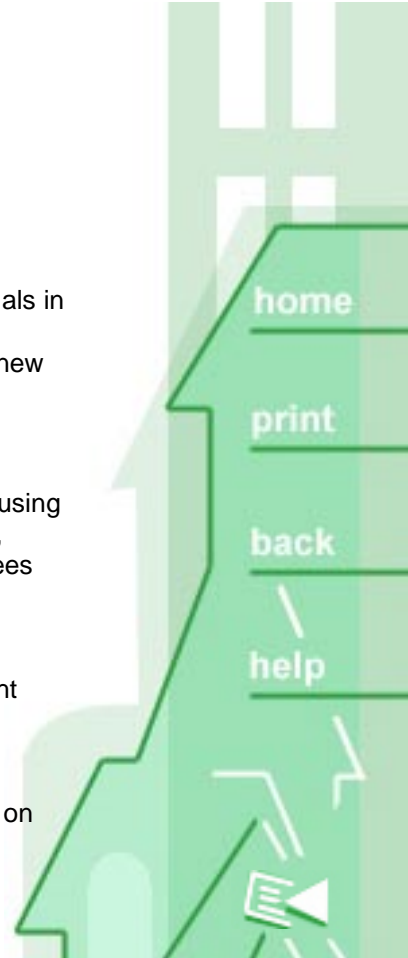
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A Fragmented Class Structure?

Objectives

By the end of this quantum you should be able to recognise the constantly changing nature of social structure, and apply the approaches you have learnt to contemporary society.

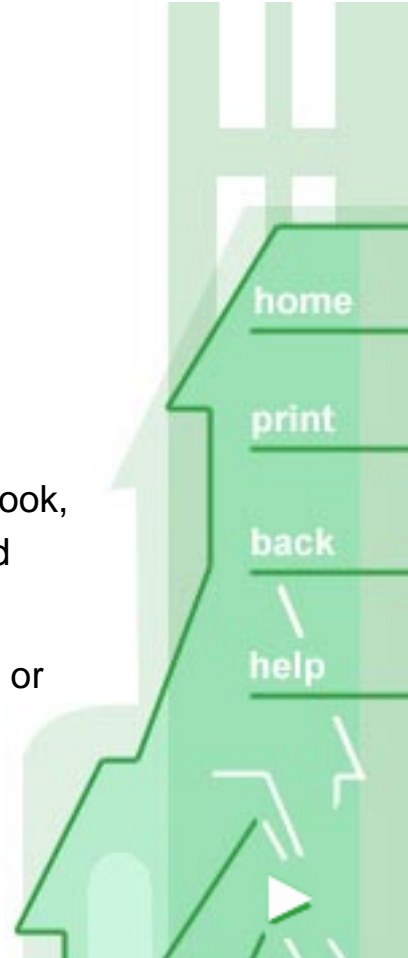
PRE-REQUISITES

This quantum should be linked to appropriate sections in your textbook, HARALAMBOS, M. (ed) *Sociology – Themes and Perspectives* (3rd edition).

The discussion points are for discussion with fellow students, tutors or members of your family.

WELCOME

The aims of this quantum are to develop your skills of presenting alternative explanations, and evaluating their relative merits.

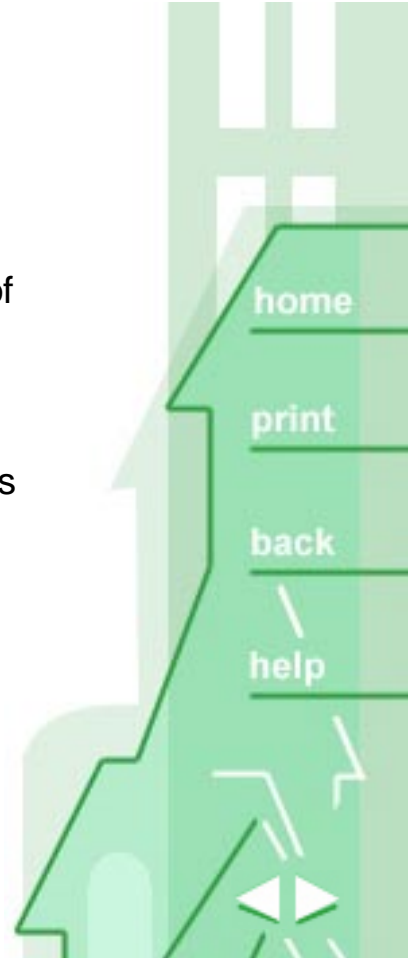


A Fragmented Class Structure?

A FRAGMENTED CLASS STRUCTURE?

Let's consider empirical work on the actual composition of each of the strata.

The main problem to consider, is whether there is a unified working class in the way Marx envisaged, or whether the changes that have taken place over the last twenty or so years have resulted in a wholesale fragmentation, which is visible not only in the working class, but in the middle and upper classes also. In other words, does Weber's model of rival status groups fit the modern class structure better than Marx's model? We also have to take into account conflict based on other factors than class, such as race or religion.

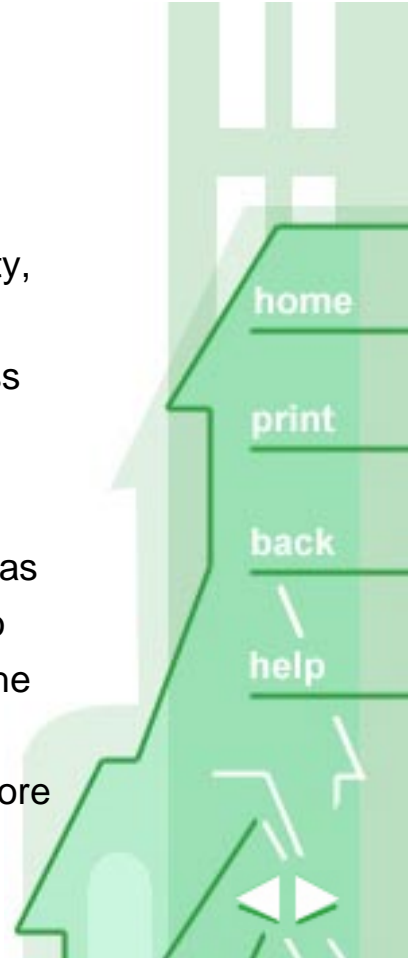


A Fragmented Class Structure?

