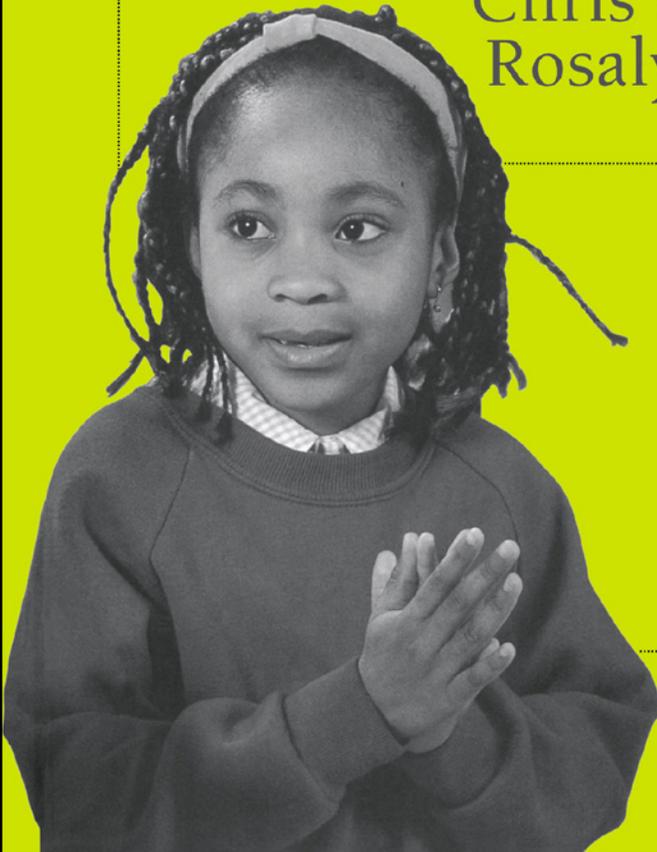


Gender, 'Race' and Class in Schooling

A New Introduction

Chris Gaine and
Rosalyn George



**Also available as a printed book
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Gender, 'Race' and Class in Schooling

For Adam, Luke
and Siobhan

Gender, 'Race' and Class in Schooling: A New Introduction

Chris Gaine and Rosalyn George



UK

Falmer Press, 1 Gunpowder Square, London, EC4A 3DE

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk.”

USA

Falmer Press, Taylor & Francis Inc, 325 Chestnut Street, 8th Floor,
Philadelphia, PA 19106

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First published in 1999

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-203-98482-X Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0 7507 0758 5 cased

ISBN 0 7507 0757 7 paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data are available on request

Jacket design by Caroline Archer

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Acknowledgments

In Chris's case, as the primary author of the sections on 'race' and class, this book had to be written against the competing demands of a serious illness and another project which seemed to suffer from sibling rivalry, as well as the regular demands of teaching, family life, gardening and leaking taps. The fact that it was finished at all is due to the forbearance and support of my wife, my employers and colleagues, so thanks to them.

Rosalyn, as the primary author of the sections on gender, would like to thank her family, friends and colleagues for all their help and support during this project.

Many thanks also to Falmer Press, from both of us.

1

Key Ideas and Concepts

In this book we want to explore the current situation in schools with regard to three central inequalities in education: gender, ‘race’ and social class. All three have been high on both teachers’ and politicians’ agendas in the careers of most practising teachers, and all three have been the focus of significant and recent changes.

There has been a long history in the UK of addressing educational inequalities resulting from social class—from the advent of free secondary education for all in 1944, to the intended phasing out of grammar schools beginning in 1965, and to the expansion of free higher education in 1966. All of these have had the explicit aim (among others) of increasing the lower levels of educational participation and success of the children of poorer people and those in unskilled work. By the 1970s some social and political attention was also focused on the educational performance of girls and young women in line with the advent of the Sex Discrimination Act in 1975. ‘Race’ came later than class to national attention and policy, though special measures were introduced via the Local Government Act of 1967 to address what were seen as particular disadvantages of immigrant pupils. It was not really until the late 1970s that the issue was firmly established on the national policy agenda and, since the 1980s, it has had a very high profile.

A good deal has happened in policy terms since 1980, some of it seemingly paradoxical. In the early years of the Thatcher governments, which began in 1979, the movement towards comprehensive secondary education continued. At the same time, the intervention of LEAs in how schools dealt with racial (and to an extent gender) inequality increased, so the early 1980s saw an expansion of explicit and official attempts to tackle inequality. We call this ‘paradoxical’ because in time it became increasingly clear that this was incompatible with important elements of Conservative Party philosophy. There are several strands to this: it is not that in any simplistic way Tories believe in inequality.

