

## THE ECONOMICS OF DISCRIMINATION

By Gary Becker

Second Edition – University of Chicago Press  
Chicago and London, 1971

Gary Becker's classical work, *The Economics of Discrimination*, has recently been issued in a second edition. The original edition of this work was published in 1957. It gained its reputation primarily because it was the first serious attempt to deal with the problems of discrimination in an analytically rigorous fashion and to try to reconcile the phenomenon of discrimination with neo-classical economic theory. The second edition includes only minor alterations in the original presentation in the addenda to chapters 4, 8, and 9. Otherwise, Mr. Becker has chosen not to alter his analysis. This procedure may be justified by considerations of the literary propriety of the work. However, Mr. Becker apparently feels that the work stands on the merit of its economic analysis as well.

*The Economics of Discrimination* defines discrimination with reference to individual taste and coefficients of discrimination defined to measure the psychic cost of dealing with a non preferred group. Mr. Becker then tries to utilize this definition and neo-classical analysis to demonstrate that it is these tastes, and these tastes alone, operating through the market place which lead to observed real world discrimination and the resultant black/white welfare disparities. Whereas it is fruitless to argue with any particular definition of discrimination, one can differ with the analysis if it does not demonstrate what was intended.

Mr. Becker's analysis fails to demonstrate his primary hypothesis. Namely, that it is the taste for discrimination operating through a competitive market that determines the black condition. The analysis is confused, incomplete, and sometimes contradictory. For instance, in Chapter 2, Mr. Becker, argues that Blacks cannot profit from counter discrimination and separation, but in the addenda to Chapter 8, he maintains that black professionals have gained in the South, precisely because of separation. But the major shortcoming of the work is its failure to recognize that there is a basic inconsistency between the tenets of the neo-classical doctrine of competitive markets and the phenomenon of discrimination. For one thing, the assumption that employers can pay workers less than the value of the marginal product (i.e., the wage rate times the discrimination coefficient) is inconsistent with the competitive theory of price determination. For it employers have the "power" to lower the wage rate when they have taste for discrimination, why do they not have the power to

# Economics Of Discrimination

**M Carnoy**



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