THE WORKING CLASS(ES)?

From a Marxist point of view, the working class is an objective reality, created by the capitalist mode of production, which creates profits which pass into private hands. Any divisions within the working class are fostered and amplified in a variety of ways by the ruling class to distract attention from the real conflict with employers.

A **reserve army of labour** composed of marginalised groups such as the unemployed, women, and ethnic minorities are kept available to undermine job security and reduce wages. Instead of recognising the system for what it is, workers are encouraged to fight among themselves. Perceptions by workers of different interests are therefore **false consciousness**.

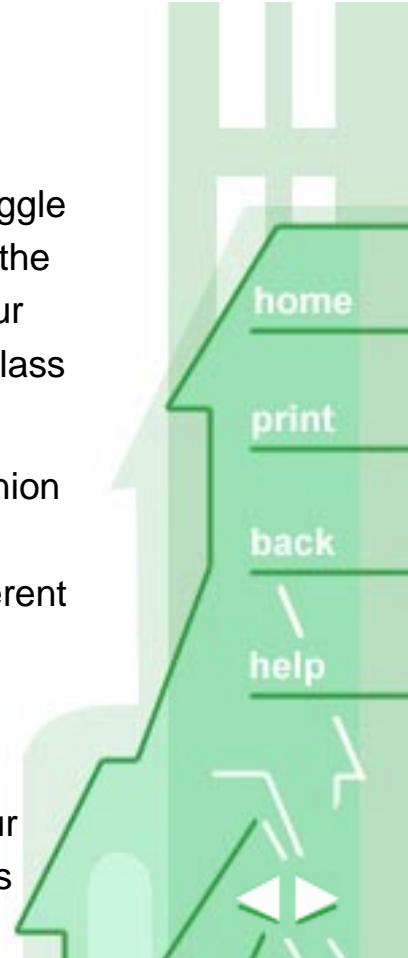


A Fragmented Class Structure?

It was the belief that workers have to act together as a class to struggle effectively against the bourgeoisie which led to the development of the trade union movement, and eventually to the formation of the Labour Party. In the areas which first became industrialised, a tradition of class solidarity, and collectivity has existed, and perhaps still exists.

This tradition carries strong beliefs, such as: belonging to a trade union means you accept majority decision, eg, to go on strike; you do not cross a picket line organised by fellow workers, even if they do different jobs. Before it was made illegal, you might go on strike in sympathy with other workers, if you believed their cause was just.

The Labour Party was supported as the party which struggled on behalf of the whole working class. There are those within the Labour Party and the TUC who argue that this is still the philosophical basis on which the Labour Party is built.



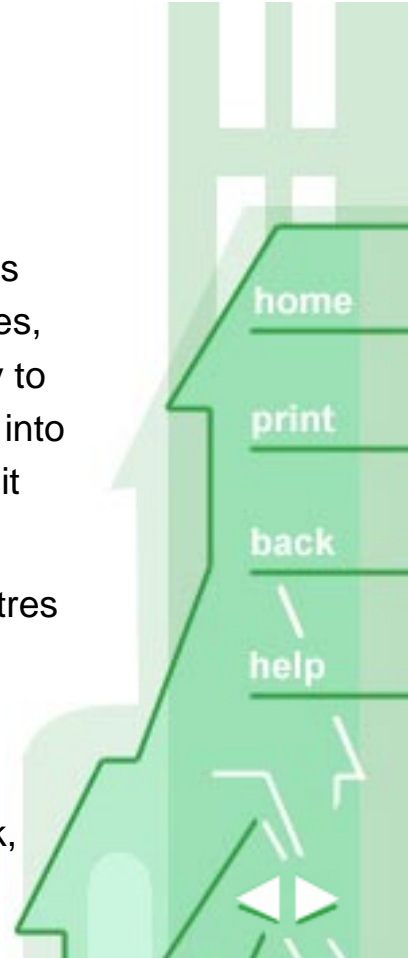
A Fragmented Class Structure?

Activity 1

Does this tradition still exist? Try to find someone you know who has been involved in industrial action? Ask them about the circumstances, about the decision-making, and about the conduct of the action. Try to find out, too, about the way they see trade unionism, and how it fits into the social structure. You could tape the interview, and possibly use it as the basis of a research project.

Current discussion by certain sociologists, such as Ivor Crewe, centres on the development of a **'new working class'**.

The old working class, goes the argument, was based in the areas where industrialism first began, such as the North East and North West. Towns and villages were built round one main source of work, such as the mills, the coal mines, or ship-building.

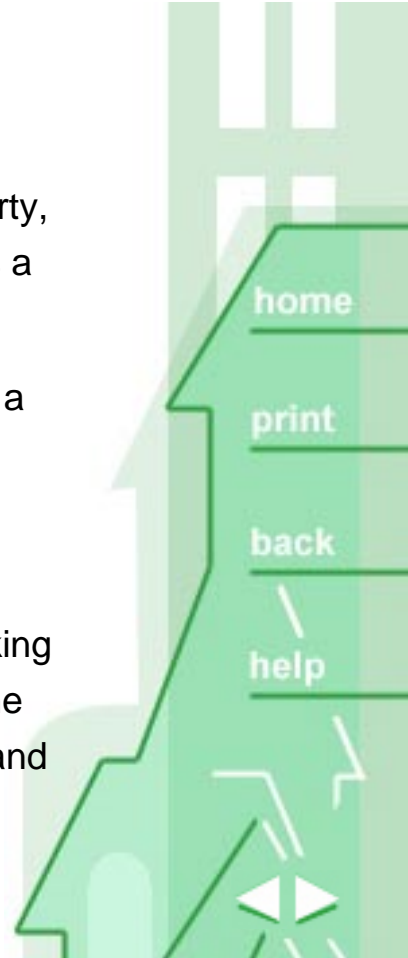


A Fragmented Class Structure?

A traditional culture was developed to cope with hardship and poverty, based on communal help and the recognition of collective action as a way of standing up to the unfairness of the employer.

There are several sociological accounts which are now historical of a community built round a way of working life, eg *Coal is our Life*, by Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter, or *The Fishermen*, by Jeremy Tunstall.

