

# The Evolving Definition of “Racism” and its Trail of Text-Artifacts

**Ben Zimmer**

*Wall Street Journal*

XX EURALEX International Congress  
16 July 2022, Mannheim, Germany

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.



WORD ON THE STREET

## ‘Bada-Bing’: Improvised Nonsense Turned Mobster Argot

The late James Caan slipped a few syllables of gibberish into ‘The Godfather.’ Now they have their own entry in the Oxford English Dictionary.

*Ben Zimmer* | July 15, 2022



WORD ON THE STREET

## ‘Curfew’: A Cap on Hearth Fires and Tennis Matches

A warning bell once told townspeople when to damp flames for the night. Now its name is invoked to clear the streets in times of crisis.

*Ben Zimmer* | July 7, 2022



WORD ON THE STREET

## ‘Cruise’: Once Just a Crossing, Now a Pleasure Ride

The term originally meant getting from here to there, before casinos and beach stopovers were added to the mix

*Ben Zimmer* | July 1, 2022

BENJAMIN ZIMMER

*Wall Street Journal*

KELLY E. WRIGHT

*University of Michigan*

CHARLES E. CARSON

*Duke University Press*

zoom-. The videoconferencing service Zoom became omnipresent in 2020, as people’s work, school, and social activities went in the remote direction during the pandemic. The ADS recognized the efflorescence of Zoom-related terms with a special ad hoc category in the 2020 WOTY selection process, and *Zoom-* itself was nominated in the Most Creative Combining Form category. The monosyllable *Zoom* certainly lent itself to all manner of compounding, as in *Zoombombing* ‘disruptive intrusion on a Zoom session by online trolls’, *Zoom fatigue*, *Zoom mom*, *Zoom party*, and *Zoom school*. Overuse of *Zoom* left many people feeling *Zoomed out* (or OYSEGEZOOMT in Yiddish, as discussed above). An appropriate portmanteau word for that Zoomed-out feeling is *Zoombie*, blending with *zombie* (Thorne 2020). Some *Zoom* blends were more successful than others: while there were reports early in the pandemic of *zumping* ‘dumping a romantic interest over Zoom’, that term never really caught on in dating lingo (*The Guardian* 2020). *Zoom* also had the power to reshape previously introduced neologisms. As noted previously in ATNW (AS 96, no. 1 [Feb. 2021]), *ZOOMER* had been used for a member of Generation Z, on the model of (*baby*) *boomer*, but in pandemic times it was reinterpreted to refer to students’ reliance on remote learning, “an acknowledgment of the dramatic shift to remote communication that will shape the interactions of this generation” (Gerhardt 2020). [BZ]

BENJAMIN ZIMMER  
*Wall Street Journal*

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*University of Michigan*

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*Duke University Press*

**Zoom-** *combining form* Relating to the video teleconferencing software program Zoom

—**Zoombie** *noun* [*Zoom + zombie*] One whose behavior has become zombie-like by spending too much screen time on Zoom

**2020** Mar. 18, @Harley\_Dalosan, *Twitter*: I have become...a ZOOMbie #Zoom

**2020** May 1, Anthony Silard, “Don’t become a ‘Zoombie’ during quarantine,” *Orlando (Fla.) Sentinel*: Here are a few strategies you can try out to get the best from Zoom without becoming a fast-moving Zoombie. [¶] Suggest a conference call rather than Zoom for smaller meetings. Your colleagues may be apprehensive about making this suggestion themselves. However, they will appreciate you being the first to share this idea and preventing them also from becoming Zoombies.

**2020** July 30, see quot. s.v. ZOOMED OUT

**2020** Oct., Ricardo Levins Morales, “Zoombie Apocalypse” (poster), *RLM Art Studio* (retail site) (see image)

**2021** Feb. 2, Scott Toney, Jenn Light, and Andrew Urbaczewski, “Fight Zoom Fatigue: Keeping the Zoombies at Bay,” *Communications of the Association for Information Systems* 48, article 10: 41: Although we smoothly transitioned the class to the online modality, we used video conferencing for the first time, so we always faced the Zoombies threat. It took planning and diligence to keep students’ eyes from glazing over and losing the class to Zoom fatigue.



2020 Oct.

# The New York Times

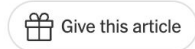
Opinion

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## Lies! Murder! Lexicography!

By Ben Zimmer

Dec. 2, 2012



HERE'S a tip: if you see the words “dictionary” and “scandal” in a sensational headline, prepare to be disappointed.

Last week, the British newspaper The Guardian broke a story from the dictionary world that seemed, at first blush, to be quite scandalous indeed. “An eminent former editor of the Oxford English Dictionary covertly deleted thousands of words because of their foreign origins and bizarrely blamed previous editors,” [it began](#).

But the truth, it turns out, is [more prosaic](#). The former editor, in compiling material for four supplements to the O.E.D., had not seen fit to include everything that was in a previous supplement to the dictionary’s first edition, published in 1933, including thousands of words borrowed from foreign languages.

# *Merriam-Webster Revises 'Racism' Entry After Missouri Woman Asks for Changes*

Kennedy Mitchum, 22, said the dictionary definition needed to be expanded to include systemic racism. The dictionary's editors agreed.



Kennedy Mitchum wrote to the editors of Merriam-Webster that racism was “prejudice combined with social and institutional power. It is a system of advantage based on skin color.” Christian Gooden/St. Louis Post-Dispatch, via Associated Press

# A Missouri woman asked Merriam-Webster to update its definition of racism and now officials will make the change



By [David Williams](#), CNN

🕒 Updated 1539 GMT (2339 HKT) June 12, 2020



Kennedy Mitchum, 22, works to get dictionary definition of racism changed 01:00

JURISPRUDENCE

# Will Merriam-Webster's Coming Redefinition of "Racism" Revolutionize Discrimination Law?

BY ELIAS LEAKE QUINN  
JULY 15, 2020 • 3:37 PM



Racism is getting a new dictionary definition. Justin Tallis/Getty Images



**Chuck Woolery** ✓  
@chuckwoolery · Follow



Merriam-Webster To Change Dictionary Definition of "Racism" to Show Only White People are Racist



bluntforcetruth.com

Merriam-Webster To Change Dictionary Definition of "Racism" to Sho...  
It's 2020, but 1984 is really arriving ahead of schedule. People are being purged for things their wife tweeted, for a costume they once ...

