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*Latitude, Slaves and the Bible:
An Experiment in Microhistory*

1. My approach to microhistory has been largely inspired by the work of Erich Auerbach, the great Jewish scholar who spent his most creative years in Istanbul in exile from Nazi Germany. At the end of his masterpiece, *Mimesis*, written in Istanbul during the Second World war, Auerbach wrote: "Beneath the conflicts, and also through them, an economic and cultural leveling process is taking place. It is still a long way to a common life of mankind on earth, but the goal begins to be visible."¹

Half a century later one hesitates to describe the so-called "globalization" which is taking place under our eyes as an "economic leveling process." On the other hand, the "cultural leveling," the erasure of cultural specificities which Auerbach looked at with growing worry, is an unquestionable reality, although difficult to grasp. In an essay published in 1952 Auerbach remarked that Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* had become increasingly inadequate to our endlessly expanding gaze. How can a philologist from a single cultural tradition approach a world in which so many languages, so many cultural traditions interact? Auerbach believed that one has to look for *Ansatzpunkte*, that is, for starting points, for concrete details from which the global process can be inductively reconstructed.² The ongoing unification of the world, Auerbach wrote in the conclusion of *Mimesis*, "is most concretely visible now in the unprejudiced, precise, interior and exterior representation of the random lives of different people."⁴

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2. Some time ago, while I was working on a separate project I came across a tract bearing the following title:

Mémoire sur le Pais des Cafres, et la Terre de Nuyts, par rapport à l'utilité que la Compagnie des Indes Orientales en pourroit retirer pour son Commerce, Amsterdam 1718 (Remarks on Kafirland and the Land of Nuyts, considered from the point of view of their usefulness to the trade of the East India Company.) The copy I consulted at the UCLA Research Library – a photocopy of the original edition – is bound with a *Second Mémoire sur le Pais des Cafres, et la Terre de Nuyts*, also issued in Amsterdam in 1718. At the end of the two tracts the identity of the author is revealed: Jean-Pierre Purry, a name I had never heard before. After a glance at the two texts I was immediately intrigued, for reasons which I will discuss later. Then began a research project which is still far from its conclusion. This lecture is a preliminary report on my work in progress.

3. Jean-Pierre Purry was born into a Calvinist family in Neuchâtel in 1675.³ His father Henry, a tinsmith (like his father and grandfather) died when Jean-Pierre was one year old.

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On May 26, 1713 he embarked as a corporal on a ship owned by the Dutch East India Company, the instrument of Dutch economic and political expansion in South-Eastern Asia. In his position as leader of seventy men, Purry may have had some

knowledge of Dutch. The ship made a halt in Capetown, and reached Batavia on February 2, 1714. Purry was to spend four years there, working as an employee of the Dutch East India Company. On December 11, 1717 he left Batavia, embarked as an accountant. After the usual halt in Capetown, his ship reached the Netherlands on July 17.⁴

These factual data provide the context for the writings from which I started, Jean-Pierre Purry's two *Mémoires sur le Pais de Cafres et la Terre de Nuyts*. Let us have now take a closer look at them.

5. In the first tract, addressed to the Assembly of the Seventeen, the board which led of the Dutch East India Company, Purry tried to convince the Governor of the Company either to colonize Kafirland (today's South Africa) or, alternatively, the Land of Nuyts (today's western coast of Australia).⁵ In his second *Mémoire*, dated September 1st, 1718, well after his return to Europe, Purry replied to the objections raised by his opponents, and made a strong case for the colonization of Land of Nuyts.

Purry's projects were rooted in a theory about climate, which he explained at length in his first *Mémoire*. He rejected labels like "temperate" or "cold" as exceedingly vague, and as absurd the standard praise showered on France's geographical location in the middle of the temperate zone, between 42 and 51 degrees of latitude. The grapes that grew at 51 degrees of latitude, he objected, produced undrinkable wine, after all. The best climate in the world was that found at 33 degrees of latitude.

Purry's litmus test was that of a former wine merchant, born in a region noted for its wines. But his seemingly superficial remarks had more complex implications. He provided a list of countries located between 30 and 36 degrees of latitude: Barbary, Syria, Chaldea, Candia, Cyprus, Persia, Mongolia, "the middle part of China", Japan. But those which are closer to 33 degrees of latitude, he explained,

"far surpass the others in fertility, as one can see even in the land of Canaan, of whose provinces Galilee is one of the finest."⁶

This passing and underplayed allusion (even, "même") was a crucial reference to Numbers 13, and it gave Purry's argument a sudden twist. Let us make the biblical reference, which Purry quoted in full in his second *Mémoire* (26-27), explicit.

