Introduction

Discrimination is as old as the capitalist labour market itself. Indeed, in the straightforward, non-pejorative sense of the word, discrimination is a necessary feature of that market. Applicants for jobs – or more correctly, perhaps, supplicants – are scrutinised by those in whose power it is to hire new workers. This scrutiny typically involves one of the most characteristic ritual occasions of Western bureaucratic societies, the job interview. On the basis of this examination, a candidate (or candidates) is chosen, the other job-seekers are not. This is by definition a discriminatory process and cannot be otherwise; as such it is an integral and routine part of the demand side of the labour market.

Nor is it, however, necessarily a purely capitalist phenomenon. Discrimination between candidates who are in some senses competitive must also be characteristic of the job-allocation process in the state socialist economies. The labour market, in this sense, must be regarded as a universalistic phenomenon of ‘industrial society’. The manner in which the process of recruitment and allocation to jobs works and is regulated, the social construction of labour market outcomes, is the subject of this book.

Varieties of discrimination

A question which inevitably arises in any discussion of this topic is whether or not particular forms of discrimination are ‘fair’. What is the difference between ‘fair’ and ‘unfair’ discrimination? Viewed from the standpoint of the liberal, social-democratic ideology of individualism and meritocratic achievement, the obvious answer would seem to be that discrimination between individuals is ‘fair’ if it is based upon an assessment of the relationship between the abilities which are deemed to be requisite for the functional performance of the job concerned, and the abilities – whether common-sensically self-evident, educationally certified or revealed through tests or probationary periods – of the individuals concerned.
Leaving aside the arguments surrounding the use of strategies of ‘positive discrimination’ in the United States (e.g. O’Neil, 1975), it is clear that the ideology of meritocratic individualism lies at the centre of the political debate concerning discrimination, and provides legitimation for the differentiation between ‘fair’ and ‘unfair’ discrimination. This individualistic ideology has generated a concern with the provision of ‘equal opportunity’, rather than other, more radical, compensatory approaches to racism and ethnic disadvantage (Cormack and Osborne, 1983).

The conceptual distinction between legitimate and illegitimate discrimination – in the labour market and in other social arenas – has become more important in the United Kingdom with the introduction of successive items of legislation designed to regulate the behaviour of the citizenry and make certain kinds of ‘unfair’ discrimination unlawful.¹ In the labour market this has involved the attempt to intervene in the recruitment practices of employers, with the political goal of removing or ameliorating relative distributions of employment opportunities and income which are seen as inequitable. Although disabled people have been protected by legislation, the main beneficiaries of the campaign for equal opportunity have been black ethnic minorities, by which is meant Afro-Caribbean people, people from the Indian sub-continent and the descendants of both,² and women. In this book I shall be mainly concerned with black workers and with racism; however, there should be much that is also relevant to the analysis of gender, and other forms of ethnic discrimination. With respect to gender, there may be readers who will view its peripherality as a major weakness of the analysis. Inasmuch as the research was about ‘race’, and given that there is only so much that one person can do, it would not have been possible to focus more attention on gender discrimination. An attempt was made to control for the gender composition of the sample organisations, and the topic is discussed where it is salient, but that is all. The sin of omission – if that is what it is – derives from the pressures of doing research, and is unavoidable. It should, finally, be noted here that in the rest of this book, unless otherwise explicitly stated, my usage of the word discrimination will reflect its meaning in popular discourse, that is, as an ‘unfair’ (when viewed from within the social-democratic, meritocratic frame of reference) way of distinguishing between, and acting towards, individuals or groups of people.

Lest it be thought that I am accepting the notion of individualistic meritocratic achievement in a rather uncritical fashion, there are three points which are, parenthetically almost, worth making. In the first place, I find myself in wholehearted agreement with those authors who stress the legitimacy function of ‘objectively certified’ meritocratic achievement in the reproduction of class-based educational disadvantage (Bourdieu and
Passeron, 1977, p. 162; Bowles and Gintis, 1976, p. 130). Furthermore, in a wider political sense, as I have argued elsewhere with respect to working-class youth, the individualism which lies at the heart of the meritocratic ideology is a fundamentally conservative influence on working-class political action (Jenkins, 1982c, pp. 88–90). Second, since the content of particular skill categories is both relative and socially constructed – neither absolute nor objectively measurable – the process of matching ‘skill’ requirements to a job-seeker’s abilities is something more problematic than a mere technical exercise in selection (Lee, 1981). Indeed, one of the issues with which this research is concerned is precisely the difficulty and ambiguity which is involved in attempting to predict performance at work during the selection interview. As a result of these problems, recruiters tend to fall back on stereotypical criteria as the yardstick of their decision-making (Spence, 1974). Finally, even if we accept the notion of skill at face value, the obstinate fact remains that the majority of jobs in large sectors of the manual labour market are essentially unskilled by anybody’s definition (Blackburn and Mann, 1979). Furthermore, recent research has indicated that even in recruiting trainees for ‘skilled’ occupations, many employers pay scant regard to formal educational qualifications (Ashton, Maguire and Garland, 1982, pp. 51–5; Reid, 1981). The realism of characterising recruitment as a process solely – or even centrally – concerned with matching abilities to job requirements is, therefore, highly questionable.