However, after the second world war, the traditional version of working class life has broken down because of several factors. The main one has been the decline of traditional industries, such as shipbuilding and mining, which led to the decline of the associated community and culture.

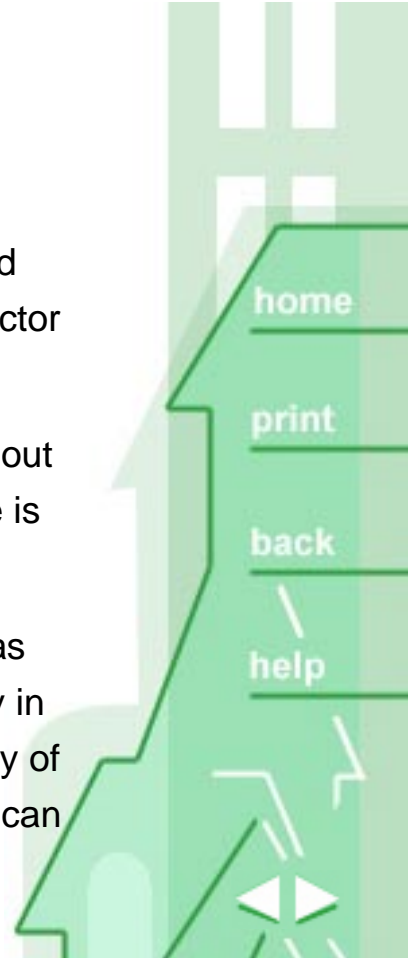


A Fragmented Class Structure?

At the same time, new industries sprang up in other parts of Britain, especially the South East, leading to migration of the workforce, and new, and more affluent communities. Affluence has been a great factor in changing the way people think and interact.

It may seem odd to talk about affluence, when so many people are out of work. It is one of the difficulties of studying sociology that change is happening so fast, that debates can become obsolete very quickly.

However, you should be aware that real average living standards (as opposed to inflation) have risen steadily since the war, and it is only in the last few years that the rise has tended to level off for the majority of people in the country. There is plenty of evidence that most people can afford luxuries now that were undreamed of in the 1940s or 1950s.



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Activity 2

List 6 items which are now common, which could be considered evidence of 'affluence'.

[Click here to check your answer](#)

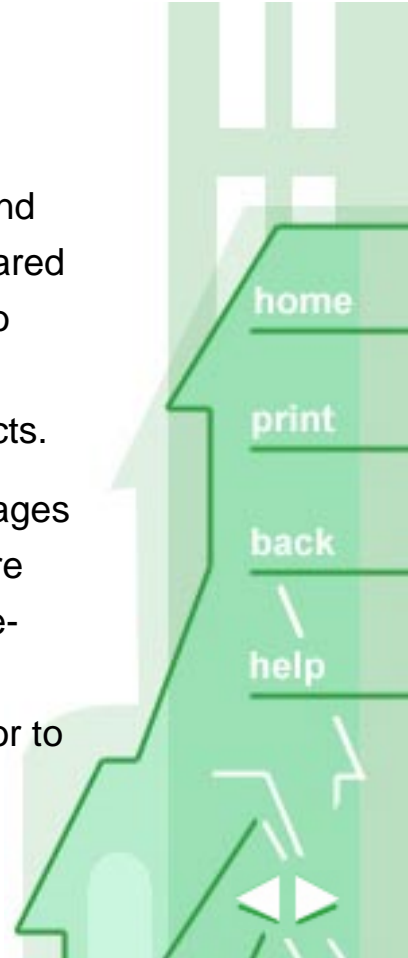
Changes in behaviour, brought about by better standards of living were documented by Goldthorpe and Lockwood in their celebrated 'Affluent Worker' studies, carried out in 1964, in the growing town of Luton, where most of the workforce had migrated to find work.



A Fragmented Class Structure?

That research found that, although many elements had changed, and that workers were more 'privatised' and home-centred, and less geared towards collective action, they were still likely to vote Labour, and to belong to a trade union. From the **instrumental** point of view these were the organisations most likely to improve their financial prospects.

Despite their relative affluence, and the fact that their take-home wages were very similar to those of white-collar workers in the survey, there was no sign that manual workers had taken on any middle-class lifestyle (known as **embourgeoisement**). They did not mix with white-collar workers; they were unlikely to have people round for dinner, or to join clubs at work; and in an economic sense, there were very real differences: lack of promotion prospects and the need to do large amounts of overtime.



A Fragmented Class Structure?

The affluent worker studies are themselves historical now. The affluent manual workers (or C2s, in market research jargon) seem to have voted in large numbers for the Conservative party throughout the 1980s, apparently because they favoured Conservative policies of reducing income tax and selling council houses; and because they perceived a threat from immigrant groups where the Conservative party seemed more likely to support their interests.

Activity 3

These studies are described on pages 88–92 of your textbook. From this, and from the previous account, work out what indicators were used by Goldthorpe and Lockwood as a means of measuring whether manual workers were becoming middle class.

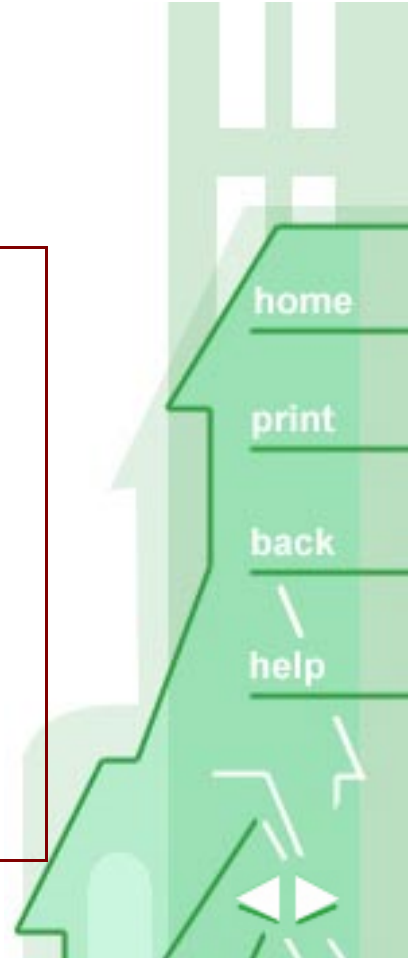


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You should look for economic, political and cultural indicators.