5:00 PM · Jun 11, 2020



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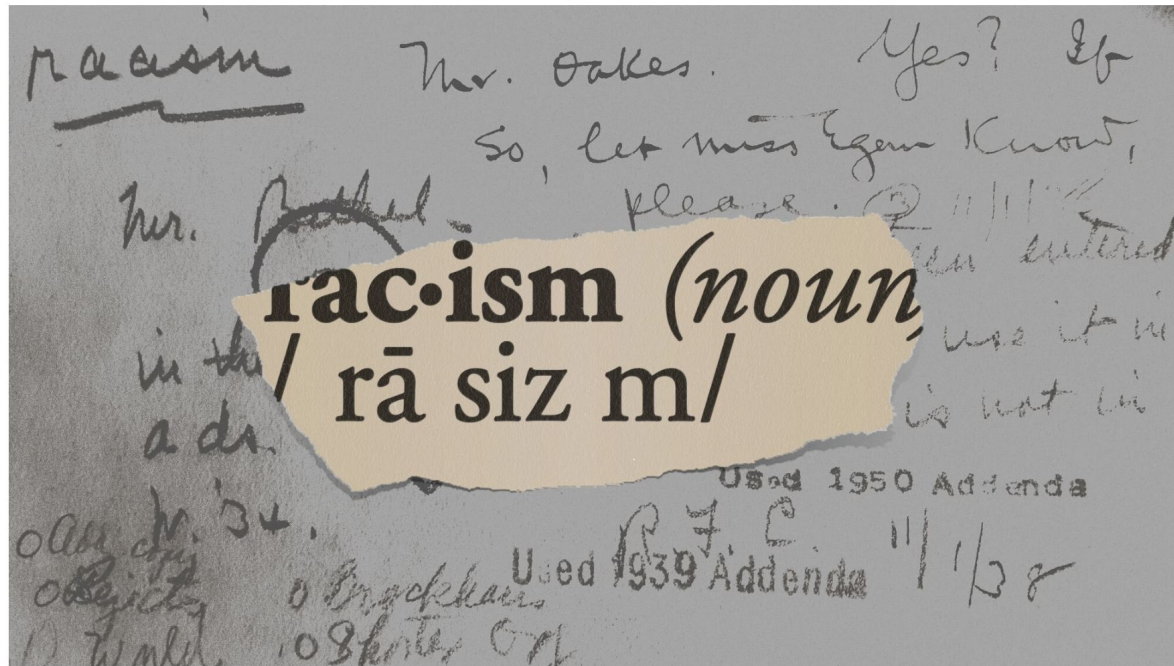


CULTURE

# The Evolution of *Racism*

A look at how the word, a surprisingly recent addition to the English lexicon, made its way into the dictionary

By Ben Zimmer



A close look at how Merriam-Webster's definition of racism has evolved over time reveals a complex narrative. (Peter Sokolowski / Merriam-Webster inc.; Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language, Second Edition, Unabridged / The Atlantic)

## *Merriam-Webster's 2020 racism revision*

- 1** : a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race
  
- 2**
  - a** : a doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles
  
  - b** : a political or social system founded on racism
  
- 3** : racial prejudice or discrimination

# *Merriam-Webster's 2020 racism revision*

- 1 : a belief that race is the **fundamental** determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race
  
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**1** : a belief that race is the **fundamental** determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race

**also : behavior or attitudes that reflect and foster this belief** : racial discrimination or prejudice

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**specifically : WHITE SUPREMACY sense 2**

**// institutional racism**

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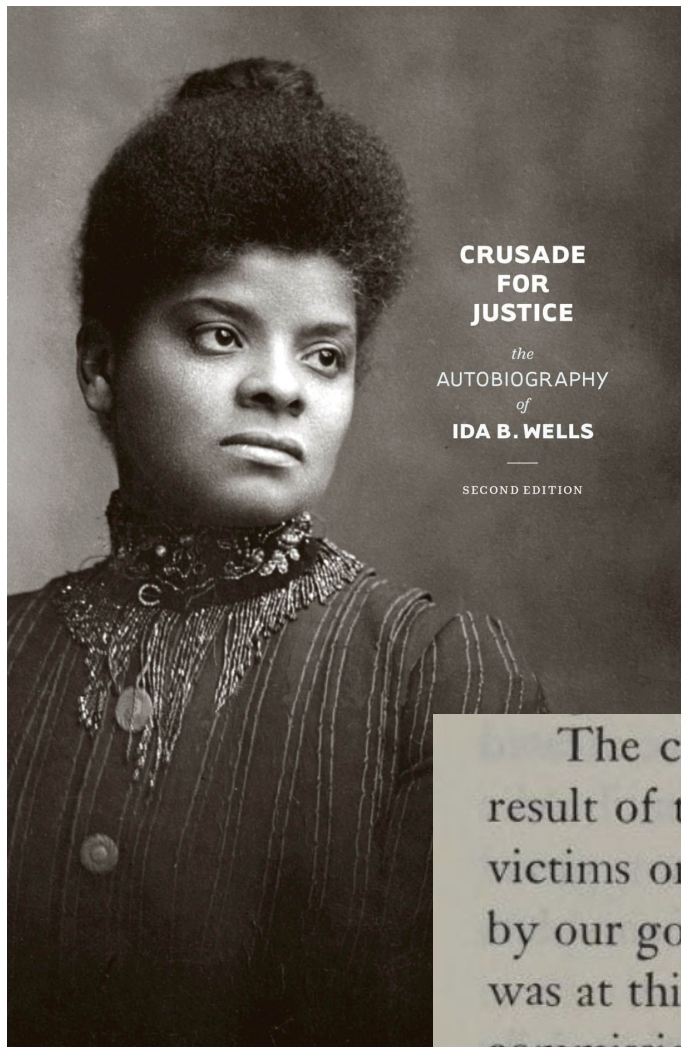
# Merriam-Webster's 2020 racism revision

## white supremacy **noun**



### Definition of *white supremacy*

- 1** : the belief that the white race is inherently superior to other races and that white people should have control over people of other races  
*//* The alt-right is a reactionary conservative movement ... . It is characterized by an embrace of fascism, *white supremacy*, and misogyny ...  
— Constance Grady
- 2** : the social, economic, and political systems that collectively enable white people to maintain power over people of other races  
*//* ... [William] Kelley turned his considerable intellect and imagination to the question of what it is like to be white in this country, and what it is like, for all Americans, to live under the conditions of *white supremacy* ...  
— Kathryn Schulz

