The R-word in question is racism. Everyone's throwing it around these days, but very few people seem to agree on what it means.

The NAACP recently asked Tea Party leaders to repudiate the movement’s racist members, to stop displaying "continued tolerance for bigotry and bigoted statements."

Mark Williams of the Tea Party Express responded by describing the NAACP's antiquated use of the word "colored" (in its name) as racist and declaring that the storied Civil Rights organization makes "more money off of race than any slave trader" ever did.

Other right-wingers simply dismiss the NAACP's accusation of racism as racist, the socio-political equivalent of saying "I'm rubber; you're glue. Everything you say bounces off of me and sticks to you."

Via tweet, Sarah Palin called the NAACP's very charge "appalling."

In other racial news, Jesse Jackson is still being clowned and condemned for claiming that Cleveland Cavaliers owner Dan Gilbert can only see LeBron James as a high-priced "runaway slave," and Whoopi Goldberg has been defending her defense of Mel Gibson all week. For the last few days, we've been getting new tape recorded snippets of a voice that sounds a lot like Gibson's (granted, a demonically possessed version) raging against the mother of his youngest child with a barrage of sexist expletives: c-words, b-words, f-bombs and just about every other letter in the alphabet. That same tape-recorded voice matter-of-factly deploys terms like "wetback" and the n-word to color its apoplectic attacks.

"I have had a long relationship with Mel," Goldberg declared. "You can say he's being a bonehead, but I can't sit [here] and say that he's a racist, having spent time with him in my house with my kids."

Detractors dismiss Whoopi as an apologist with a long history of defending the indefensibly racist, Ted Danson's blackface Friar's Club performance being their prime example. Whoopi's position is instructive though, and reminiscent of when African-American comic Paul Mooney took some heat for not demonizing Michael Richards after the latter's 2006 "meltdown," when Richards peppered his comedy club audience with a string of n-words and lynching imagery (in response to some black hecklers).

But there are at least two important things to remember in any discussion about the facts or fictions of racism (and counter/accusations thereof).

First, racism is almost never a smoking gun. It explains very little all by itself. Social causality is much more complicated than that.

Historians of early America have been unpacking and debating a version of this point for years. Our country's history of chattel slavery wasn't caused (in any simplistic and straightforward sense) by racism. Was Trans-Atlantic slavery a clear-cut example of racism? Yes. Did racism (as ideology) facilitate, justify, and rationalize the dehumanization of African people? It did. But racism alone doesn't provide us with the system's motives and raison d'etre. At the very least, we'd need to add economic arguments to that mix.

All of that is simply to say that racists are never just racists. Racism is not a mysterious island somewhere in the middle of the ocean. Eighteenth- and 19th-century slavemasters were racists, but they weren't only racist. They were also revolutionaries and humanitarians, adventurers and religious leaders. To call someone racist isn't about explanatory exclusivity. Racism is one important ingredient in the recipe for American apple pie, but there are still other details to be worked out about how much it adds, about when in the process it gets added, and about what else goes into the mixing bowl.

Second, racism is less about what someone is (absolutely and forever) than about what a person does (in specific moments). Racism is at least as much about opportunity as ontology (to butcher a proper philosophical term).
We often imagine ourselves to be looking for racists who are racist 365 days out of the year. To chronicle the several days each week or month or lifetime when they are not demonstrably racist is either (i) to dismiss such fallow periods as exceptions (or mere performance) or (ii) to offer them up as proof that said accusations are false. But it doesn't make sense to think of racism the way we think of, say, racial identity (as something we conspicuously carry around with us all the time, everywhere we go). That's one of the most powerful points demonstrated by Officer John Ryan, the disturbing character played by Matt Dillon in the award-winning 2004 film *Crash*.

In one scene, Ryan is a working-class cop who mercilessly harasses a middle-class black couple during a traffic stop, clearly relishing his racial privilege and lauding it over his intimidated victims. In another scene, he can risk his own life to pry that same black woman from a burning car before it explodes.

Critics knock the film for ignoring the lopsided specifics of America's racial history, making every example of racial prejudice (black on white, white on black, white on Latino, black on Latino, black on Asian...) equivalent to every other.

Dillon's character was often singled-out as a pathetic attempt to humanize and redeem white racism. But that's only one interpretation. The film also argues that a racial monster in one moment can be a self-sacrificing hero in the next. Very few people organize their every breath around racial animus. We often slip in and out of racism's seductive logic: sometimes rising to meet the better angels of our nature, sometimes falling victim to the easy lure of social scapegoating. That's what's so complicated about how racism animates our social lives today, helping to explain why Whoopi is right and wrong about Mel Gibson. Gibson might be a child-friendly, politically correct dinner guest one night and a maniacal phone caller spitting out the n-word in the morning.