[Click here to check your answer](#)

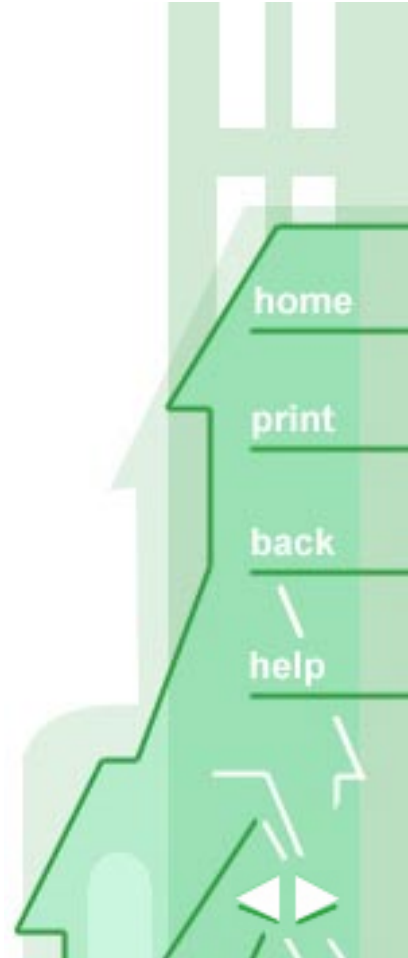


A Fragmented Class Structure?

THE NEW WORKING CLASS

Ivor Crewe is a psephologist – someone who studies voting behaviour. He is interested in the changing patterns of voting over the last twenty years or so, and he claims that the old link between class and voting has broken down, indicating at least that substantial groups within the working class now perceive their interests as very different from the aims put forward by the Labour Party.

Since universal male suffrage, there has been about a third of the working class who have chosen to vote Tory, mainly in rural areas. This number has grown during the 1980s, and Ivor Crewe has drawn a profile of the 'new' working class:



A Fragmented Class Structure?

The 'new' working class:

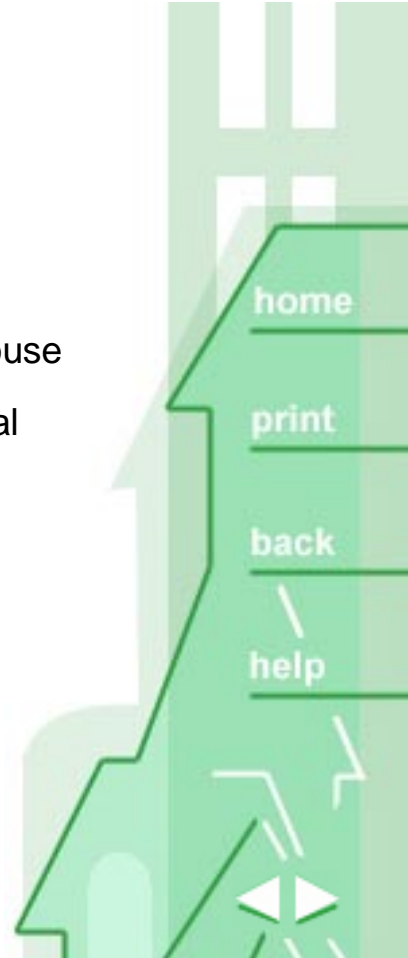
- lives in the south
- owns house
- does not belong to a trade union
- votes Conservative

The 'old' working class:

- lives in the north
- lives in a council house
- works in a traditional industry
- is a trade union member
- votes Labour

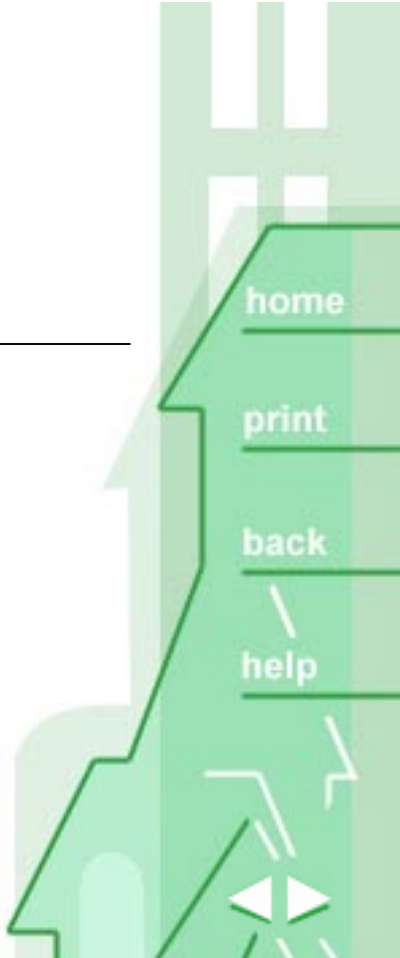
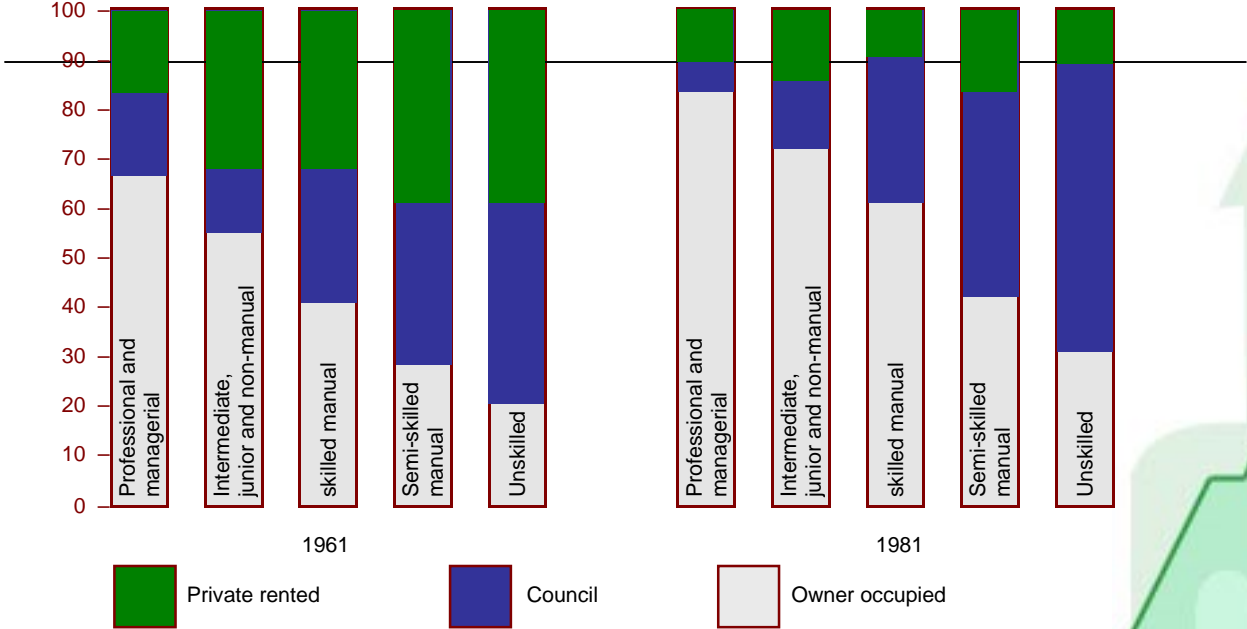
Activity 4