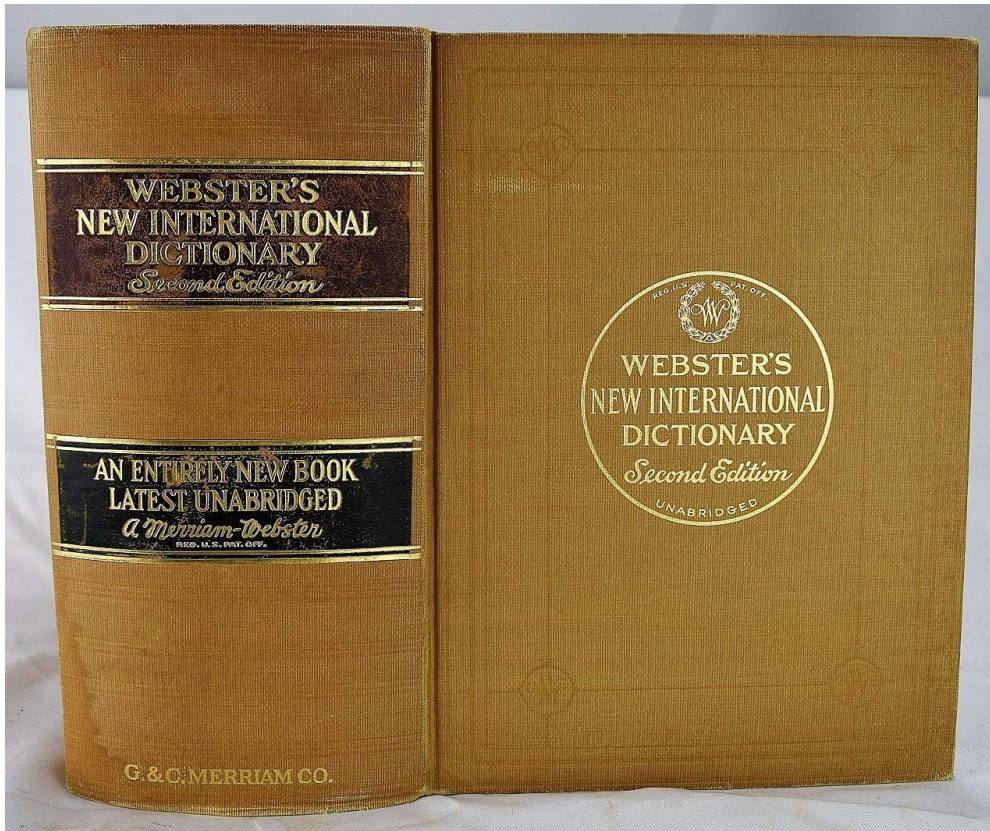


## Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice*

The city of Chicago has had several suits on its hands as a result of that riot, many of which have been paid either to the victims or to their families. Several efforts were put in motion by our good white people to stem the tide of **race hatred**, and it was at this time that the Chicago Inter-Racial was born. A race commission was appointed by Governor Lowden, and they spent weeks taking testimony and published a large book on the subject.<sup>1</sup> Many recommendations were made, but few, if any, have been carried out. Chicago has thus been left with a heritage of **race prejudice** which seems to increase rather than decrease.



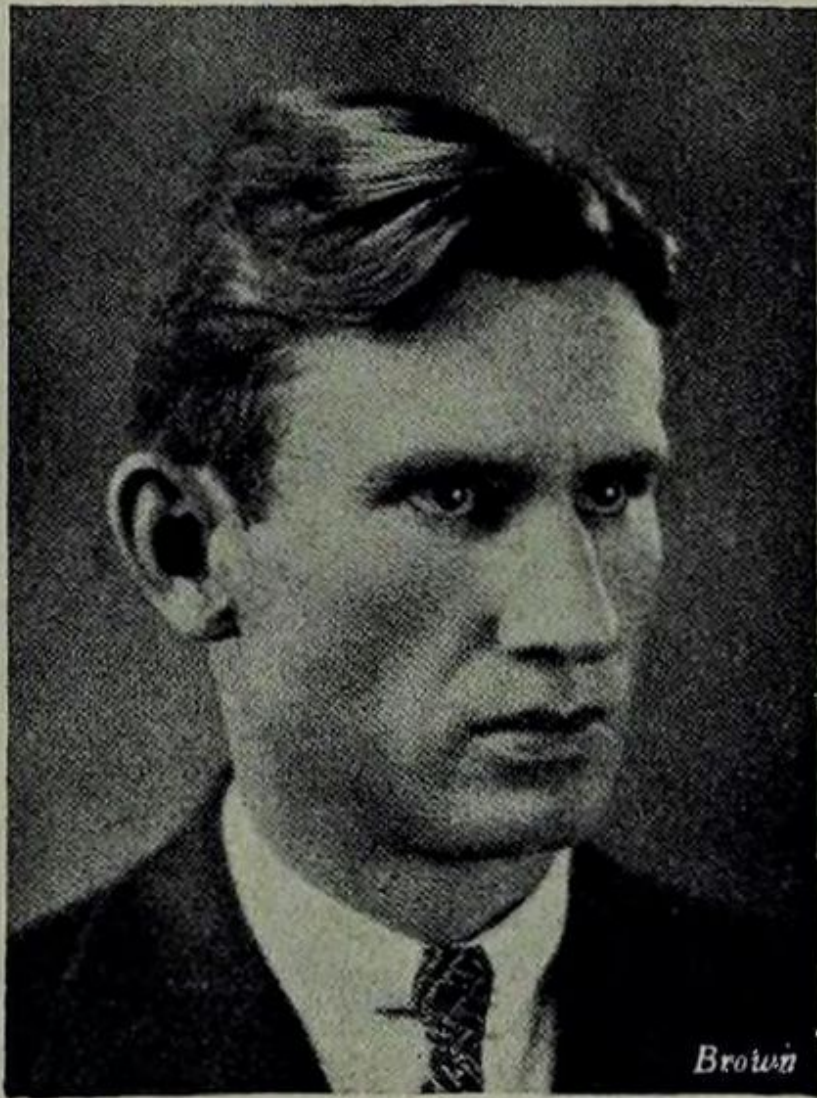
# Webster's New International Dictionary, 2nd ed. (1934)



**racialism**, n. Racial characteristics, tendencies, prejudices, or the like; specif., race hatred.



ROSE F. EGAN



JOHN P. BETHEL



ROSE F. EGAN

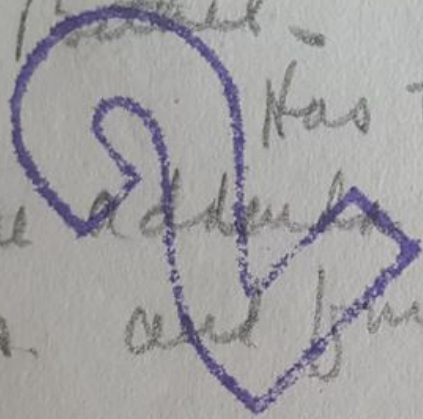
racism

Mr. Oakes.