As regards class, they believe that people have the right to be unequal. That is to say, differences in ability and effort will naturally lead to differences in education and differences in life, so this kind of inequality is not inherently unjust. With certain exceptions they believe that on the whole there are fair chances for those who want to ‘get on in life’ to do so. As regards ‘race’ they

believe that there should not be unjust or unfair barriers to success on the basis of 'race'. They also believe that the state should interfere as little as possible with individuals' actions, including discriminatory ones,¹ preferring the checks and balances of the market and having a fairly sceptical view of what they would call 'social engineering'. At the same time, they also believe that there are several things about Britain best left alone—their party title itself signals this, so there is a strong assimilationist current within the party which argues that equal treatment is conditional upon 'following British ways'. This strand *does* believe in state intervention (or at least involvement) where particular aspects of British life are involved, such as requiring 'Christian' school assemblies. As regards gender, the Conservatives believe in evolutionary rather than revolutionary change. Their strong attachment to tradition and to 'tried and tested' aspects of British society means they have some suspicion of a large scale change from women as wives and mothers to women as equal partners in the workforce.

In accordance with these different currents in Conservative thought Margaret Thatcher declared in the early 1980s that 'the pursuit of equality is dead'. The involvement of LEAs in the pursuit of educational equality was reduced in the late 1980s and 1990s, largely as a result of drastically limiting the LEAs' spending power beyond what they had to allocate to schools. At the same time, central power was taken over the curriculum as an important definer of how a society sees itself and passes on messages to its next generation. Whatever specific emphasis on equality which there had been in the curriculum was given less prominence. In 1980 most secondary age pupils went to comprehensive schools maintained by LEAs with a notional shared perspective and goal of providing a common (or at least similar) curriculum in broadly similar schools. This has now changed to a situation where schools may reintroduce selection in certain circumstances and where selection is allowed to flourish in a more covert way by parental choice of school. While the relationship is more complex than it would have been two decades ago because of a more fragmented social class structure, this 'choice' is nevertheless related to social class (these points are explored in later chapters).

At the same time, and perhaps for different reasons, patterns of inequality have changed. We have already referred to an increasingly fragmented class structure and something similar has happened with regard to 'race'. In the 1980s there was a broad pattern of relative under-achievement by the children of all post-war migrants. This is no longer true. Some groups continue to be less successful than the majority white population and others have become more successful. The situation here is again more fractured and complex, and much harder to generalize about.

If anything the situation with regard to gender has changed the most. In 1980 (and for much of the time since) all the literature about gender and school performance concentrated on the poorer performance of girls. While there were areas of greater success than boys (particularly in primary school and in language-based subjects) the overall pattern was of lower results as girls got older

and a much lower take-up of A-level and higher education places. This is now entirely reversed, so that while both boys' and girls' results have steadily improved over the intervening years, girls' results have done so at a much faster rate. By 1996 they outperformed boys in every subject at both GCSE and A-level (these general statements are critically analysed in [Chapter 6](#)).

Thus the forces and processes generating inequality, and the fine detail of how they operate, may have changed from the past. It is these series of changes which have placed teachers in a new position. There are new sets of practices and official policies within which teachers have to work, and there are new sets of priorities for those seeking to engage critically with the educational world in which they work. Making sense of what has happened, and is happening, is, we believe, critical if all young people are to receive their entitlement. While the Conservative Party is not likely to see political power again until some years into the twenty-first century, their influence on the educational world we now inhabit has been profound. They have changed the landscape in which anyone concerned with educational inequality has to operate.

Our own view is the comparatively modest one that more equality is possible. In particular we believe there are aspects of language ([Chapter 3](#)), curriculum ([Chapter 4](#)) and pupils' experience ([Chapter 5](#)) which at the ideological and practical level promote inequality. We also believe that in material ways current policies will increase social class differences in education and that these will interact in intricate but reinforcing ways with gender and 'race' ([Chapter 7](#)). Our main aim for this book, therefore, is to provide an accessible summary of recent history and developments in order to promote an understanding of future trends and possibilities.

Clarifying our Terms

In view of what Ball called the 'discourse of derision' to which concern with equality has been subjected in the past two decades, there are certain key terms and ideas which need defining.