Look at the following table. What trends can you identify from it?



A Fragmented Class Structure?

Socio-economic Groups by Tenure of Head of Household, 1961 and 1981, England and Wales



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How could these trends be used:

- 1 to support the view that the skilled manual worker is more committed to house ownership, and therefore less inclined to Labour.

- 2 that class differences in housing still exist.

[Click here to check your answers](#)

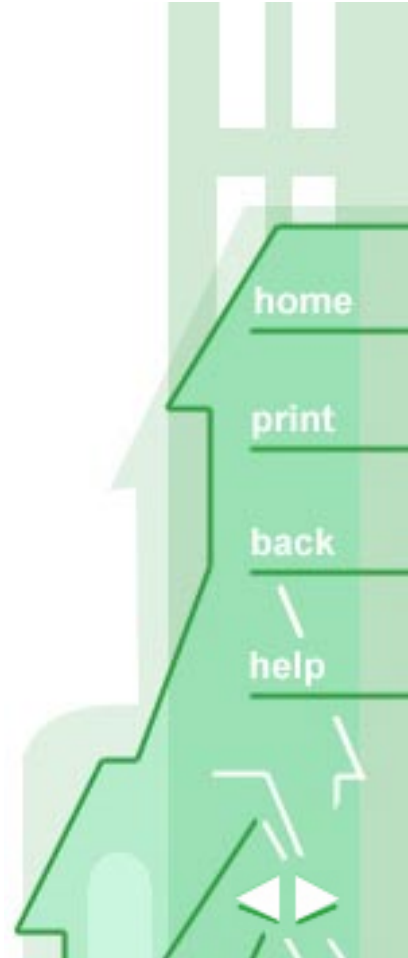
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Discussion

How do you think house ownership might affect the way working class people see themselves?

Do you think that this self-image would be affected by a fall in house prices and repossessions?

What would Marxists point out as the flaw in seeing these changes as the formation of a new 'class'?

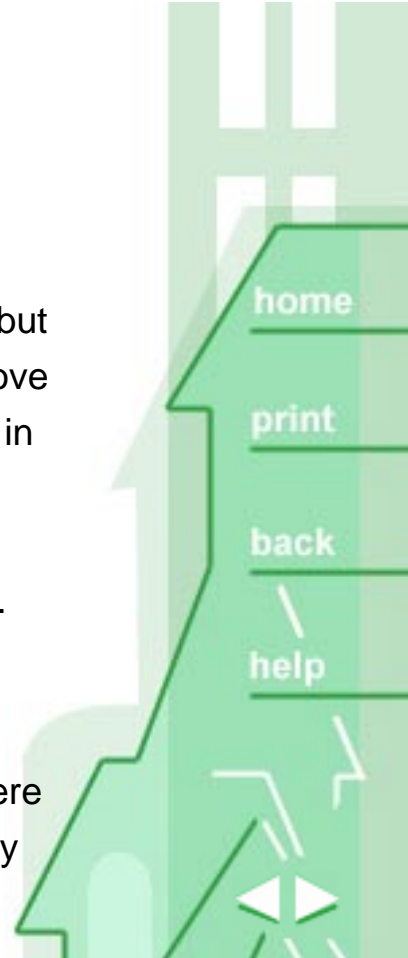


A Fragmented Class Structure?

PROLETARIANISATION

Neo-Marxists say the real trend is in the opposite direction from embourgeoisement. Harry Braverman called it **proletarianisation**: but the former 'middle classes' finding that the skills which set them above the working class have been progressively transferred to machines in the same process that occurred to the working class during industrialisation. As a result, jobs which formerly commanded high status and pay have gradually sunk in comparison to other workers.

Clerical work is an example of this process. Lockwood, in *The Blackcoated Worker*, (1958) documented changes in clerical work, which changed from class II to class IIIN in 1931. In 1851, there were only about 60,000 clerks, whereas in 1981 there were approximately 13 million jobs of that type.

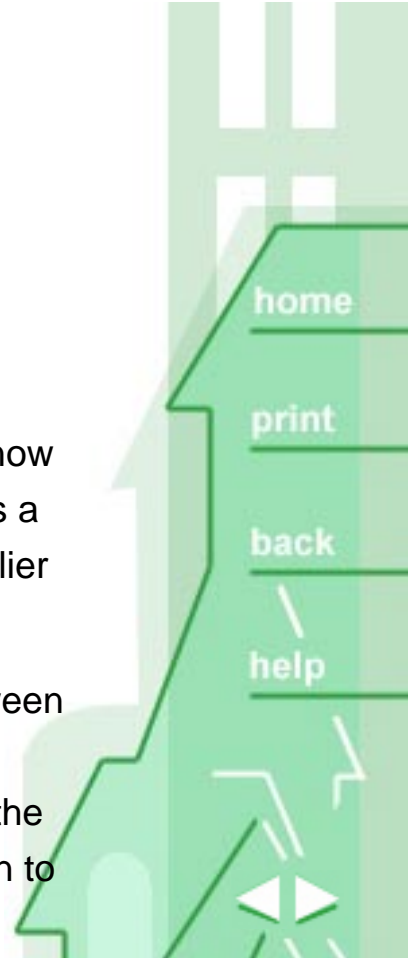


A Fragmented Class Structure?

