

The Political Economy of Colonisation: Carl Bernhard Wadström's Case for Abolition and Civilisation

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Carl Bernhard 'Philonegros' Wadström (1746–1799) could without embellishment be regarded as an embodiment of the eclecticism often found among Swedish eighteenth-century intellectuals. This native of Norrköping was occupied with everything from mineralogy to philanthropy, from Swedenborgian mysticism to commercial prospects and political economy. Wadström was an ardent industrialist, owner of factories in Manchester and Chantilly, and member of both the Board of Commerce (*Kommerskollegium*) and the Board of Mines (*Bergskollegium*) in Sweden. Alongside his civil accomplishments, Wadström was also a dedicated Swedenborgian and worked keenly on publishing, translating and spreading Swedenborg's theological writings.¹ His concern for Africa was closely connected to his Swedenborgian faith. According to Swedenborg's visions, Africa was God's chosen location for the New Jerusalem, and the Africans themselves were especially receptive of the teachings of Christ. It was in Africa that the original biblical word was to be found in an uncorrupted form, and Africa was therefore the best place for establishing a new Christian congregation. Wadström would make it to Africa in the 1780s, and he undoubtedly had Swedenborgian intentions with his journey, but there is no evidence to suggest that this trip was part of the original Swedenborgian quest for the New Jerusalem.²

In 1787 Wadström was employed by the Swedish king Gustavus III to scout the coast of Africa with the purpose of finding a suitable place for a Swedish trade colony. In Africa, Wadström witnessed the cruelties of the Atlantic slave trade and became a devote abolitionist as a result. His experiences with the Africans convinced him that free labour colonies would be the perfect commercial alternative to the inhumane Atlantic slave trade. Wadström left Africa for London in 1788, never to return to Sweden again. When he arrived in London, the city was in the midst of fierce abolitionist agitation. In April 1788 Wadström met the well-known English abolitionist Thomas Clarkson, and was invited to serve

as a witness in the ongoing parliamentary debates concerning the abolition of the slave trade. Wadström had first hand information on the cruelties of the slave trade, and his testimony was referred to several times by the leading abolitionist in parliament, William Wilberforce, in the parliamentary debates of 1789–1791. During his time in London (1788–1795), Wadström published his two main political writings regarding the abolition of the slave trade and the colonisation of Africa.³ It is these writings that are the primary object of this article.

Wadström's magnum opus, *An Essay on Colonization* (1794–1795), is a vast and eclectic work of more than five-hundred pages. It contains his main ideas on the political and economic principles for establishing free colonies on the west coast of Africa. It is to be noted that Wadström's authorship is highly contested. The main issue is whether Wadström in fact wrote the *Essay*, or whether it is the work of his editor William Dickson.⁴ The controversy started immediately after Wadström's death in 1799, when the novelist and social critic Helen Williams published 'Memoirs of the life of Charles Bernhard Wadström' in *La Décade Philosophique, Littéraire et Politique*. Williams's article was very ill informed and conjured a heroic and romanticised story of Wadström's life as a struggling humanist on a crusade to abolish the Atlantic slave trade.⁵ Shortly after, Dickson decided to set the record straight on Wadström's achievements and published 'Strictures on Miss William's Memoirs of Wadstrom' in the *Monthly Review* of December 1799. While this article is the primary source for questioning Wadström's authorship, Dickson himself never claimed to have written the *Essay*. What he wanted credit for was the work of compiling the *Essay* and, in his own words, serving as the 'midwife' at its birth.⁶ With little reservation, one should conclude that Wadström was the chief instigator of the main ideas found in the *Essay*.⁷

As an object of historical research, Wadström has mainly caught the attention of Swedish biographers and historians, either as the study of an adventurous character or as an example of a Swedenborgian visionary. Consequently, neither historians nor biographers have regarded his political writings as an interesting subject of research for shedding light on topics such as political thought, abolitionism and civilisation. The majority of Wadström's biographers have portrayed him as a great humanist, and considerably overstated his contributions to the British anti-slavery movement.⁸ However, the most recent biography thoroughly re-evaluates this legendary portrait of Wadström as a disinterested hero of abolitionism.⁹