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8. Purry tried to convince the Dutch East India Company to send immigrants either to South Africa or to Australia. But the relatively small number of Europeans likely to immigrate to that area drove him to consider a different alternative:

". . . when one is unable even to find laborers, one can have slaves work the soil. The Romans did not work their own soils otherwise."⁷

Why did Purry justify slavery with a secular precedent, instead of quoting, as he usually did, a passage from the Old Testament? Possibly because the curse Noah set upon the children of Ham, who had seen his nakedness, seemed to connect slavery to an inborn stigma.⁸ Purry's attitude was different. He dismissed the idea that slaves had limited learning capacities. In Java he had seen slaves of both sexes

working as taylor, carpenters, shoemakers. They played musical instruments at weddings, they danced. Those things "are nothing but the effects of habit and continual practice. I can see, as a result, no reason why slaves should be incapable of learning the science of agriculture." At this point an imaginary opponent suggested a graver impediment:

"It will be objected that in this case justice and equity will bar us from setting ourselves up in the Land of Nuyts and lording it over those who have been there, father and son, for as long as several thousand years, and will also bar us from evicting from their land people who have never done us any harm."⁹

9. Here was a striking and quite straightforward objection to European colonization as such. An even more striking rebuttal followed. There was no injustice in this, Purry replied, for two reasons. First of all,

"the Earth belongs to God in perpetuity, and we have but the use of it, something like the father who has a dish set before his children or his servants: he does not assign a portion to each, but rather that which each fairly seizes for himself belongs to him, though before that he had no greater right to it than the others, and though they did not grant him permission to take this or that piece."¹⁰

[...]

Purry answered an implicit question: was the European conquest of the world legally justified? To raise such a question already implied a distantiating, if not perhaps a doubt. Purry articulated his answer in terms of a natural law, which he derived from a biblical passage; although one could also argue the opposite, that a notion of natural law inspired by John Locke's *Second Treatise* inspired Purry's reading of the Bible.¹¹ Locke's passage on the human bond connecting "a Swiss and an Indian, in the Woods of America" who are "perfectly in the State of Nature in reference to one another" must have had a special resonance for Purry, a Swiss. In front of God there were no hierarchies: every human being had the same right to use the Earth. Local bonds were nullified by the invocation of God, a God distant and lonely in his uniqueness. Claims rooted in antiquity, in traditions thousand of years old, had no validity whatsoever. No property could be held in perpetuity; only the present counted. The Earth was like a meal, and in principle, everyone was entitled to get a share of it. But there would be no orderly distribution; in fact, there would be no distribution at all. In claiming a share, the children of God had to behave "fairly" ("honnêtement"), of course. But the reference to the "rights of others" does not suggest a brotherly relationship. The "rights of others" refer to a law governing all: the biblical word "stranger" defined not only relationships between human beings and God, but strictly human relationships as well. Everybody was a stranger to everybody else. This common shared condition did not, in Purry's global perspective, elicit the compassion that inspired Exodus 23, 9: "thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt." When everybody can "in turn, claim the privilege of the first occupant *after a fashion*" ("d'une maniere ou d'autre"), when each individual is tacitly entitled "to take this or that piece," natural law turns (we might conclude) into a law of mutual pillage. Might becomes right. At this point, Purry's second axiom, and morality, are introduced:

"savage and rustic people love above all things a lazy existence and (. . .) the more a people is simple and vulgar the less it is given to work, while a life of abundance and pleasure requires a great deal of care and trouble. In addition, the countries inhabited by these sorts of savage and lazy people are never very populous. Thus one has every reason to believe that far from harming the inhabitants of the Land of Nuyts -- and one is not obliged to displace them -- the establishment of a good European Colony would provide for them all sorts of benefits and advantages, as much because theirs would be a civilized life as because of the arts and sciences they would be taught . . ."