Yes? If

So, let Miss Egan know,  
please. ③ 11/1/38

Mr. Butler -



Has this term been entered  
in the addenda? I wanted to use it in  
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Used 1950 Addenda

W. 34.

P. F. C. 11/1/38  
Used 1939 Addenda

o All. copy  
o Bigotry  
o World

o Brockhaus  
o Shorter Oxf.

Merriam-Webster editorial slip on racism, Nov. 1, 1938

# Webster's Dictionary of Synonyms (1941)

The writing of the articles was done chiefly by Miss Rose F. Egan, *Assistant Editor on the permanent editorial staff*, who also prepared the essays that form the larger part of the introductory matter. To her clear analysis and understanding of the purposes of the book and to her skill in dealing with the difficult material of synonymy this work owes much of its quality.



**USE THE *Right* WORD—  
IN THE *Right* PLACE!**  
Here's the Most Useful, Modern,  
Comprehensive Guide to Synonyms Published

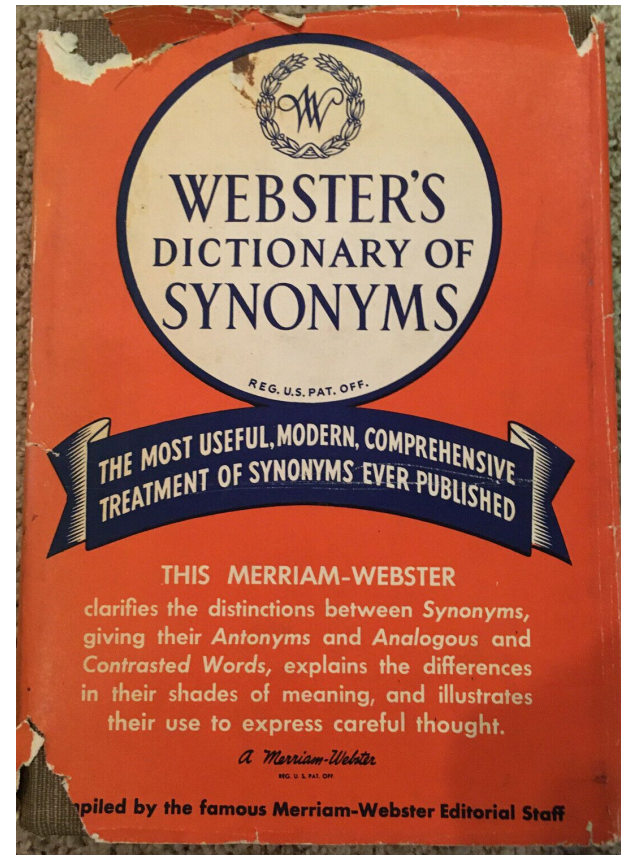
*Not Only Makes  
Synonyms Easy to  
Find but also  
Explains and  
Illustrates Their Use*

Prepared by  
the Famous  
MERRIAM-WEBSTER  
Editorial Staff

WEBSTER'S DICTIONARY  
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distinctions between Synonyms,  
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# Webster's Dictionary of Synonyms (1941)

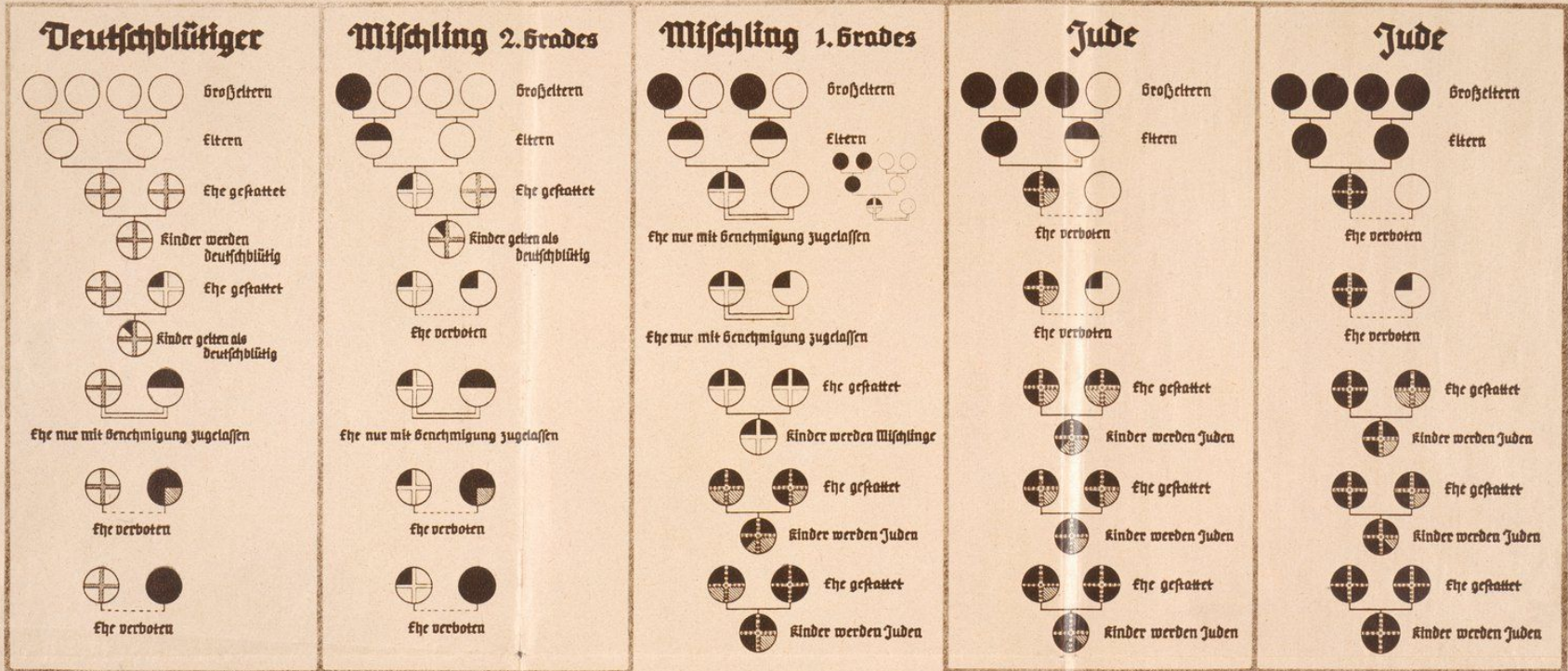
**citizen.** 1 \*Inhabitant, resident, denizen.