The most influential historical research on Wadström's writings was done by the Swedish historian of ideas Ronny Ambjörnsson in his *Det okända landet: tre studier om svenska utopister* (1981).¹⁰ According to Ambjörnsson, Wadström's writings, especially the *Essay*, should be understood in the wider contexts of Swedenbor-

gianism and the economic development of late eighteenth-century Swedish society. Ambjörnsson interprets Wadström's ideas as primarily a reflection of the contemporary Swedish ideological climate, and as containing mainly Swedenborgian visions mixed with strong physiocratic influences.¹¹ However, the latest research on Wadström's published works is found in literary historian Deidre Coleman's book *Romantic Colonization and British Anti-slavery* (2005). Coleman places Wadström's writings in the context of British anti-slavery and the romantic attempts among European travellers to colonise Africa in the late eighteenth century. She tries to show how Wadström's African colonisation plans were early and rather peculiar examples of romantic exoticism regarding Africa in late eighteenth-century European literature. In her work it becomes evident that the Swedenborgians did not create or reproduce the typical image of Africa as Europe's savage and uninhabitable 'other', but rather that their religious enthusiasm created quite an opposite representation of Africa as a populous continent filled with prosperous nations.¹²

Ambjörnsson's and Coleman's methods profitably open up different historical perspectives on Wadström's writings. However, in contrast to previous research this article will explicitly focus on the particular context of Wadström's writings and the ongoing debate to which they were intended as contributions: namely, the British anti-slavery debate of the 1790s. This sort of approach, often associated with the methods of the Cambridge School 'contextualists', stresses the fact that writers write for their contemporaries. Consequently, one of the most essential historical questions in treating Wadström's texts will be, as the philosopher and historian Robin George Collingwood put it, 'To what question did So-and-so intend this proposition for an answer?'¹³ This does not entail that I find the efforts to see Wadström's writings in the context of romantic colonisation or economic development useless. On the contrary, Coleman's and Ambjörnsson's interpretations are as valid as any 'contextualist' reading of Wadström's writings. The aim of this article is rather to analyze Wadström's publications as ideas and arguments *in use* in order to open up previously overlooked dimensions of his writings. Such an analysis may serve as a different point of entry into the complex and diverse nature of political thought in late eighteenth-century Northern Europe.

A Call for Colonisation and Civilisation

Wadström was before the British Privy Council in April 1788 as a witness to the cruelties of the slave trade. In June the next year his *Observations on the Slave Trade*

was published by James Phillips as one of many contributions to the ongoing campaign waged through publications by the London abolitionists. In April 1790 Wadström appeared another time in front of a Select Committee of the Whole House and was heard for three consecutive days on his experiences of the slave trade and Africa. A few years later, between 1794 and 1795, Wadström's *Essay* was published, during a time the historian Judith Jennings has called 'The abolitionist breakdown'. After the outbreak of war with France in 1793, the political tide of abolitionism was drastically on the turn, and finally resulted in a prejudicial association of abolitionism with libertarian 'French principles'.¹⁴

Throughout the 1790s the political space for abolitionist sympathies was becoming ever more restricted. This made abolitionists desperately start looking for signs that could be interpreted in their favour. The seventh official report of the London Abolition Committee in August 1793 identified one major hopeful sign supporting abolition. This was the possibility of a successful trade in *free labour African produce* with the colony in the hands of the Sierra Leone Company.¹⁵ The historian Michael Turner goes so far as to say that for the participants of the anti-slavery debate, the questions of abolition and free labour colonies were 'inextricably linked'.¹⁶ In July 1794 Wadström published volume one of his research on creating free colonies on the African coast, and the list of subscribers to his work contains most of the directors of the Sierra Leone Company.

Wadström had put forward the idea of free labour colonies already in his appearance before the Select Committee of 1790. He stated that the Africans had an 'extraordinary genius of commerce' and that they could be 'brought into such a state of society as we enjoy in Europe'.¹⁷ If only some good Europeans settled in Africa and gave them instructions, they would have the capacity to live off their own produce and even engage in a peaceful trade with Europe. The whole of Wadström's *Essay* is in fact a comprehensive plan on how the Africans, instead of being an object of exploitation, could become a useful trading partner. The *Essay* is also dedicated to Paul Le Mesurier, a wealthy London merchant and president of the Bulam Association, which tried to colonise the island of Bulama in the 1790s. Wadström was involved in collecting subscriptions for the Bulam Association and even wrote a plan for them on how the colonial government should be organized.¹⁸

The fundamental question Wadström was addressing in the 1790s was how to create both a humanitarian and commercially legitimate alternative to the slave trade. Wadström was therefore faced with a very specific problem: how could the intended project of establishing a new kind of colonial trade with Africa, essentially in contradiction to the present one established on the principles of mercan-

tilism and slavery, be legitimised ethically and politically? In the *Essay* Wadström admits that he was on a straightforward mission, and this was to prove that 'the colonization of Africa is not only practicable, but, in a commercial view, highly prudent and advisable'.¹⁹ This issue would, as Wadström saw it, finally be a question concerning the potentiality of creating civilisation among the Africans in the free colonies of the future.