The spread of universal education has meant that skills which were once scarce are now generally available, reducing status and bargaining power.

Although there are small offices, in which clerical and secretarial workers are a vital part of the functioning of the office, most clerks now work in large offices where the work is standardised and routine. As a result clerical workers have become much more unionised than earlier in the 20th century.

Lockwood felt that there were still important status distinctions between manual labour and 'white-collar' work, in spite of the changes connected with the closer working relationship with 'management', the pleasanter conditions under which they work, and the respect given to 'brain power' over physical labour.



A Fragmented Class Structure?

However, Crompton and Jones (1984) point out that it is women who largely occupy low status clerical posts, as the men who now enter (about 30%) quickly gain promotion and upward social mobility. These writers say that there is no fundamental difference between female clerical workers and manual workers in terms of pay and conditions, and therefore women clerical and secretarial workers can be said to be part of the proletariat.

Braverman argues that de-skilling occurs in several ways, in order to allow employers to pay lower wages and replace stropic workers easily. One way is to develop technology which puts the skills of a highly skilled worker into a machine, reducing the worker to a machine minder. The other is to develop work practices which fragment the work, and reduce the amount of control the worker has over it.

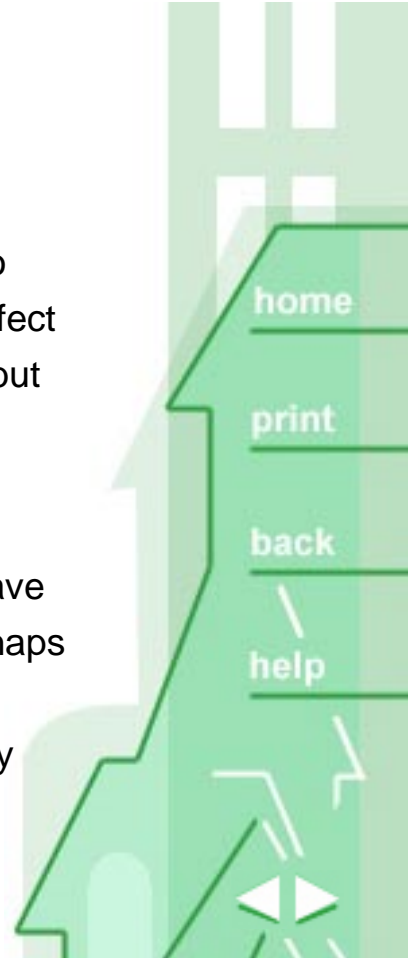


A Fragmented Class Structure?

In clerical and secretarial work, offices have been rapidly computerised. Procedures have been developed to allow anyone to perform the tasks with equal efficiency. It is too early to say what effect these changes will have. Massive job losses have been expected, but this is not necessarily the case.

Activity 5

Since the studies mentioned above, clerical and secretarial work have undergone huge changes. Find out from books, magazines, or perhaps by interviewing people who work in offices, how their work has changed over the last ten years or so, and whether this has had any effect on their pay, status and conditions. You may like to use this activity as a starting point for a research project.

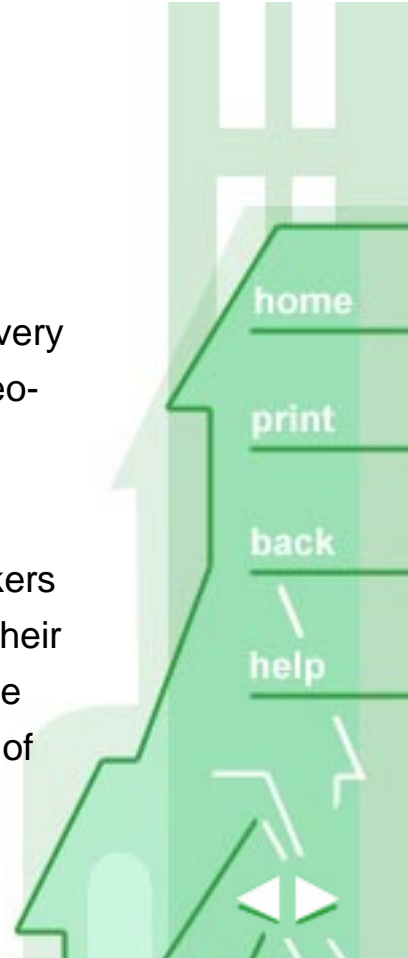


A Fragmented Class Structure?

DIVISIONS IN SOCIAL CLASS

Can the position of the working class be considered as one major grouping, as Marx and the Neo-Marxists would argue, or are there very real divisions between different status groups, as Weber and the neo-Weberians have emphasised.

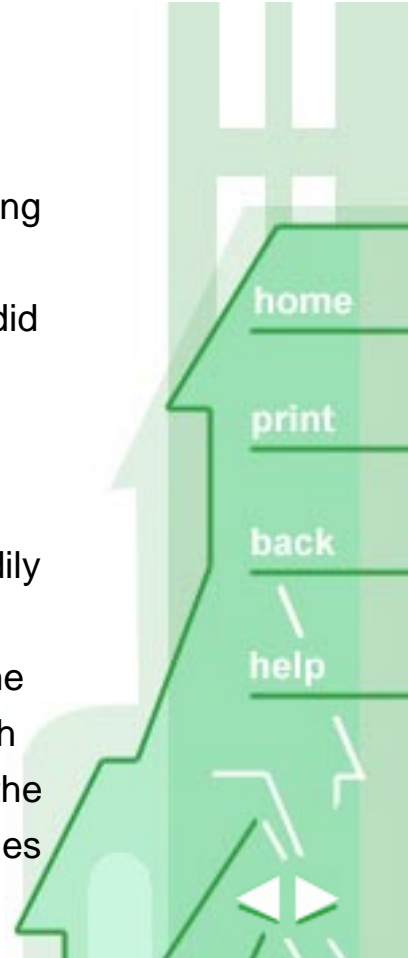
The question has very real significance in terms of political activity, Marx believed that the Proletariat was the revolutionary class. Workers had only to recognise their actual position in society to realise that their interests lay in acting together collectively to destroy the Bourgeoisie and take over power. At times it has seemed that this development of class consciousness has been growing; at others, collective action has been rejected in favour of improving one group's position over others.