*Con.* \*Stranger, outsider.

2 **Citizen, subject, national** are compared here only as denoting a person who is regarded as a member of a sovereign state, entitled to its protection, and subject to its laws. **Citizen**, which is far more common in the United States than in the British Commonwealth of Nations,

North and South America. There is also a tendency to prefer *national* to *subject* or *citizen* in some countries where the sovereign power is not clearly vested in a monarch or ruler or in the people, or where theories of racism prevail. In some use, especially in international

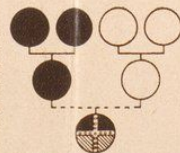
# Die Nürnberger Gesetze



## Zeichenerklärung

|                     |  |  |   |
|---------------------|--|--|---|
| Deutschblütiger     |  |  | gehört der deutschen Bluts- u. Abstammungsgemeinschaft an, kann Reichsbürger werden       |
| Mischling 2. Grades |  |  | gehört nur der deutschen Volksgemeinschaft an, kann Reichsbürger werden                   |
| Mischling 1. Grades |  |  | gehört nur der deutschen Volksgemeinschaft an, kann Reichsbürger werden                   |
| Jude                |  |  | gehört der jüdischen Bluts- u. Abstammungsgemeinschaft an, kann nicht Reichsbürger werden |
| Jude                |  |  | gehört der jüdischen Bluts- u. Abstammungsgemeinschaft an, kann nicht Reichsbürger werden |

## Sonderfälle bei Mischlingen 1. Grades

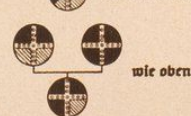


Mischling, der aus verbotenem außerehelichen Verkehr mit einem Juden stammt und der nach dem 31. Juli 1936 außerehelich geboren wird, gilt als Jude.

Mischling gilt als Jude, wenn er der jüdischen Religionsgemeinschaft angehört.

Mischling gilt als Jude, wenn er mit einem Juden verheiratet ist.

Kinder werden Juden.



wie oben

Mischling, der aus einer Ehe mit einem Juden stammt, die nach dem 17. 9. 1935 geschlossen ist, gilt als Jude, bei bereits bestehenden Ehen bleibt er Mischling.

## Reichsbürgergesetz vom 15. 9. 1935

1. Verordnung vom 14. 11. 1935

Das Reichsbürgerrecht ist in jedem einzelnen Satz von der Definition abhängig

## Gesetz zum Schutze des deutschen Blutes und der deutschen Ehre vom 15. 9. 1935

1. Verordnung vom 14. 11. 1935

Behörden sind Meldden undberück-

Kriegsgerichtsblätter I  
Nr. 100 vom 14. 9. 1935  
Nr. 125 vom 14. 11. 1935

# Pope Attacks Racism and Nationalism

## Hits Italian Mimicry of German Nazism

CASTEL GANDOLFO (UP) — Pope Pius XI attacked excessive nationalism and facism for the third time in two weeks today and criticized Italy's "unhappy imitation" of Germany's racial theories.

There were reports the pope might issue an encyclical on the subject soon.

Addressing a group of young missionary students from the College of Propagation, the holy father said:

### Unhappy

"We ask ourselves why Italy, with unhappy imitation, felt it necessary to copy Germany."

He recalled that he was the son of a Milanese, who in 1848 drove the Germans from Milan and that therefore "someone could accuse me of being prejudiced, which is not so."

"Catholicism means universality, not racism, not nationalism, not separatism," he told the students. "Catholic action should be inspired by these principles. Catholic action is Catholic life."

### One Method

"Catholic life means activity full of charity, full of virtue and of respect for the laws of God. There is no other method of thinking catholically, therefore one cannot think racialistically, nationalistically or separatistically."

"By racism and nationalism we mean those exaggerated forms, as they are commonly called, which are barriers raised between men and men, and people and people."

The pope said that the only sane racism was the dignity of the human being and family "because men must be men, not beasts, and must gather in one sole big family."

"This is the church's answer to racism," he said, "and this for the church is sane racism worthy of men."

The pope told the students he had received an important communication today, but he declined to reveal its nature. Because of his outspoken attitude on racial nationalism, some observers suggested that the communication might have dealt with Italy's new racial credo which gradually is being put into effect.

*Ames (Iowa) Daily Tribune, July 29, 1938*



# Writer Warns of 'Racism' As Foe To U. S. People

## Sees Alliance of Reds, Nazis Against Re- ligion

NEW YORK, Dec. 1 — Warn-  
ing that the destructive forces  
of "racism" are increasing in the  
United States, the Rev. John  
LaFarge, Catholic writer, said  
that these elements would cause  
untold harm among the Ameri-  
can people if immediate steps  
are not taken to combat them.

American racism, Father La-  
Farge said, is directed principal-  
ly against Negroes, foreigners  
and Jews. He described it as  
the "pale but venomous elder  
cousin" of Nazi racism.

### Impassable Barriers Seen

Like its Nazi counterpart, he  
added, American racism has  
erected impassable barriers be-  
tween extensive regions and  
large groups of people. It has, in  
addition, formed its own myths  
and glories and romance and  
moulded its own social institu-  
tions. Above all, it has consist-  
ently come into conflict with  
Christian teachings, he declared.

*Paterson (N.J.) Evening News, Dec. 1, 1938*

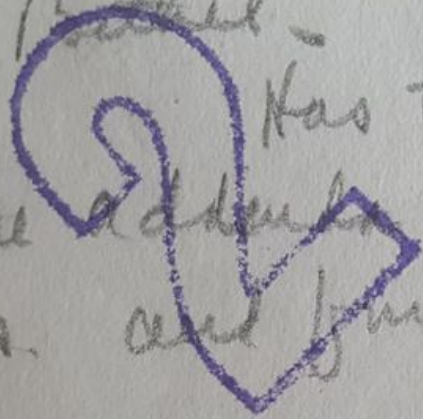
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o All. copy  
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o Brockham  
o Shorter Ory.