According to the historian Robin Blackburn, the 'abolitionist breakdown' of the 1790s was also accompanied by a revitalized type of racism amongst pro-slavery agitators. This reinforced racist ideology was used in the anti-slavery debate to legitimise both slavery in the colonies and the Atlantic slave trade. One primary source of inspiration amongst pro-slavery propagandists was the British colonial administrator and historian Edward Long's work *History of Jamaica* (1774). Long claimed that Africans were inherently inferior to the white race, and that slave labour under the white man's leadership was accordingly in the best interest of the Africans themselves. This was not simply a new statement of old prejudices, but represented a new wave of quasi-scientific ways of thinking about race. Some of these ideas were, as acknowledged by Blackburn, inspired by Linnaean notions about the human species involving an innately inferior African nature. According to proslavery opinion, this lower nature of Africans was evidently revealed in their criminality, childishness and stupidity.²⁰

Since pro-slavery opinion focused on the idea of an inherently inferior African nature, it consequently became a very pressing issue for the abolitionists themselves. The leading abolitionist in Parliament, William Wilberforce, acknowledged that it was the idea of African inferiority that gave legitimacy to slavery and the slave trade. If one accepted that Africans were irredeemably morally and intellectually deprived, all arguments for the betterment of their conditions through freedom and civilisation would be disarmed. The idea of African inferiority was, according to Wilberforce, the moral and intellectual bulwark of the whole system of the slave trade.²¹

Wilberforce wrote in August 1793 that evidence was needed to refute 'the assertion of our opponents that the Africans are an inferior species; that they are incapable of civilization, either from intellectual or moral defects'.²² Furthermore, the possibility of civilisation among the Africans was seen as a prerequisite of a successful colonisation, and it was one of the primary goals of the Sierra Leone Company to 'prepare the way for Christianity and civilization' in Africa.²³ It was essentially these questions, concerning the necessity and possibility of introducing civilisation in free labour African colonies, that Wadström was addressing in his writings between 1788 and 1795. In order to legitimise his case, as will be

shown, Wadström would rely primarily on the concepts of contemporary political economy concerning the development of human civilisation and the economic advantage of independent colonies.

The Makings of a Free Colony

Wadström treats colonisation and civilisation as inseparable issues in his writings. Civilisation will be furthered through colonisation, and free colonies will only prosper if a civilised people administers them. A colony was not to be thought of as the existing European plantations and factories based on slave labour. Instead one should see colonies as permanent settlements to promote 'cultivation and improvement, either of the people or the land'. Wadström sees the slave-trading colonies only as a form of short-sighted commercial exploitation that has led to nothing but 'injustice, rapine and murder in various shapes'. In accordance with the objects of the Sierra Leone Company, colonies should be established with the aim of 'extending the blessings of civilization and religion to distant nations'.²⁴

Europeans had a very special responsibility in this project of spreading civilisation through colonisation. Wadström expresses the nature of this responsibility in the form of a popular eighteenth-century paternalistic cliché: Europeans are in the same relation to Africans as a father is to a son. Africans should therefore be treated with the respect and affection that such a family relationship requires. As a result the colonies are to be viewed as friends and allies, not as dependent societies or conquered provinces.²⁵ In a nod to his cultivated readers, Wadström then asks if this was not exactly the way that the benevolent Greeks treated their colonies during antiquity? Wadström's distinction between different types of colonies was originally made by the Scottish moral philosopher and economist Adam Smith in his book *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). Smith bases his distinction on the observation that the Roman and Greek colonies were based on different concepts: 'The Latin word (Colonia) signifies simply a plantation. The Greek word (αποικια), on the contrary, signifies a separation of dwelling, a departure from home'.²⁶ According to Smith, the Roman colony was characterized by slave labour and dependency, while the Greek colony was considered a haven of freedom, independence and self-government. Smith did not intend this distinction to serve as a mere historical curiosity. Rather he saw that the Greek colonies had been more prosperous than their Roman counterparts, and the reasons were the natural benefits bestowed upon a people allowed the liberty to manage their own affairs in a way most suitable to their own interest.²⁷

