

Is Columbia history professor Rashid Khalidi a historian?

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David Reminck, the editor of the *New Yorker*, recently deemed it necessary to dedicate a full issue of [New Yorker Radio Hour](#), a weekly show broadcast on NPR stations nationwide, to exploring the notion of Israeli “settler-colonialism.” To that end he invited Rashid Khalidi, “a professor emeritus at Columbia University, [who] is the author of a number of books on Palestinian history; among them, *“The Hundred Years’ War on*



Palestine” [a copy of which was recently seen in President Biden’s hands and which] has been particularly influential. The book helped bring the term “settler colonialism” into common parlance, at least on the left, to describe Israel’s relationship to historic Palestine. Sometimes invoked as a term of opprobrium, “settler colonialism”

is strongly disputed by supporters of Israel. Khalidi asserts that the description is historically specific and accurate. The early Zionists, he says, understood their effort as colonization. “That’s not some antisemitic slur,” he says. “That’s the description they gave themselves.”

This alleged Zionist self-indictment forms the backbone of professor Khalidi’s argument. “Early Zionists knew, wall to wall, that they were *colonizing* Palestine; hence, they called their land purchasing agency ‘Jewish Colonization Agency,’” he points out triumphantly (at 20:40). Bingo! Zionism is settler-colonialism – a bad, bad, bad thing.

Not really, professor Khalidi. Though ostensibly a historian,

you did something totally ahistorical – you applied modern meaning of a word to its original usage. Professor Khaledi's "clinching argument" mixes together two completely different meanings of the word "colony" – the modern one which carries opprobrium, and the 19-century one which had a strictly positive meaning.

Consider [Russian Tsars' attempts to settle Jews](#) on land – on Russian Empire's land, that is. What is the Russian word for Jewish settlements on Tsar-allocated lands? "Kolonii," Wikipedia informs us. "Kolonija" was simply the term for a new settlement. The word carried no tinge of what we decry today as imperialism or colonialism – of forcible appropriation of someone else's territory. Apparently, in German language of the time the word "kolonie" had a similar connotation – at least to judge by Kafka's *"In the Penal Colony"* ("*In der Strafkolonie*," also translated as "[In the Penal Settlement](#)," [as Wikipedia](#) informs us. The same source disconnects the term "penal colony" from modern-day "colonialism" – "Although the term can be used to refer to a correctional facility located in a remote location, it is more commonly used to refer to communities of prisoners overseen by wardens or governors having absolute authority.") In fact, this is exactly the present-day Russian use of the word "kolonija" – a place of detention for juvenile offenders.

In other words, the word "colonization" in its 19th-century usage meant nothing more than ameliorating land by productive human labor, resulting in a double benefit – of giving useful employment to an otherwise alienated group, and manufacturing a useful product in the process.

And this is what Zionism was really about. Zionists purchased land – not took it by force – to settle on it the Jews who were alienated by world antisemitism. (To further buttress his argument, Professor Khaledi could have also mentioned the name of institution that collected funds for land purchases in Palestine – "Jewish Colonial Trust" – but again, the Zionist usage of the word (that was common with the way others used it) has nothing whatsoever to do with its modern meaning that professor Khaledi finds useful for his purpose of bashing Israel.)

Constitutional originalists are not the only people who should be concerned with the relevant meaning of words. Historians

like Mr. Khaledi should pay attention to linguistics, too – though, regrettably, he doesn't, prostituting history to politics instead.

Words are strange things – especially when copied into different languages and cultures. A newly-arrived Russian cannot help but burst into laughter when reading a label on an American food can. "No preservatives"? In Russian, a "preservative" means "condom" (and the word "condom," pronounced according to Russian usage, is a vulgar term for that item.) In Russian, the word "negr" – easily transported by an American ear into a "negro" – carries no derogatory meaning whatsoever; it simply means "an African." But the word "black" that in America proudly – or at least bureaucratically – denotes someone of African ancestry, and is therefore routinely used in government questionnaires, is, in Russian, an extremely rude racial slur. Don't call anybody "chjornij," though it merely means "black."

Professor Khaledi may claim in his defense that he is no linguist – and indeed he isn't. But he claims to be a historian – and yet he neglects the history of the shifting meaning of words, without which it is simply impossible to properly understand history. His politically expedient neglect of the history of language automatically dooms his claims to be a historian.

That is professor Khaledi's real problem which makes him an extremely unreliable authority on Zionism – and certainly unworthy of making pronouncements a wider public over NPR.

Take note, Mr. Remnick. And President Biden too – in the case you purchased and read professor Khalidi's book. And – needless to say – any other reader of this professor of pseudo-history.