The first of these is the most obvious: *inequality*, which we have begun to discuss already. A distinction that needs to be made is between *inequality of access* and *inequality of outcome*. If there are barriers which ought to be irrelevant but which prevent particular children getting into a school or receiving its benefits (barriers such as skin colour, sex or social background) then, on the face of it, this constitutes unequal access. If it can be justified (for there are equally good alternatives: there is different but not unequal provision; and the same desirable goals are attainable by different routes) then there is not necessarily injustice present. The inequality we are concerned with therefore is different *and unequal* treatment based on irrelevant criteria resulting in injustice. This kind of unequal access can be quite subtle, it is much more than a crude (and usually unlawful) exclusion from an entire school and can operate through the curriculum that is offered, the style of interaction in classrooms and the

atmosphere in corridors—all aspects of schooling which will be discussed in the ensuing chapters.

Unequal outcomes, as such, do not necessarily present a problem for educationalists. No group of people learning netball or nuclear physics will become equally proficient in the necessary skills, and no school is likely to produce a group of pupils entirely undifferentiated in their achievements. The unequal outcomes we are concerned about are those resulting from the un-equal access described above.

Equality of opportunity, therefore, means opportunities without unfair barriers or irrelevant criteria getting in the way. It does not mean every pupil's results will be the same.

Discrimination we shall take to mean more than its literal sense of simply choosing and use it in its usual sense of *unjust* choosing, that is to say treating people differently on the basis of irrelevant criteria. It is unlawful in Britain in some respects but not others. For instance, it is against the law for schools to set quotas for the number of black (or white) pupils or for them to demand a higher pass mark for girls in entrance exams in order to keep the sex ratio even. It is also unlawful to have measures or procedures which *indirectly* disadvantage some ethnic groups compared to others or one sex against the other. It is not unlawful to indirectly, covertly or even virtually explicitly advantage one social class compared to another. Legislation was passed in 1996 making most forms of discrimination against disabled people unlawful in employment, but there remain areas of unequal access. Another high profile issue is sexual orientation, where at the moment no general law requires equal treatment and some explicitly prevent it, i.e. recognition of marriage and service in the armed forces. The Race Relations Acts are less draconian than bar-room wisdom usually has it. The first law was introduced in 1965, prohibiting discrimination in restaurants, theatres and cinemas; in 1968, this was widened to key areas of employment and housing, and in rather more general terms to the provision of education and health care.² The more nebulous provision against 'promoting racial hatred' is almost never used, and has no connection with the mythical 'bans' on books and words which have been the subject of some media hysteria.

Positive discrimination is one of a group of ideas which are easily misunderstood and perceived negatively. There is not the space here to explore the idea fully, but in relation to pupils in schools it is indicated above where discrimination is against the law, whatever the motive, hence positive discrimination is also against the law. *Positive action*, however, can be used to ensure irrelevant barriers are not preventing someone or a particular group achieving access. Taking particular steps to undermine the 'unmacho' image of learning French, or learning to type, even though the steps require extra staff resources, is positive action and is not unlawful. When viewed in this way it is clear that, in practice, many features of school life involve positive action.

Sex and gender The usual distinction here is that sex encompasses those features which are biologically determined and gender those which are socially

determined. Thus the fact that women are on average shorter and lighter than men is mostly due to sex, i.e. it is biologically determined. The fact that in western societies women often wear skirts and men almost never do is entirely social. Even the pattern on the skirt matters, since in the UK it is acceptable for some men to wear skirts if they carry a tartan pattern.

Sexism refers to actions or circumstances where one sex displays prejudiced attitudes, or more especially, actions towards the other. For sexism to have any effect it must operate from a position of power, and, as will be discussed in [Chapter 2](#), in practice the opportunity to act in ways which disadvantage the other sex has historically been more open to males.

'Race' This term is always put in quotes in this book because it does not mean what people think it means, but it would require many pages to explain why not (for a slightly fuller discussion see Gaine, 1995). The key point is that what are often thought of as 'races'—Africans, Europeans, Chinese etc.—are only superficially different from each other. Groups which appear different from others generally have more differences *within* the group than some of their members do with outsiders. 'Race' is a crude and superficial classification which began in the last century, it has no biological significance to scientists today. Perhaps a useful working definition is 'a group of people who may share some physical characteristic to which social importance is attached'. Thus, the important facet of 'race' is not the skin colour, facial features or type of hair people have but the social significance which is placed upon these.