This form of liberty was to be realised in the colonies through the free trade of merchandise, the slave trade of course excepted. Trade monopolies were, according to Wadström, the greatest threat to the success of free labour colonies: 'Of all expedients that can well be contrived to stunt the natural growth of a new colony, that of an exclusive company is undoubtedly the most effectual'. Wadström claimed that Adam Smith had shown that monopolies were a severe impediment to economic growth, both for the colonies and the mother country. A trading company with a monopoly stood to profit from the exploitation of both, and would keep production low in the colonies to keep prices high in the metropolis whenever it could do so. This was the vicious logic of monopoly trade, and it had clearly been demonstrated on the Spice Island where the Dutch East India Company often burned all the merchandise beyond a certain quantity.²⁸

The detrimental effects of monopoly trade, as stated by classical political economy, became one of the main arguments Wadström used to legitimise independent free labour colonies. Adam Smith, referred to by Wadström as 'this intelligent author', had not only shown that free colonies were a possible alternative, but also that they were bound to be commercially more profitable.²⁹ Therefore free colonies should not merely be seen as a benevolent act on behalf of the mother country. By referring to Smith, Wadström wanted to appeal to the economic benefits and utility of the abolition of the slave trade. He frames these thoughts in the discourse of emancipation when he writes: 'Let us teach them to shake of[f] their irons, and to revenge themselves on their blind tyrants, who schackle them, by becoming more useful to them in a state of freedom'.³⁰ In the same spirit he insists that establishing European civilisation in free African colonies is generous enough, but to 'improve ourselves in a form of association [...] appears to be of much greater importance'.³¹

Deidre Coleman insists that these quotes show a certain tension between two rival discourses in Wadström's writings: the civilisation of Africa and the salvation of the Europeans.³² Coleman suggests that Wadström had to choose one or the other, and when his hopes for the civilisation of Africa withered he focused his ambition on European self-improvement. I would like to suggest a different reading based on Wadström's strong reliance on political economy in his argumentation for free colonies. This would suggest that the question for Wadström was never 'either-or', but that the civilisation of Africa coincided with the improvement of Europe. To recognize this, one has to take into account the crucial role of colonial trade in the framework of eighteenth-century political economy.

A popular idea among classical economists was that the expansion and progress of commercial society constantly demanded new markets. For Smith this was an idea inextricably linked to his theory of profit: If no vent for surplus production in merchandise or capital were available it would result in an inevitable stagnation. Hence new (colonial) markets for relocating capital and merchandise was thought to be a central means for raising productivity, enhancing the division of labour and stimulating technical advancements.³³ Wadström was clearly influenced by such popular theories of profit, and would often motivate his case for colonisation with reference not to the need of moral improvement, but rather to the needs of a progressive and commercial society. This is quite evident in the following passage from his *Observations on the Slave Trade*:

That it is necessary for a *free, commercial and labourious* nation to look out for foreign settlements, when *population and manufactured products* encrease in a similar proportion, is a truth as evident as that without *enlarging space* for the former, and *seeking for an emporium* for the latter, the progress of *population and commerce* must necessarily and of course cease.³⁴

It is important to emphasize the argumentative context of this passage. What Wadström is trying to do is to find a way to give legitimacy to the free colonisation of Africa as an alternative to the Atlantic slave trade. The historian Seymour Drescher has recently shown that it was common among abolitionists in the anti-slavery debate in the 1790s to rely on naturalistic arguments derived from the principles of political economy.³⁵ When Wadström claims that colonisation is a necessity for every commercial nation, it should be seen as part of the trend among abolitionists to mobilize the authority of political economy for their own arguments.

Ultimately Wadström's plans for the colonisation of Africa were part of an even grander scheme of Enlightenment thought, namely the universal process of spreading improvement and civilisation. The ideas behind such a general process of civilisation, conceived as different stages of development common to all societies, were elaborately studied by Scottish Enlightenment philosophers. In this sense the call for civilisation was indeed a truly Eurocentric ambition, because what characterized the highest form of civilisation was nothing other than the ideals of the Enlightenment philosophers themselves.³⁶ What will be considered next is how Wadström implemented this general scheme of the progress of civilisation to support his claim that civilisation could prosper in free labour colonies in Africa.