Merriam-Webster editorial slip on racism, Nov. 1, 1938

## *racism vs. racialism*

ets, connected with, or pertaining to, tickets.  
**Racial** (rēi·siäl), *a.* 1862. [f. RACE *sb.*<sup>2</sup>  
+ -IAL.] Belonging to, or characteristic of,  
race. Hence Ra·cialism. Ra·cially *adv.*

*racialism* in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1936)

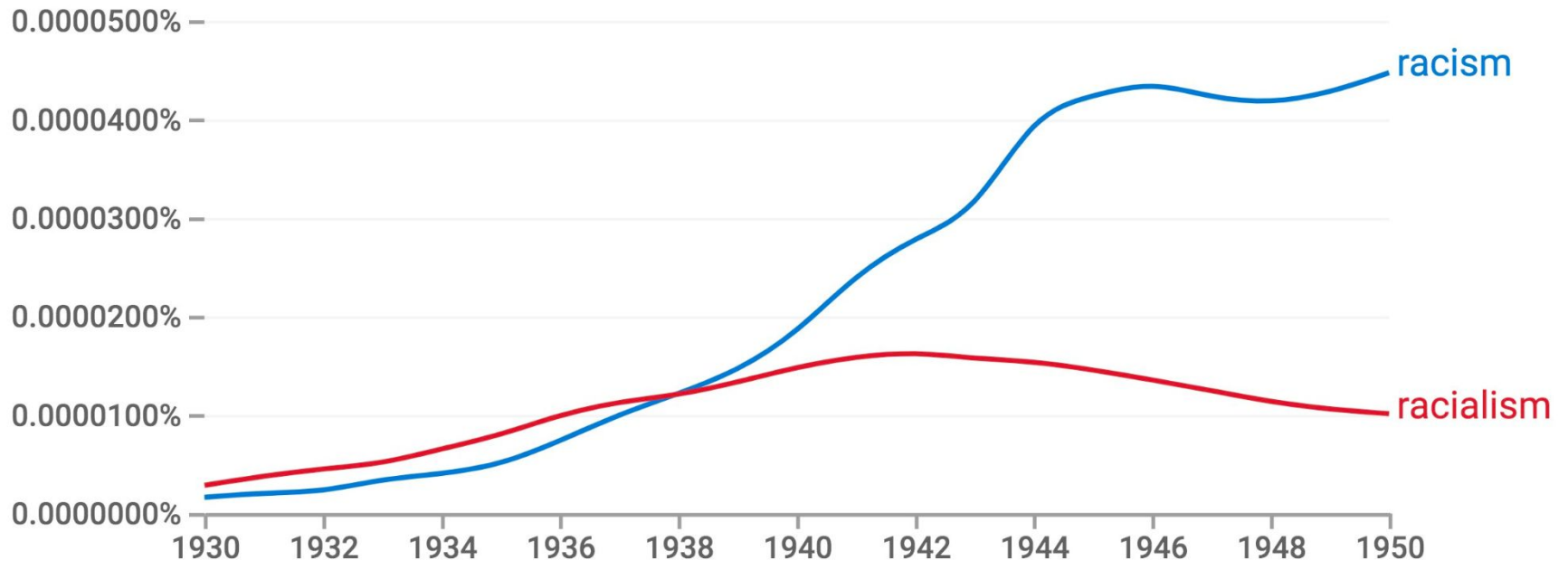
# *racism vs. racialism*

1930 - 1950 ▾

American English (2019) ▾

Case-Insensitive

Smoothing ▾



*Google Books Ngram Viewer*

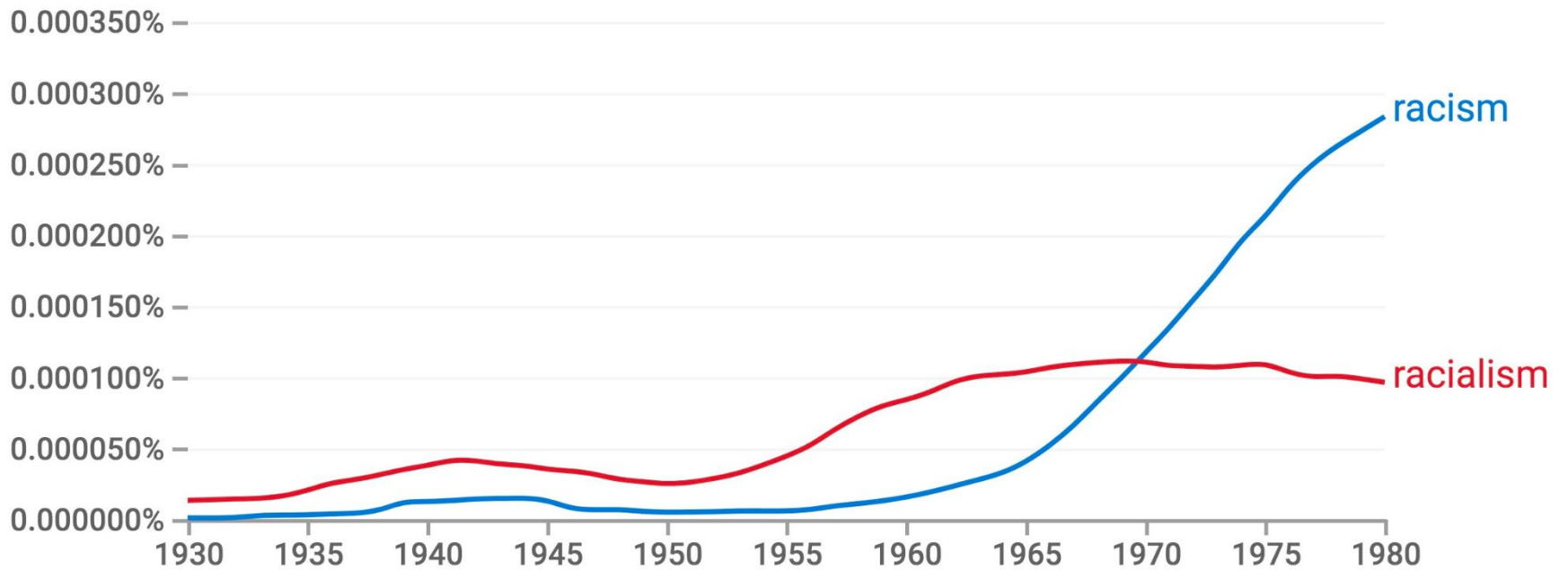
# *racism vs. racialism*

1930 - 1980 ▾

British English (2019) ▾

Case-Insensitive

Smoothing ▾



*Google Books Ngram Viewer*



ROSE F. EGAN

Racism

Used 1950 Addenda

Superseded  
Nov. 4:38

Racialism; esp., a doctrine, characteristic of totalitarian ideology, that national ~~should be made up~~ divisions should correspond to racial divisions and that the racial stock of the nation should be kept pure from admixture; specif., (orig. a Gallicism), an assumption ~~for~~ by the dominant race in a nation of racial superiority with attendant ~~persecution of racial~~ <sup>discrimination against</sup> minorities of other races.