Ethnicity and ethnic group Ethnicity is a far more preferable term because it unambiguously refers to culture. An ethnic group is simply a group which shares certain cultural features such as language, religion, various customs, perhaps food and clothing preferences. It usually depends on a sense of shared peoplehood—that is to say that if a group believe themselves to be an ethnic group based on one or more of the above features then they probably are. Where one draws the line between different 'ethnic groups' depends on who is drawing the line and for what purpose. It might make sense sometimes to speak of 'Asians' as an ethnic group in Britain, but at others it will be more appropriate to speak of specific sub-divisions.

Racism is, analogously to sexism, the belief that one 'race' (in practice often an ethnic group) is superior to others coupled with *the power to put this belief into practice*. This last point allows for the importance of media control, force of numbers, institutional assumptions and power over employment and housing. Racism in this sense is more than name-calling or simple dislike of another ethnic group.

Left wing has traditionally been associated with the Labour Party and with socialism. In education the left has generally had more of a concern with equality and its promotion, and has therefore tended to be in favour of measures which reduce unfair barriers to educational success. Though for a time broadly supported by the Conservative Party, comprehensive schools have been more actively promoted by Labour and, for the most part, it was Labour LEAs who

initiated the 'race' and sex equality policies to which we have already referred. Obvious potential barriers to educational success are income and wealth, so the left has been in favour of means-tested grants to higher education and giving extra resources to schools in poorer areas. In the past, Labour spoke of abolishing private education, but this is no longer their policy and they are less opposed to the surviving grammar schools.

Right wing is, correspondingly a term applied to the Conservatives, though during the 1980s and 1990s they tended to be dominated by what is generally called the *New Right*. In economics the New Right are liberals', seeking the derestricting of trade, commerce and the free play of market forces. In other aspects of social life they are more restricting, favouring, for example, capital punishment, severe prison regimes, 'tradition' and only limited social recognition of gay relationships. In school terms, this means that they are likely to favour introducing what they see as efficiency- and quality-enhancing 'market forces' between schools, namely schools competing for pupils (and hence resources) and competing for good exam results. On the other hand, they have been much more authoritarian about curriculum content, favouring central control and opposing liberalism' in the social sense, thus favouring various aspects of tradition like academic selection and uniforms and opposing or reversing some of the changes touched upon above.

A Warning About 'Difference'

One of the difficulties in discussing and analysing group differences in performance, achievement, or any other aspect of schooling is that we can forget that in practice groups *overlap* in their characteristics, rather than possess completely different ones. However, this is not always the case, which helps to confuse matters further. Take, for instance, physical sexual differences between girls and boys. Here there is little overlap, girls possessing different sexual organs to boys with a very small number of children being born as hermaphrodites, i.e. without a clear physical sex and undeveloped organs. This could be represented diagrammatically thus:

It is possible to produce a similar diagram for skin colour comparing, say, people of Pakistani descent with white people of English descent. There is still some overlap since some Kashmiri Pakistanis are very fair-skinned, some having blue eyes too, and some 'white' English people are darker-skinned than most, perhaps because of some distant Mediterranean ancestor.

Many other attributes, however, are not discontinuous. Most of the attributes we are concerned with in education are not possessed entirely by one group of people and not possessed at all by another. To take an uncontroversial example first. Men are typically taller than women, but this could not be represented in a diagram similar to the one above with almost *all* men being taller than almost *all* women. The actual picture is more like this:

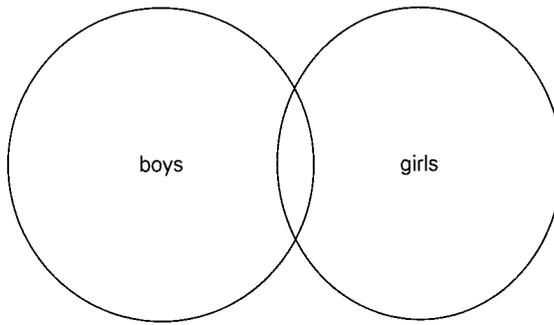


Figure 1.1: Diagram representing physical sex differences between boys and girls

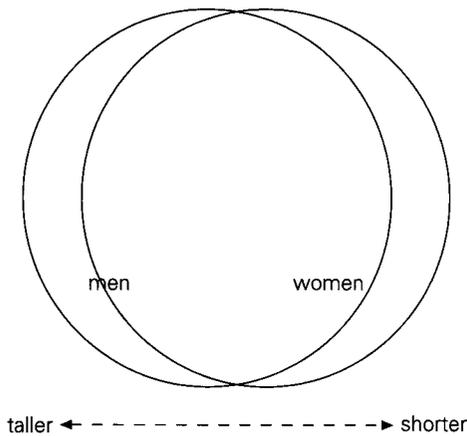


Figure 1.2: Diagram representing differences in height of men and women

Statisticians and social scientists usually represent populations not by circles as in these diagrams, but by graphs called ‘normal distributions’, which show more accurately the distribution of particular attributes within a population, i.e. that most people are somewhere in the centre with the numbers at either extreme falling away to zero.