A final distinction, which must be briefly outlined here, is that which is drawn between direct and indirect discrimination by the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act and later by the 1976 Race Relations Act (Section 1(1)(b)). This differentiation with respect to categories of discrimination was an attempt to adopt some of the anti-discriminatory legal mechanisms developed in the United States (McCrudden, 1982). Direct discrimination is relatively straightforward, and involves the intent to discriminate. The Commission for Racial Equality has recently argued (1983a, p. 11) that the law does not entail that direct discrimination should be deliberate. However, it is difficult to see how treating another person less favourably on racial grounds, to paraphrase section 1(1)(a) of the 1976 Act, can be anything other than a deliberate act, born of the intent to discriminate.

Indirect discrimination, which has something in common with the notion of institutional racism (Dummett, 1973), is a more nebulous concept. Indirect discrimination in employment occurs when treatment which is nominally equal in its effect upon different sexes or ethnic groups imposes conditions or requirements which can be less easily met by a particular group (or is otherwise discriminatory), as a result of which members of that group suffer a detriment (Lustgarten, 1980, pp. 43–64). It is an important component of the concept of indirect discrimination that the practices or
conditions concerned cannot be shown to be justifiable on the grounds of business necessity. The question of the intention to discriminate does not arise here. An example of indirect discrimination in this sense might be the insistence upon unrealistically high standards of literacy or competence in the English language as selection criteria for an unskilled manual job which does not require such skills for its effective performance. I shall return to the distinction between direct and indirect discrimination in later chapters; one of the central themes of this work is an examination of the adequacy of this conceptualisation as a basis for intervening against racist discrimination.

This brings me to the sometimes vexed topic of what is meant by the words ‘racism’ or ‘racialism’. Clearly, this must depend to some degree upon what one means by ‘race’. Following the broad thrust of contemporary conventional wisdom, it must be insisted that ‘race’ as a biological analytical concept has little, if any, utility in the social sciences (Bodmer, 1972). However, at the level of folk, or popular, categorisations, it is clearly redolent with meanings, some of them contradictory and many of them pernicious. Bearing in mind the well-worn argument that the continued use by sociologists of terms such as ‘race’ or ‘race relations’ may contribute to the legitimacy of racial categorisation in non-sociological discourse, I shall endeavour instead to use terms such as ‘ethnicity’, ‘ethnic relations’ and ‘ethnic minorities’ wherever possible in this book. Where this is not possible, I shall use the words ‘race’ and ‘race relations’ within inverted commas, in order to signify the problematic nature of their meaning.

Starting out from a perspective which recognises ethnicity, the social organisation of cultural diversity, as a meaningful and legitimate object of inquiry (Barth, 1969; Cohen, 1978), it is, however, clear that racism, as a particular form of categorising groups of people into putative ‘races’, and subsequently dealing with them as significantly different in certain respects, may be viewed as an historically specific form of ethnicity. It is necessary to introduce the concept of racism into any discussion of ethnicity in recognition of the fact that:

a far wider set of situations are based upon cultural differentiation of groups than those which are commonly called racial and . . . few of them have anything like the same conflictual consequences that racial situations do. (Rex, 1973, p. 184)

This, however, still leaves us in need of a working definition of racism. Keeping to the forefront the notions that popular ‘racial’ categorisations are socially constructed, facets of the wider phenomenon of ethnic categorisation (Miles, 1982), and that ethnicity is generally more concerned with the categorisation of ‘us’, while racism is orientated to a definition of
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‘them’ (Banton, 1983b, p. 106), I offer the following three-fold model of racism:

(1) racism, based on popular ‘racial’ categorisations, is an historically specific facet of ethnicity which characterises many situations in which one ethnic group dominates, or attempts to dominate, another;

(2) racism involves the categorisation of particular groups of people as inherently or immutably different, and denies the possibility of cultural assimilation or coexistence in equality; and

(3) racism necessarily involves the disadvantageous treatment of ‘racially’ stigmatised groups, either intentionally, on the basis of their categorisation as different and/or inferior, or as the unintentional consequence of historical circumstances and/or the contemporary system of social relationships in a given situation.