Used 1939 Addenda

Merriam-Webster draft definitions for racism, Nov. 1938

Used 1950 Addenda

racism ( ), n.

Assumption of inherent racial superiority or the purity and superiority of ~~certain~~ races, and consequent discrimination against other races; *also, any* specif., (orig. a Gallicism) the Nazi assumption of Teutonic ~~Germanic~~ superiority and attendant anti-Semitism.

*This is the definition with which Miss Egan  
Takes issue. Carter does not insist  
upon the accuracy of any part because  
of the death of it.*

Used 1939 Addenda

GOEPP 387 26 59

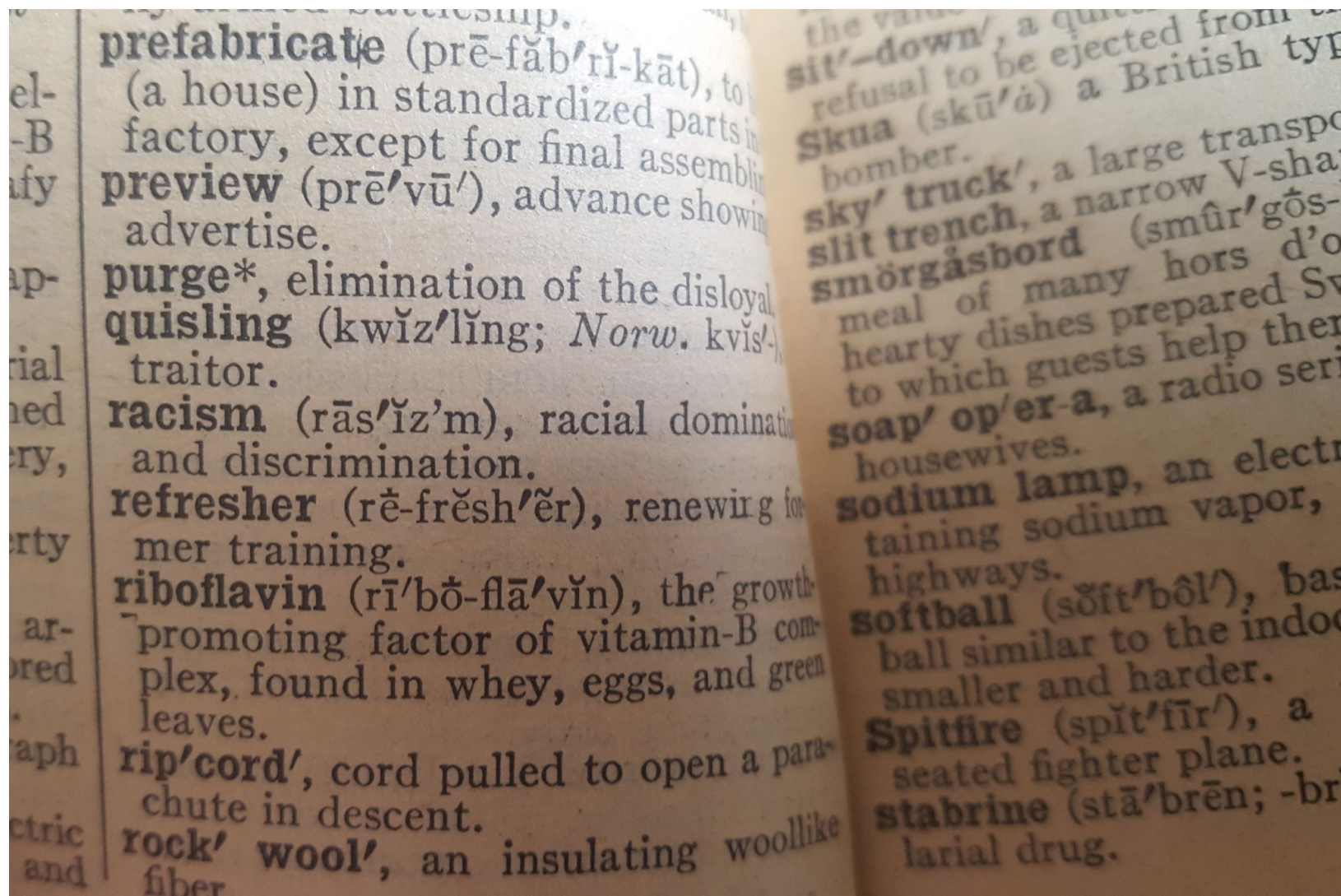
*Cont. on next slip*

Merriam-Webster draft definitions for racism, Nov. 1938



## *Racism in Webster's Second Addenda (1939)*

**rac'ism** (rās'iz'm), *n.* Assumption of inherent racial superiority or the purity and superiority of certain races, and consequent discrimination against other races; also, any doctrine or program of racial domination and discrimination based on such an assumption. — **rac'ist**, *n.*



Armed Services Edition of Webster's New Handy Dictionary (1945)

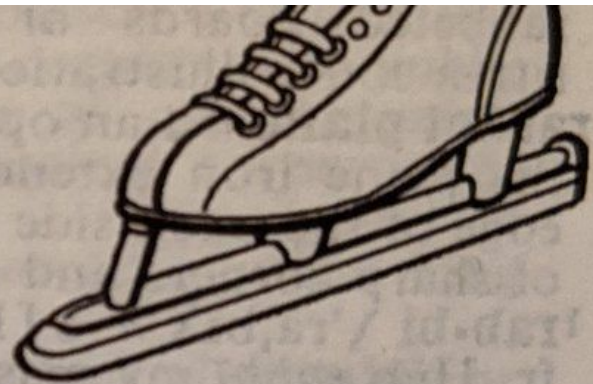
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# Racism in Webster's 3rd New International (1961)

study of human races  
**rac·ism** \ 'rā,sizəm \ *n* -s [prob. fr. F *racisme*, fr. *race* + *-isme* -ism] **1** : the assumption that psychocultural traits and capacities are determined by biological race and that races differ decisively from one another which is usu. coupled with a belief in the inherent superiority of a particular race and its right to domination over others **2 a** : a doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles **b** : a political or social system founded on racism **3** : RACIALISM **1**