If we split the figures by sex, we can see that most men have a height of around 5’10” and most women a height of around 5’7”, but the majority of both men and women are in the range which overlaps. In any roomful of people, therefore, several of the women will be taller than several men. Sex has some relationship with height, but it alone is a weak predictor.

What would a normal distribution of motivation for homework be like? There is some evidence that girls in secondary schools are more motivated about this than boys, so we might have a pair of distributions like this:

This shows more girls being highly motivated towards their homework than boys, *not that no boys are highly motivated or no girls have very low motivation*. You

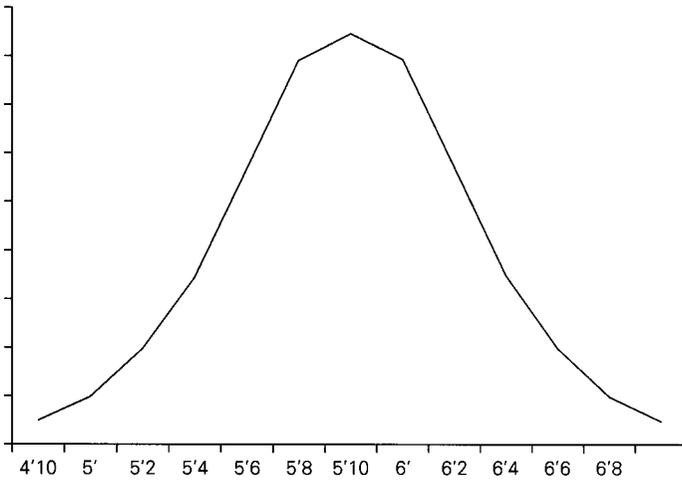


Figure 1.3: Normal distribution showing height of adults

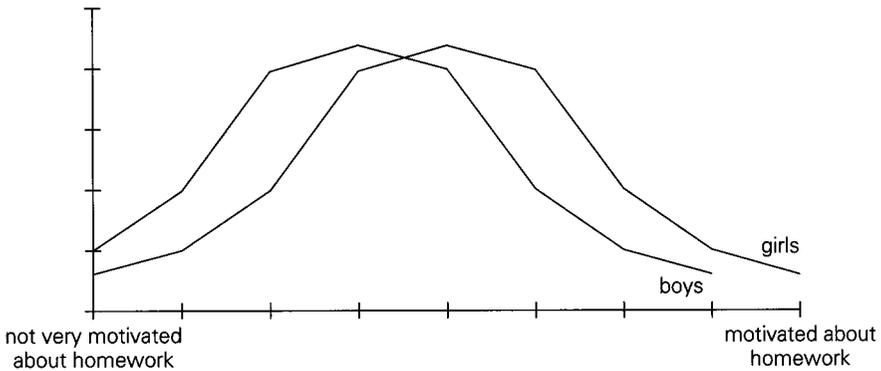


Figure 1.4: Speculative Normal distribution of motivation for homework

can predict from these graphs that overall the girls you teach will do more homework, but they cannot predict for you the motivation of an *individual* girl or boy. To take another case, suppose there is evidence of greater family support and encouragement for pupils of Indian background than for white ones. Such evidence would *not* support the assumption that every Indian pupil was highly supported and encouraged by her or his family, nor even that in most cases there is any difference.

The last example to illustrate this is about achievement. You will read in [Chapter 6](#) that on average African-Caribbean boys achieve a GCSE points score some points lower than white boys. In other words, the normal distribution of scores for African-Caribbean boys has its 'peak' at a lower number. But as the distributions drawn together show, most white and African-Caribbean pupils lie in the overlapping area.