The Universal Progress of Civilisation

During the middle of the eighteenth century a very influential neologism of modern European political discourse was created. This was the concept of civilisation, denoting both a certain state of a society and a progressive historical process. On the one hand, civilisation was a counter concept to another stage of society, namely barbarism; on the other, it signified a social reform movement concerning all dimensions of society. The notion of civilisation now included both the idea of a progressive historical process, and the belief that the level of civilisation could serve as a universal yardstick for evaluating development in different societies.³⁷ In the hands of the Enlightenment philosophers, the concept of civilisation was related to a process of emancipation from the prejudices of the past. It became, in the words of the literary critic Jean Starobinski, a hallmark of the Enlightenment and functioned as 'an apotheosis of reason'.³⁸

The concept of civilisation played a central role in Wadström's writings in the British anti-slavery debate. The reason was that the success of civilised free colonies could serve as a perfect argument against pro-slavery notions of African inferiority and the need for European tutelage. Consequently, Wadström tried to show that Africans were capable of attaining a state of civilisation, and, therefore, he wanted to give advice on how the process of civilisation could begin. Conveniently, the Scottish political economists provided elaborate theories on the historical progress of civilisation, and it was to them Wadström would turn when he needed arguments for the viability of introducing civilisation in Africa.³⁹

Scottish Enlightenment philosophers such as Adam Ferguson, Lord Kames, David Hume and Adam Smith all devoted a great deal of thought to the historical development of civilisation. The progress of civilisation in all human societies passed through four stages of development, which were identified by their mode of production and other economic activities. The historian Ronald Meek has claimed that classical political economy in many ways developed out of the prevailing theories of the four stages of society. Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* was essentially an analysis of the road taken by different nations toward the age of commerce. In addition, Smith wanted to show how such a development could be furthered and what its eventual consequences would be.⁴⁰ What pushed this development forward was, for Smith, primarily factors relating to production economy: the increased division of labour; escalated trade and the expansion of markets; and a greater accumulation of capital to make the previous processes possible. Accordingly, these socio-economic factors determined the development rather than the innate qualities of different peoples. Like John Locke, he saw that

man lacked any real essence; instead the human character was a result of contingent material circumstances. Smith in particular, and the Scottish Enlightenment philosophers in general, did not regard civilisation as the corruption of a free and desirable state of nature. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's idea of a prosperous state of nature, characterized by perfect equality, was for Smith nothing but equality in poverty, misery and ignorance.⁴¹

The European need to explain the progress of civilisation stemmed from increased contact with the surrounding world in the eighteenth century. This gave Europeans an incentive both to explain why they were different, and to legitimise their supposed superiority. During the eighteenth century, this explanation was not primarily based on the essentialist principles of racial supremacy, but rather on the idea that the Europeans were superior, not because of innate qualities, but because they were at the forefront of history.⁴² The logic of such a non-essentialist idea implicated that the possibility of development and improvement, through the ascent of the stages of civilisation, was open to any people who adhered to the principles of progress. Hence the very notion of a general progress of civilisation contradicted the presumption of differing innate qualities among separate races. To argue in the anti-slavery debate for the civilisation of Africa, therefore, also meant denying the essentialist idea that gave legitimacy to the pro-slavery opinion.

Issues regarding the universal nature of man became key questions during the anti-slavery debate. In the late 1780s leading abolitionists like William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson started to collect African products in order to prove that the Africans possessed abilities and skills indicative of their potential for advanced civilisation. Such proof was meant to refute the pro-slavery spokesmen's most devastating argument, namely that Africans and Europeans did not share a 'common nature'.⁴³ It was also as a witness to the great capacities of the Africans that Wadström got in contact with the London abolitionists. Before the Select Committee of 1790, Wadström testified that the Africans were 'as capable of being in all respects brought to the highest perfection, as those of any white civilized nation'.⁴⁴ The meeting between Wadström, Thomas Clarkson, and the former's fellow African traveller, the naturalist and Linnaean Anders Sparman is documented in Clarkson's history of the abolitionist movement. Through them, Clarkson claims to have obtained 'beautiful specimens of African produce' and 'a more accurate knowledge of the manners and customs of the Africans [...] than from all the persons I had yet seen'.⁴⁵