"¹²

We are confronted with a series of overlapping, allegedly self-evident oppositions: a) civilized and savage life, b) industry and laziness; c) abundance and scarcity. The establishment of "a good European Colony" will rescue the savages from their sinful laziness, and will provide for them "a civilized life".¹³ The change brought by the Europeans would have been moral and profitable for everybody, "as long" Purry wrote "as one acts gently and regards them as poor creatures who, though vulgar and quite ignorant, are nonetheless members of human Society, as much as we are."¹⁴

Purry remarked that the Spaniards and the Portuguese, who treated the American Indians as if they were animals, had been despised because of their cruelty and barbarity. His colonization projects, on the contrary, could be carried on "without causing the [local] inhabitants any suffering or in any way wronging them. These sorts of benefits, which never give rise to any regrets, and which may be conferred without in any way compromising one's decency and Christian spirit, are truly worthy of our Illustrious Company."¹⁵

To dismiss this kind of moral reasoning as either a mask concealing the features of greed, or as an out-and-out lie, would be simplistic. Purry's effort to eliminate "regret" was in itself significant. European colonization, at this stage and in certain environments, could generate bad conscience: a feeling to be silenced in the name of morality, civilization, and profit. The argument, based on natural law, that every human being stood equal before God and was equally amenable to civilization, would contribute, in the long run, to anti-slavery and anti-colonial movements of various kind. But before that could happen, it could serve as an elaborate justification for European colonization.

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11. Purry's projects were examined by the managers of the Dutch East India Company and ultimately rejected on April 17, 1719.¹⁶ This is not surprising: the Company preferred trade to colonization. More surprising is the fact that immediately after, in unknown circumstances, Purry became director general of the French India Company.¹⁷ By 1720 he was in Paris, fully immersed into the financial turmoil generated by John Law, the Scottish financier, and his "system." Purry invested the money he had earned in Batavia, with some initial success.¹⁸ According to a friend, Purry pursued a speculator's jackpot with utter determination, saying: "Here everybody speaks of millions. Once I'll have a few millions, I'll cash out."¹⁹ The Mississippi bubble popped, and Purry lost everything.

He gave up neither his theories nor his projects. On June 6, 1724 he wrote to Horatio Walpole, asking to be introduced to the duke of Newcastle; Walpole

promptly complied, the day after.²⁰ In a memorial addressed to the duke, published in London that same year, Purry proposed the colonization of South Carolina by several hundred Swiss Protestants. Frustrated in his designs on the Austral hemisphere, Purry had shifted his focus to 33 degrees of northerly latitude.

His first expedition to America ended in failure, and, destitute, Purry returned to his home town.²¹ He was confined by his family to a mountain farm not far from Neuchâtel. From there Purry sent deferential letters to his step-brothers, requesting money for his little expenses: letters, tobacco. But he could not refrain from referring to his American projects.²² Purry must have spent a number of years suspended between a miserable present and the expectation of a grandiose future. Then something happened. At last, official patronage came. On March 10, 1731 George II signed a royal patent authorizing Jean-Pierre Purry, colonel in the British army, to found a city in South Carolina, to be named Purrysburg. As Purry had proposed, it was to be inhabited by a settlement of Swiss Protestants.²³

[...]

Like Moses (a metaphor he would have liked) Jean-Pierre Purry was not allowed to see the promised land of industrial revolution. He died on August 18, 1736, in the city bearing his name.²⁴ The city itself decayed and ultimately disappeared. Jean-Pierre's eldest son, Charles, was murdered in a slave revolt in 1754. Another son, David, who had stayed in Europe, became enormously rich. At his death, in 1786, he left his money, part of which had been earned through the slave trade with Brazil, to the poor people of Neuchâtel. His statue is placed in the middle of the city main square, which bears his name.

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This is an abstract of the lecture I delivered at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Study. Different versions of this paper were delivered in Istanbul (see "Küresellesmeye Yerel Bir Yaklaşım: Coğrafya, Köleler ve İncil", in *Tarih Yazımında yeni Yaklaşımlar. Kürellesesme ve Yerellesme*, Istanbul, Tarih Vakfı, 2000, pp. 17-39); Department of History, UCLA; Central European University, Budapest; Penn State University, Philadelphia; Boston University, Boston; University of Oslo; University of São Paulo; Columbia University, New York; Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, Siena; Université Libre, Bruxelles; Nexus Institute, Tilburg; the University of Chicago. Many thanks to Carlo Aguirre Rojas, Perry Anderson, Pier Cesare Bori, Alberto Gajano, Stefano Levi Della Torre, Marta Petrusiewicz for having helped me, either directly or indirectly, with their comments and suggestions; to Professor Albert de Pury for his generous help; to Samuel Gilbert for his stylistic suggestions.