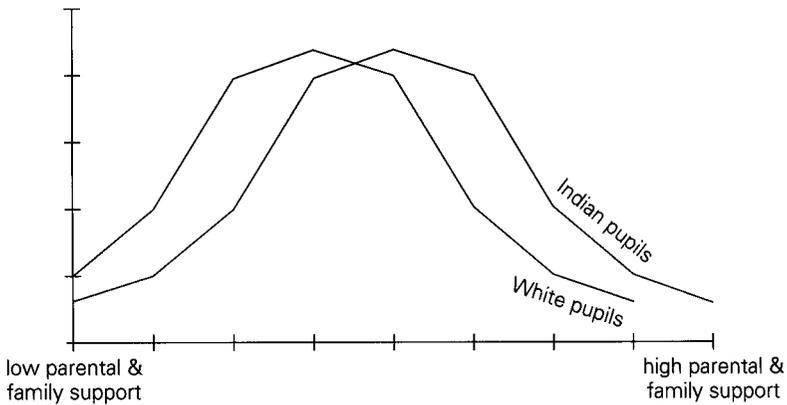


Figure 1.5: Speculative Normal distribution showing family support

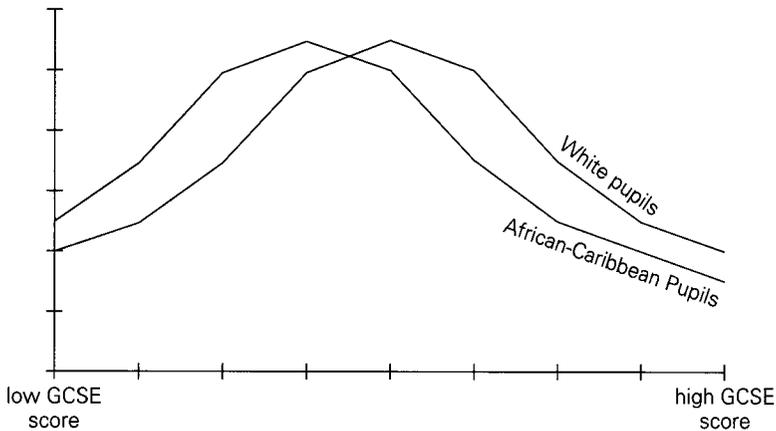


Figure 1.6: Normal distribution showing achievement

It is hard to over-emphasize this simple but crucial point. It is all too easy to think of differences as if they were discontinuous rather than overlapping and hence forget that ethnicity, sex and social class, while they produce significant *group* differences, are in most case weak predictors of educational outcomes for *individuals*. In any case, people are seldom, in any aspect of their lives, solely recognizable in terms of class, 'race' or gender. Most often there is a complex interweaving of all three and, more besides, like sexual orientation and age. We have nevertheless kept to these three primary categories in the organization of the book in order to structure the wealth of material and to highlight the central debates and changes in each sphere—of which a growing awareness of interlinking is only one.

Notes

- 1 This is an important part of Conservative philosophy and is dealt with in detail in Levitas (1986), and see also Cohen et al. (1986). In most of the last 20 years the Conservative Party annual conference has had motions submitted calling for the repeal of the Race Relations Act. Though they have never been passed, this is evidence, at least, of a view within the party that the Act is an unnecessary infringement of people's freedom.
- 2 The number of successful prosecutions is small. In the employment field, the Commission for Racial Equality only backs industrial tribunal claims which it thinks are absolutely solid. There were 389 of these in the whole country in 1988-89, and 22 per cent of these found the allegation of discrimination proven. For reports about education see CRE (1988a; 1992b).

Facts and Representations

Women and the Economy

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the family represented a working relationship which was engaged collaboratively in the production of such things as food and clothes. This work took place in the same arena as sexual relations, child bearing and child rearing. Although at that time the patriarchal role of the father was absolute, women's skills were indispensable and interdependence between the husband and wife, both being economically productive, was critical. As the nineteenth century progressed, market forces dramatically altered the structure of this working relationship. The world of the family and the world of production became separate entities. Production became part of the public sphere and the family became more and more private.

Middle-class women gradually became relatively unproductive and many working-class women, although working in the public sphere, lost many of the skills over which previously they had had control. The division of labour by gender could be characterized in the following ways: for the male, the public sphere offered waged employment, a rigid distinction between work and leisure and an income which brought with it power and independence. The middle-class woman, on the other hand, was engaged in un-waged employment, with no defined work or working hours and no defined leisure time. With no income, the woman was totally dependent on her husband and, therefore, powerless to alter or shape her destiny.

The period from 1780–1850 was one in which the idea of separate spheres for men and women became sanctified in middle class thought and practice. Women were identified with the private domain of the home and the family as wives and mothers or unmarried dependants; men, on the other hand, were associated with the public sphere of paid work, politics and business and with economic and jural responsibility for their wives and the expected brood of children. (Purvis, 1991, p. 2)