A Fragmented Class Structure?

Throughout the sixties and seventies, unions were active in improving conditions for their members, and the general improvement in the standard of living made it appear as though the old class divisions did not matter any more. Universal schooling made social mobility relatively easy, and the Welfare State seemed genuinely to have reduced the threat of poverty.

The proportion of manual workers in the country has declined steadily through the 20th century and the numbers of white collar and professional jobs have doubled. This has reduced the strength of the traditional Labour party, leading to the growth of other parties, which are not so closely associated with the idea of two-class conflict. At the same time, the Conservative party has been seen to have the policies to protect the newly affluent.

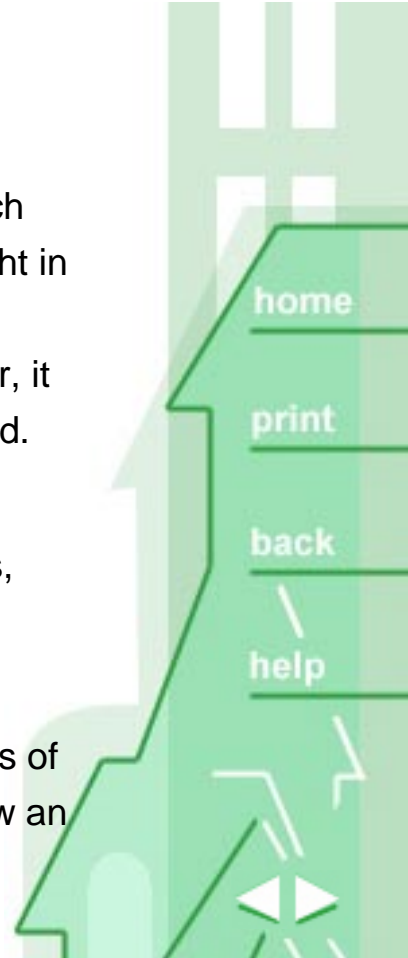


A Fragmented Class Structure?

Looking back in 1993, after a long period of Conservative rule, which started with a strongly co-ordinated attack on union strength, brought in measures intending to reduce 'state intervention' and adjusted the balance of taxation to benefit the wealthy at the expense of the poor, it seems as though a revised analysis on Marxist lines may be needed.

Ironically, this comes at a time when Marxism as a political force seems to have collapsed. The fall of the Eastern European regimes, and the decline of Marxist movements all over the world leaves a vacuum in coherent resistance to capitalist hegemony.

To compare the relative merits of a Marxist and a Weberian analysis of social class a tentative evaluation is offered, rather to show you how an evaluation can be made than to say that you should agree with this point of view.

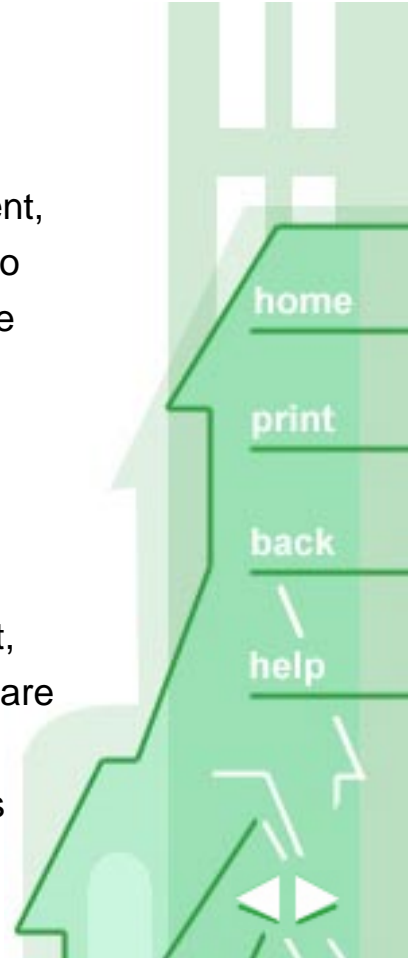


A Fragmented Class Structure?

This is an area where you are expected to make your own judgement, based on the evidence presented. In a sociology essay, the ability to explain your judgement and back it up with evidence drawn from the body of the essay is highly rewarded.

AN EVALUATION

The Neo-Marxist debate about who is or who is not part of the proletariat is not particularly helpful. A nurse working in an NHS hospital cannot be counted as part of the proletariat on any account, but they are not immune from the effects of capitalist ideology, and are involved in a degree of exploitation. As Marx realised, Capitalism is extremely resilient, and extremely powerful as an ideology. There is no area of life which is not shaped by it.

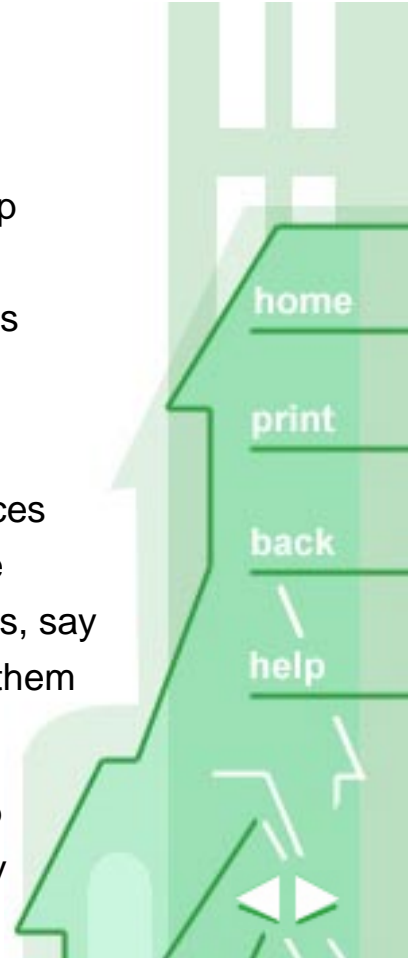


A Fragmented Class Structure?