¹ J. Revel, introduction to G. Levi, *Le pouvoir au village. La carrière d'un exorciste dans le Piémont du XVIIIe siècle*, Paris 1989, p.

¹ E. Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, tr. by W. R. Trask, Princeton 1953, p. 552

² E. Auerbach, "Philology and *Weltliteratur*," *The Centennial Review*, 13 (1969), pp. 1-17 (= "Philologie der Weltliteratur", in *Weltliteratur. Festgabe für Fritz Strich*, hrsg. von W. Henzen, W. Muschg, E. Staiger, Bern 1952, pp. 39-50).

⁴ E. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 552.

³ L.-E. Roulet, "Jean-Pierre Purry et ses projets de colonies en Afrique du Sud et en Australie", *Musée Neuchâtelois*, 1994, pp. 49-63; Id., "Jean-Pierre Purry explorateur (1675-1736)", in *Biographies Neuchâteleuses*, I, sous la direction de M. Schlup, Neuchâtel-Hauterive 1996, pp. 237-242; A. C. Migliazzo, "A Tarnished Legacy Revisited: Jean Pierre Purry and the Settlement of a Southern Frontier", 1718-1736", *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, 92 (1991), pp. 232-252; *Lands of True and Certain Bounty. The Geographical Theories and Colonization Strategies of Jean Pierre Purry*, ed. by A. C. Migliazzo, Selinsgrove-London 2002. See also H. Jéquier, J. Henriod, M. de Purry, *La famille Purry*, Neuchâtel 1972. None of these studies analyzes the religious arguments for colonization put forward by Purry. The spelling of the family name varies (Purry, Purry, Puri, Purri): see *Recueil de quelques lettres & documents inédits concernant David de Purry et sa famille*, Neuchâtel 1893, p. 11 n. 1. I chose Purry, the version Jean-Pierre consistently used.

⁴ On this I follow L.-E. Roulet, "Jean-Pierre Purry", based on a lecture given by C. C. Macknight in 1993. I am very grateful to Professor Albert de Pury, who sent me a typewritten version of Macknight's lecture.

⁵ The land was named from Pieter Nuyts, extraordinary councillor of India, who discovered it in 1627: see J. E. Heeres, *Het Aandeel der Nederlanders in de Ontdekking van Australie 1606-1765 - The Part Borne by the Dutch in the Discovery of Australia 1606-1765*, Leiden-London 1899, p. 51.

⁶ "surpassent de beaucoup la fertilité des autres, ainsi qu'on peut remarquer même au païs de Canaan, dont la Galilée étoit l'une des meilleures provinces" (J.-P. Purry, *Mémoire...*, I, pp. 17-19).

⁷ "quand même on ne trouveroit point de laboureurs, on pourroit en ce cas là faire cultiver la terre par des esclaves. Les Romains ne labouroient pas les leurs autrement."

⁸ R. Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery. From the Baroque to the Modern (1492-1800)*, London 1998, pp. 64-76 (on Noah's curse, with an extensive bibliography).

⁹ "ne sont autre chose que des effets de l'habitude et d'une exercice continuel. Ainsi je ne voy pas pourquoi des esclaves ne pourroient pas apprendre la science de l'agriculture" (J.-P. Purry, *Mémoire...*, I, pp. 69-70); "Mais, dira-t-on, quand cela seroit, la justice ni l'équité ne permettent pourtant pas qu'on pût s'aller établir dans la Terre de Nuyts au prejudice de ceux qui y sont déjà de pere en fils, depuis, peut-être, quelque milliers d'années, ni qu'on pût chasser de leur païs des gens qui ne nous ont jamais fait aucun mal." (J.-P. Purry, *Mémoire...*, I, pp. 70-71).

¹⁰ "la terre appartient toujourns à Dieu en toute propriété, et nous n'en avons que l'usufruit, à peu près de même qu'un pere de famille qui fait servir quelque plat à ses enfans ou à ses domestiques, il n'assigne pas a chacun sa portion, mais ce dont chacun se saisit honnêtement est à lui, quoi qu'auparavant il n'y eût pas plus de droit que les autres; et quoi que ceux ci ne lui aient pas donné la permission de prendre tel ou tel morceau."