**rac·ist** \ 'rāsəst \ *n* -s [prob. fr. F *raciste*, fr. *race* + *-iste* -ist] : one who advocates or believes in racism  
**racist** \ 'rāsəst \ *adj* **1** : of, relating to, or based on racism (< ~ ideas> **2** : advocating or practicing racism (<a ~ leader>  
**rack** \ 'rak \ *n* -s [ME *rac*, *rak*: prob. of Scand origin: akin to



racing skate

## Racism in Webster's 7th Collegiate (1963)

**ra·cial·ism** \ 'rā-shə-,liz-əm\ *n* **1** : racial prejudice or discrimination **2** : RACISM **1** — **ra·cial·ist** \ -ləst\ *n* — **ra·cial·is·tic** \ ,rā-shə-'lis-tik\ *adj*

**rac·i·ly** \ 'rā-sə-lē\ *adv* : in a racy manner

**rac·i·ness** \ -sē-nəs\ *n* : the quality or state of being racy

**rac·ing** *n* **1** : the sport or profession of engaging in or holding races **2** : horse races that are a sport or business


**rac·ing form** *n* : an information sheet giving pertinent data about horse races

**rac·ism** \ 'rā-,sɪz-əm\ *n* **1** : a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race **2** : RACIALISM **1** — **rac·ist** \ -səst\ *n*

# Collegiate entry for *racism*, M-W online (1996-2016)

## Full Definition of RACISM

- 1 : a belief that **race** is the primary **determinant** of human traits and capacities and that **racial** differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race
- 2 : racial **prejudice** or discrimination

–**racist**  \-sist *also* -shist\ *noun or adjective*

# Unabridged entry for *racism*, M-W online (2016-2020)

## racism noun



rac·ism | \ 'rā-,si-zəm  also -,shi- \

### Definition of *racism*

- 1** : a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race
- 2 a** : a doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles  
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- 3** : racial prejudice or discrimination

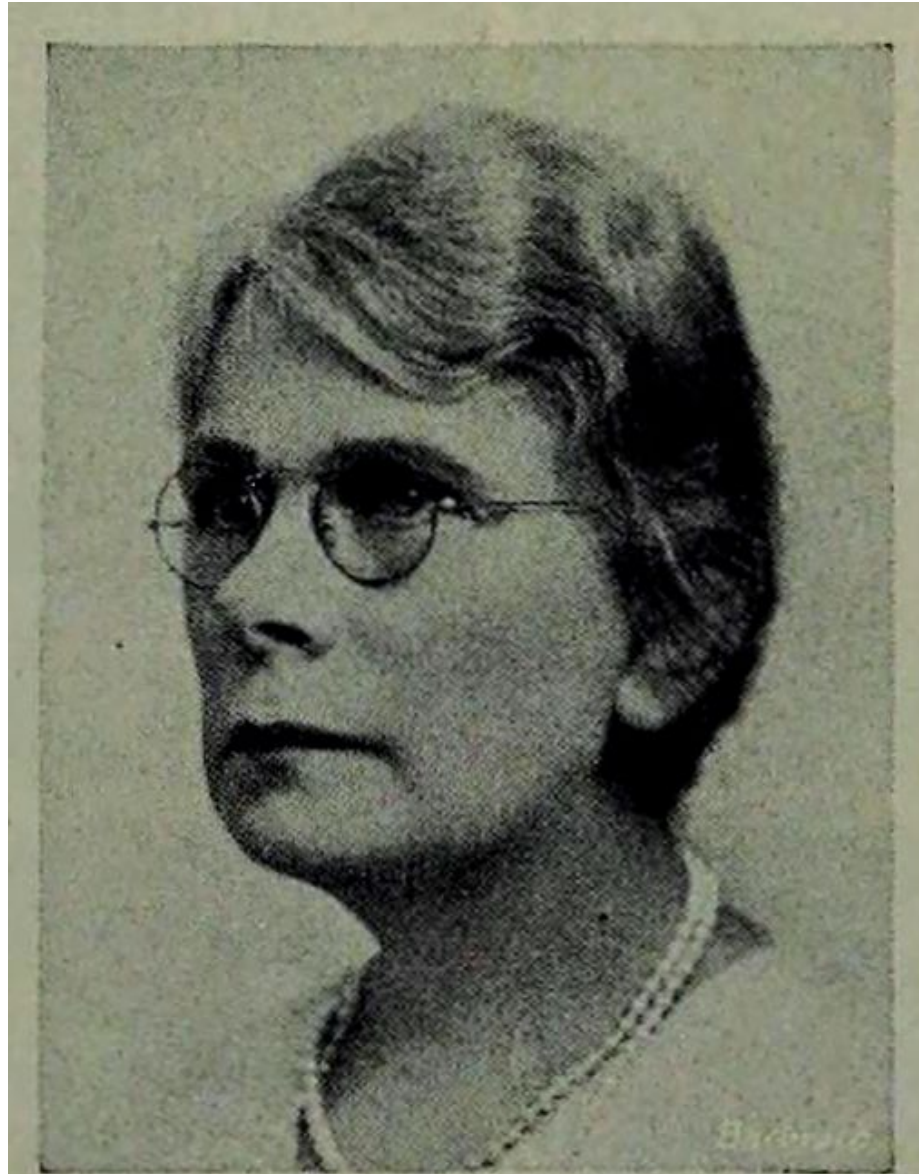
# Merriam-Webster on *racism*: online note (2016-)

## The History and Dictionary Meaning of *Racism*

*Racism* appears to be a word of recent origin, with no citations currently known that would suggest the word was in use prior to the early 20th century. But the fact that the word is fairly new does not prove that the concept of racism did not exist in the distant past. Things may have words to describe them before they exist (*spaceship*, for instance, has been in use since the 19th century, well before the rocket-fired vessels were invented), and things may exist for a considerable time before they are given names (*t-shirt* does not appear in print until the 20th century, although the article of clothing existed prior to 1900).

Dictionaries are often treated as the final arbiter in arguments over a word's meaning, but they are not always well suited for settling disputes. The lexicographer's role is to explain how words are (or have been) actually used, not how some may feel that they should be used, and they say nothing about the intrinsic nature of the thing named by a word, much less the significance it may have for individuals. When discussing concepts like racism, therefore, it is prudent to recognize that quoting from a dictionary is unlikely to either mollify or persuade the person with whom one is arguing.





ROSE F. EGAN

# Closing questions

- What is the role of lexicographers in public debates and discussions about contentious words and phrases?
- Do we need more transparency in the processes lexicographers use in creating and editing dictionary content?
- What can we learn from the trail of “text-artifacts” documenting lexicographical revisions?

# Thank you for listening!

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