This is deliberately designed as a compendium definition, something of a ‘catch-all’, to include as much as possible of the wide variation in the global manifestations of the phenomena which appear to me as racism. As such there are two things I would ask the reader to bear in mind. First, following closely Martin Barker’s conceptualisation of the ‘new racism’ (1981), I do not think that prejudice, however defined, is a necessary component of racism, although the importance of attitudes of this kind should not be overlooked. A model of fundamental differences between certain groups is, however, a prerequisite of racism. These differences may be conceived in either cultural or biological terms. ‘Racial’ categorisation need not depend, therefore, on an explicitly biological frame of reference.

Second, intentionality is not a necessary component of racism either. In so insisting I am attempting to include indirect discrimination, as defined above, within our terms of reference. Given the weight of history pressing down on all of us, to paraphrase Marx, and the complexity of social relationships in modern, urban societies, it seems likely that there will be many situations which, regardless of the self-conscious motivations of the actors involved, will be characteristically disadvantageous to racially categorised groups in their routine outcomes. Furthermore, given the philosophical problem of ‘other minds’, i.e. the imputation of motivation to significant others (Ryle, 1949), it is not theoretically defensible to attach inextricably a concept such as racism to actors’ intentions, which in the final analysis must, almost by definition, remain mysterious and impenetrable.

In this sense, the social scientist is in much the same difficult situation as the members of an Industrial Tribunal: how do you establish that someone intended to discriminate, or that that discrimination depended on racist motives? It is possible, and indeed necessary, to take what actors say seriously; I am certainly not advocating that form of epistemological
arrogance which characterises actors’ statements as necessarily unreliable or ‘false knowledge’. However, the impossibility of inferring actors’ motives or intentions from their statements or other actions with any finality or certainty must be admitted (Stuchlik, 1977). One must settle for a sceptical or critical acceptance of actors at their face value, however unsatisfactory that may be, tempered by a corresponding interest in the observed consequences of their practices and the agreement or contradiction between their testimony and the testimony of others in the social situation under examination. It is in this spirit that the research documented in this book was carried out.

The starting point for any analysis of racism in employment must be the present labour-market situation of black workers. Despite three Race Relations Acts (1965, 1968, 1976), the setting up of ‘Special Programmes’ by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), the investigative and promotional activities of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), the struggles of black workers, inside and outside trade unions, and the efforts by some employing organisations to set their own houses in order through the establishment of equal opportunity policies, black workers remain probably the most disadvantaged category of workers in the labour market. Over-represented in unskilled or semi-skilled manual occupations and in particular sections of the manufacturing or public sectors, they are more likely to work shifts, in particular night shifts, and, on average, earn less than comparable white workers (Unit for Manpower Studies, 1977; Runnymede Trust and Radical Statistics Race Group, 1980, pp. 55–72; Smith, 1974). Partly as a consequence of their occupational identity or industrial location, but also because of racist discrimination, black workers are substantially more likely to become unemployed (Smith, 1981). Young black workers are in a particularly difficult situation in the present economic recession, with the gap between levels of black and white youth unemployment widening all the time (Runnymede Trust, 1981). Although the recession is affecting the working class in general, the black working class is disproportionately hard hit.

Remaining with the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate discrimination, there are four possible reasons for the above pattern of labour-market participation. First, it may be the result of self-selection on the part of black workers, who may be either choosing to work in these sorts of jobs and these industries, or voluntarily quitting employment more frequently than whites. Second, it may be the outcome of a legitimately discriminatory selection process, black workers occupying the lower reaches of the occupational hierarchy because they lack the skills or qualifications for higher level jobs. Third, the employment situation of black workers may reflect the illegitimately discriminatory selection
decisions of managers or other recruiters, in other words, racist discrimination. Finally, it may be the case that black workers are excluded from certain areas of employment because of opposition from white workers. In terms of a broad— and over-simple— distinction between supply and demand in the labour market, the first two considerations are supply-side factors, the last two, inasmuch as pressure from white workers will tend to find its expression in managerial recruitment decisions, relating to the demand side.