A Marxist model remains very powerful. The exploitative relationship between the ruling class and the worker is real, and it is becoming increasingly apparent that the balance of power has lurched towards the bourgeoisie over the last fifteen years or so.

To recognise this does not mean that the particular patterns which develop within that framework cannot be investigated. The differences between groups within the working class are real, because they are perceived that way. It is dangerous to suggest that different interests, say between skilled and unskilled workers, can be ignored. To dismiss them simply as **false consciousness** is to simplify the matter too much.

Routine white collar workers can now be seen as yet another group within the loosely defined 'working class', because they increasingly share a similar market position.

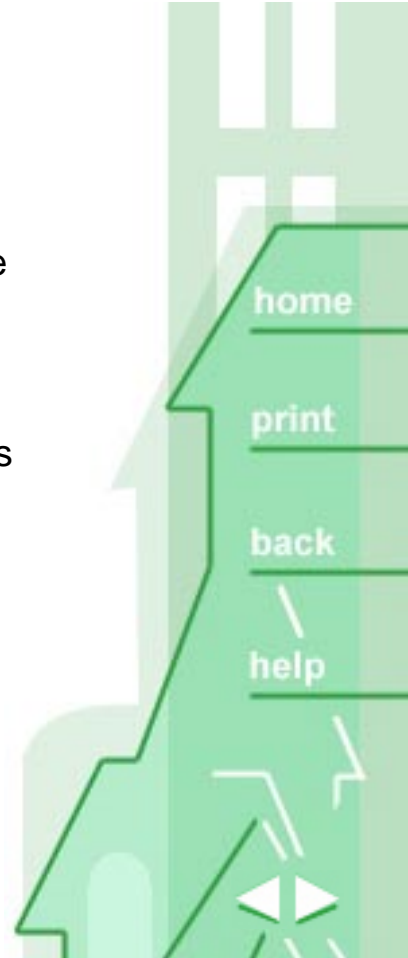


A Fragmented Class Structure?

It may be that other groups of previously privileged workers will find themselves increasingly casualised and undercut in the more volatile labour market introduced by changes in technology, government policies and the effects of recession.

The variety of different groupings within 'the working-class' makes it very difficult to foresee the kind of revolutionary class consciousness expected by Marx.

For that reason, a Weberian approach, which takes into account market position, degree of political organisation and cultural factors in its analysis, is more flexible and provides for a greater degree of complexity when used as a basis for empirical research.



A Fragmented Class Structure?

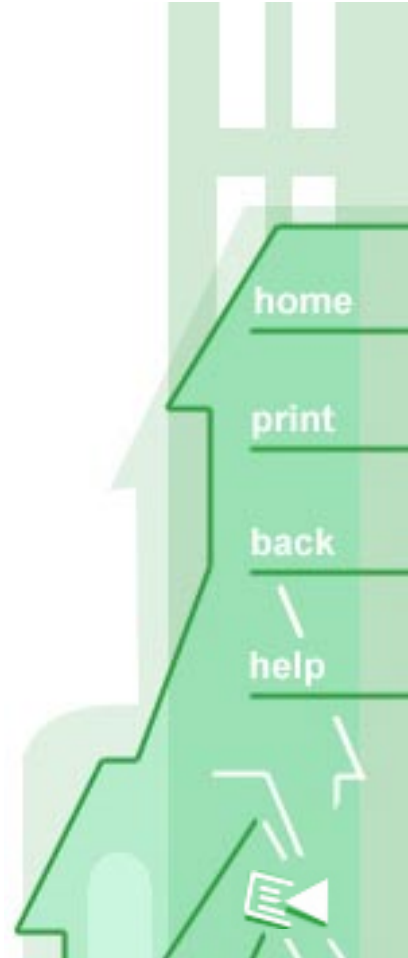
A full understanding of the way the class structure works can only be achieved by combining the two models, as they focus on different levels of analysis. It may be true that divisions between groups are fostered by capitalists to suit their own interests. But that does not mean that they do not exist, nor that they are not worthy of study. And to study them, Weber's model is needed.

Click the Home Button to move on

A Fragmented Class Structure?

ACTIVITY 2 – ANSWERS

Suggestions: car ownership; holidays abroad; video machines; fashionable clothes; central heating; computer ownership; and lots more.



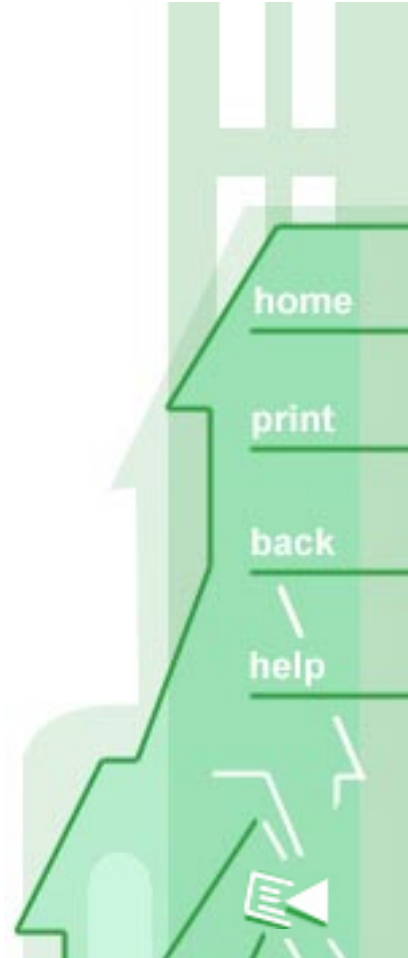
A Fragmented Class Structure?

ACTIVITY 3 – ANSWERS

Economic – levels of wages, and how made up (for example overtime/promotion prospects).

Political – voting patterns/attitudes.

Cultural – leisure activities/social interaction/attitudes.



A Fragmented Class Structure?

ACTIVITY 4 – ANSWERS

- 1 There is a big leap in the proportion of skilled manual workers buying their own homes – from 40% in 1961, to 60% in 1981.
- 2 House ownership has increased in all occupational groups, in roughly the same proportions. Council housing is still a big element in housing manual workers.