¹¹ See *Mémoire...*, I, p. 71: "Tous les hommes ayant *donc* naturellement le même droit sur les biens du Monde en vertu de l'intention du Createur..." (mine italics). The central role played by natural right in Purry's argument emerges again in *Mémoire...*, 2, 52: "Mais je suis très persuadé qu'on peut presque se promettre d'avance le succès d'une bonne entreprise, lorsqu'elle n'a rien de contraire au droit naturel, et que le Ciel ne manque jamais d'accompagner de ses benédictiones des desseins qui sont fondés sur la Charité envers le prochain, aussi bien que sur l'Amour de Dieu." On this issue see A. Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man*, Cambridge 1982.

¹² "les gens sauvages et rustiques aiment la vie faineante par dessus toutes choses, et (...) plus un peuple est simple et grossier moins il est adonné au travail: au lieu qu'une vie d'abondance et de delices demande beaucoup de soins et de peine. Ajoûtons à cela, que les païs qui sont habités par ces sortes de gens sauvages et paresseux ne sont jamais fort peuplés. Ainsi on a tout lieu de croire, que bien loin de causer du dommage aux habitans de la Terre de Nuyts, ni qu'on fût obligé de les chasser chez eux, au contraire, l'établissement d'une bonne Colonie Européenne leur procureroit toutes sortes de biens et d'avantages, tant pour une vie civilisée que par les arts et les sciences qu'on leur enseigneroit..."

¹³ L. Febvre, "Civiltà: evoluzione di un termine e d'un gruppo di idee" [1930], *Problemi di metodo storico*, tr. C. Vivanti, Torino 1976, I, pp. 5-45, quotes Furetière's *Dictionnaire* (1690): "La prédication de l'Évangile a civilisé les peuples barbares les plus sauvages"; E. Benveniste, "Civilisation: histoire du mot", *Hommage à Lucien Febvre. Eventail de l'histoire vivante*, Paris 1953, I, pp. 47-54.

¹⁴ J.-P. Purry, *Mémoire...*, I, 72-73.

¹⁵ "sans appréhender de faire souffrir ses habitans, ni de commettre aucune injustice à leur égard. De tels biens, qui ne donnent jamais aucun remord et qu'on peut acquérir sans donner la moindre atteinte à la qualité d'honnête homme et de Chrétien, sont véritablement dignes de notre Illustre Compagnie..." (I, 73).

¹⁶ See J. E. Heeres, *Het Aandeel*, p. XVI, note 5.

¹⁷ *Memorial presented to His Grace My Lord the Duke of Newcastle*, [1724]: Augusta, Georgia 1880, p. (new English translation; ignores the translation published in London, 1724.)

¹⁸ L. A. Roulet, "Jean-Pierre Purry", ...

¹⁹ [F. Brandt], *Notice* pp. 1-2; F. A. M. Jeanneret et J.-H. Bonhôte, *Biographie neuchâteloise*, II, Locle 1863, p. 251: "il réalisa la meilleure partie de son bien et courut à Paris, où il spécula avec tant de succès, qu'il possédait un jour dans son portefeuille des effets au porteur pour plus de six cent mille francs. Jean Chambrier, son ami, plus tard ministre de Prusse à Paris, le conjurant de faire comme lui, et de réaliser au moins deux cent mille francs pour les faire parvenir à sa femme et à ses enfants, Purry lui répondit froidement: "On ne parle ici que de millions, il faut donc aller aux millions, puis nous réaliserons".

²⁰ V. W. Crane, *The Southern Frontier, 1670-1732*, Ann Arbor 1956 (1st ed. 1929), p. 284, n. 8. refers to B. M. Add. MSS. 32,739 (*Newcastle Papers*, LIV), ff. 39, 41 f. (Purry to Walpole, June 6, 1724; Walpole to Newcastle, June 7, 1724).

²¹ A. Migliazzo, "A Tarnished Legacy", p. 237 ff.

²² *Recueil*, pp. 16-17 (May 11, 1727; see also January 1st, 1717, p. 13-14). On la Cernia, see *ibid.*, pp. 11-12, n. 3.

²³ Neuchâtel, Archives de l'Etat, G XII (French translation of the English original.).

²⁴ H. D. K. Leiding, "Purrysburg: a Swiss-French Settlement of South Carolina, on the Savannah River", *Transactions of the Huguenot Society of South Carolina*, 39 (1934), p. 32 (possibly based on A. H. Hirsch, *Huguenots of Colonial South Carolina*