This, of course, is a crude and not particularly novel characterisation of the explanatory options available to us. In addition, residential ethnic segregation is obviously an important factor contributing to disadvantage in employment, and vice versa (Rex and Tomlinson, 1979). However, for the purposes of this discussion, and bearing in mind my later argument about the centrality of the labour market in the practical production of stratification, I shall, in the interests of clarity and economy of exposition, leave that topic aside. This, it should be remembered, is no more than a ‘bracketing off’ of the spatial patterning of race relations; in any more general discussion than the present work, it could not be so easily ignored.

The distinction between supply and demand, while perhaps heuristically useful, may be something of a blunt explanatory instrument. It might, for example, be argued that black workers only ‘choose’ to work in certain industries or occupations because they accurately recognise the demand-side barriers which prevent their mobility into other employment contexts. I have argued elsewhere that the labour market, as a loosely constituted social arena, is only to be adequately understood as produced in the reciprocal interaction of the practices of both job-seekers and job-givers, mediated within a hierarchically organised institutional context (Jenkins, 1983, p. 100). I have also argued in the same text, however, that, given the distribution of power within the capitalist labour market and society in general, some actors, specifically employers and their agents, are more in a position to make their decisions count than others (ibid., pp. 127–8). In other words, job-seekers can usually only apply for jobs; no matter what steps they take to reduce uncertainty in the job-search, even in a tight labour market they cannot, short of self-employment, allocate jobs to themselves. The only exceptions to this rule are to be found, as for example in the printing trade, where trade unions exert a major influence on recruitment. The relative weakness of the employee lies at the core of the capitalist wage relationship; offering work is an employer’s prerogative, and all the more so in a market with more workers than jobs. The conditions under which the offer is made are thus centrally important.

That high levels of unemployment further emphasise the importance of the demand side of the equation is reflected in recent studies of the labour market, which have shown a distinct trend towards a concern with the
recruitment and selection practices of employers. This monograph should be seen as part of that trend, although it would be true to say that, because of the emphasis upon discrimination, studies of black workers in the labour market have always shown an interest in the demand for labour. Given my concern with employers’ recruitment practices, it is all the more important to consider briefly the ‘quality’ and the labour-market behaviour of black workers. This I shall do in the next section, which will also provide additional justificatory arguments for concentrating our attention on the way in which the demand for labour is organised.

Black workers in the labour market

In this brief discussion of a broad and well-researched topic, I shall summarise data from the work of other researchers which relate to three substantive areas of interest: the occupational or industrial preferences of black workers, the circumstances under which they quit employment, and the relationship between their skill levels and/or educational qualifications and their labour-market outcomes. I shall not consider ethnic differences in job-search strategies in this chapter. Since such differences acquire most of their practical importance in conjunction with the recruitment procedures of employing organisations, I shall postpone an analysis of their significance until later in the book. The reader should also bear in mind that the discussion below is merely an introductory overview; it is not intended to be a comprehensive review of the literature.

Looking at the occupational or industrial preferences of black workers, let us begin with the migrants who came to the United Kingdom during the wave of migration that began with the arrival of the SS Empire Windrush in 1948 and effectively ended with the coming into effect of the Commonwealth Immigration Act in 1962. Most of the literature on the employment of these early migrants places great stress on discrimination, in reflection of the realities of their situation. Some attention is paid to their occupational status, but there is little discussion of their labour-market goals or preferences, either as reasons for migration or as the basis for occupational choice in Britain (e.g. Patterson, 1968; Rose et al., 1969, pp. 149–81, 296–329; Wright, 1968). Those studies, mainly although not exclusively social anthropological, which do discuss the meanings attached to migration and work, simply serve to emphasise the heterogeneity of goals, aspirations and other ‘push’ factors which lie behind the ‘migrant worker’ category. Some had the stereotypical ‘migrant’ ideology, seeking to accumulate capital in order to return home after a few years, while others were working in order to accumulate enough to go into business in Britain. For some, migration was part of a deliberate strategy of occupational and social mobility; others were impelled here by political imperatives beyond their control. Then again,
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there were those who simply came to work, trying to escape chronic poverty or unemployment in the Caribbean or the Asian sub-continent (Davison, 1966; Dahya, 1974; Foner, 1979; Rex and Moore, 1967, pp. 84–132; Saifullah Khan, 1979; Tambs-Lyche, 1980; J. L. Watson, 1977).

In the light of such aspirational diversity, it is difficult to understand what contribution occupational choice or industrial preference can have made to the restricted pattern of employment described earlier. What has to be emphasised here, of course, is the importance of labour shortages in particular sectors of the metropolitan economy. In all discussions of post-war migration, whether the explanatory framework is the ‘replacement labour’ or ‘expanding occupations’ model, it is agreed that metropolitan demand for labour must be central to any understanding of the situation (e.g. Jones and Smith, 1970, pp. 46–84).

None of this, however, gets us much farther in assessing the role of the preferences of migrant workers in producing their labour-market outcomes. Some insight into the problem may be gained from the original PEP Racial Discrimination survey; it is quite clear from this material that, for a significant number of migrants, not only did the move to Britain result in occupational downgrading, particularly for white-collar workers, but this was experienced as a deprivation (Daniel, 1968, pp. 57–82). It was the ‘ablest’ respondents in this survey who appeared to experience the greatest discrimination. Similarly, retrospective data from Phizacklea and Miles’s West Indian sample (1980, pp. 78–89), while acknowledging the differences in the organisation of skill training in the West Indies and Britain, confirm that many migrants saw themselves as skilled, and suffered disappointment on discovering that British employers did not share this view. In the same vein, a recent survey of the work histories of Asians in a Midlands town indicates that black workers are in their present occupational niches by dint of constraining circumstances, not the exercise of choice (Ratcliffe, 1980, pp. 19–21).

Some idea of the effect of this ‘personal deskilling’ upon migrants may be gleaned from Blackburn and Mann’s study of the Peterborough labour market in the early 1970s. Discussing the work orientations of the migrant workers in their sample, mainly Pakistanis, Italians and Eastern Europeans, they conclude that:

market experiences appears to play a large part in shaping the orientations, with a predominant tendency for the very limited scope for meaningful choice by immigrants to lead to an absence of orientations, other than to find a job where they will be accepted. (Blackburn and Mann, 1979, p. 223)

Coming to the question of industrial location (and, to some extent, this includes geographical location), Mark Duffield’s recent research on labour
migration in the 1940s and 1950s demonstrates that West Indian workers were, as a matter of policy, deliberately dispersed geographically and, to a degree, industrially. This was achieved through the medium of their allocation and placement by Labour Exchanges (Duffield, personal communication). Asian workers, who began to arrive later, found themselves in a different industrial and policy climate. By virtue of their active exclusion from many workplaces by trade unions, they became concentrated in industries with labour shortages and/or weak or non-existent union organisation, such as the West Midlands iron foundries and the textile factories of the Northern mill towns (Duffield, 1982a, pp. 21–4). Such then was the scope which the first generation of black workers had to exercise their labour-market preferences, regardless of what those might have been.

Information concerning the early migrants is relatively scanty. When we look at the young black workers of the 1970s and 1980s, there is more direct information upon which to base any discussion. The conclusions to which one is drawn, however, are largely the same. Lee and Wrench, for example, examining the movement of black and white school-leavers into apprenticeships in the Midlands, found that there was little relationship for any school-leavers between job aspirations and eventual outcomes, but most particularly for their samples of black youth. Although Asian, West Indian and white youngsters were similarly placed in terms of examination successes and subjects taken, the white sample did much better in terms of apprenticeships secured (Lee and Wrench, 1983, pp. 57–9, 84–5).

Similarly, research sponsored by the CRE into the transition from school to work in Lewisham produced broadly comparable findings. In terms of their relative success in finding the kinds of job they wanted, West Indians were much less successful than whites: 46 per cent of the West Indian sample who were in employment were in jobs they did not want, as opposed to 29 per cent of the comparable white group. Differences in educational achievement between the two groups were not sufficient to explain the labour-market differences (Commission for Racial Equality, 1978a, p. 10). More recent research carried out by the CRE reinforces this picture; in terms of securing whatever job goals they may have, young whites do better than either Asians or West Indians (Anwar, 1982).

Thus it appears that white job-seekers have more scope for the exercise of occupational choice than their black peers. This, however, begs an important question: how much scope does any job-seeker have for the exercise of choice? The mythical charter of neo-classical economics insists that such choice is the transactional basis of an efficient, and equitable, labour market; there is good evidence, and a lively debate, to suggest otherwise, however (Clarke, 1980; Williams, 1974). It is particularly