One should not here overemphasize the benevolence displayed in Wadström's philanthropic project for civilisation. The starting point of his argument was

the obvious inferiority of the Africans. In this sense, the only thing separating Wadström from the advocates of slavery was his methods of explaining that postulate. The Africans were deemed inferior, uncivilised and savage given that the criteria for civilisation were European. As a result, this perspective legitimised the supposed hierarchies of different peoples that the theories of civilisation presupposed. What puzzled Wadström, along with other civilisation theorists, was a question produced by their own colonial imagination. This question was, in the words of the cultural critic Edward Said: why did the Africans seem 'lost to begin with, irredeemable, irrecusably inferior'?⁴⁶ Thus the argument for civilisation against the slave trade was far from the antithesis of the pro-slavery opinion. This created a peculiar problem for abolitionism: if the Africans' need for civilisation was stressed too much, it would also highlight their supposed savageness and bolster the call for European tutelage. Wadström's editor, William Dickson, was well aware of this flaw and claimed that Wadström's 'paper systems' would actually only prolong slavery in the form of apprenticeships.⁴⁷

The Paradoxes of Civilisation

Previous historical research has argued that Wadström's colonial plans should be regarded as an expression of his Swedenborgian ideas about Africa and the Africans. The Africans were by nature divinely superior and it was the possibility of founding the New Jerusalem congregation on God's chosen soil in Africa that was the ultimate driving force behind his quest for colonies.⁴⁸ Undoubtedly Wadström had Swedenborgian ideas, but to focus only on these generates peculiar problems when one examines his key political writings from years between 1788 and 1795.⁴⁹

The first problem with an interpretation that stresses a Swedenborgian influence is that neither Wadström's *Observations on the Slave Trade* nor the *Essay* contains even an implicit reference to Swedenborg or his ideas on Africa.⁵⁰ The second problem with this interpretation is that if one embraces it completely it becomes very difficult to make sense of Wadström's key political writings. The dilemma is this: if Wadström's main source of inspiration is Swedenborg's ideas on Africa and the Africans, then the ideas on their 'improvement and civilisation'⁵¹ through colonisation that permeate his own writings become inexplicable. If, as Swedenborg believed, the Africans existed in a divinely ordained spiritual state, then any introduction of civilisation would involve a corruption of their character. Put differently, if one accepts that Wadström was simply

filled with Swedenborgian notions of the spiritually superior Africans, then one will be hard pressed to explain his thoughts on their need for improvement and civilisation.⁵²

Considering that Swedenborgian ideas are absent in his key works in the anti-slavery debate, what, then, were the reasons he used to justify his support for the colonisation and civilisation of Africa? As stated in the *Essay*, a colony in Africa did not only serve anti-slavery purposes, it was also a way to escape from European societies 'where waste land and degenerate morals too much abound'.⁵³ Africa was not unique in Wadström's view, since he also claims to have considered different regions in Europe as potential sites for new colonial communities, but in the end he deemed this continent far too unstable and corrupt for such a project to succeed. The plans for colonisation and the development of a new African community thus coincided with a perceived need for a migratory destination beyond the reach of European influence. This new African community would be prevented from degeneration by creating regulations to 'effectually exclude every political, financial and mercantile principle, which was not deemed consistent with the happiness of mankind'.⁵⁴ Thus Wadström's writings on colonisation and civilisation were not only contributions to the anti-slavery debate, but also a critique of contemporary European society and an alternative vision for the future.

The problem for future societies was that the progress of civilisation, so eagerly supported by Wadström in the anti-slavery debate, seemed to be driven forward by forces that contained the seed of its own destruction. This was the contradiction of progress and an issue Wadström was well aware of when he spoke of the inherent dangers of liberty in the colonies:

liberty, independent of any check or order, appears to tend directly to destroy the useful and moral character of individuals, and, paradoxical as it may seem, to reduce them ultimately to slavery.⁵⁵

By highlighting Wadström's ideas on civilisation and its potential corruption, it is possible to tie his writings to one of the great themes in European eighteenth-century political thought. This theme is the complex of problems concerning how the burgeoning commercial society was to be combined with a good and moral social order. The historian John Greville Agard Pocock has called this theme the paradigm of virtue and corruption. He claims that one of the keys to understanding eighteenth-century political thought is to understand the unease many intellectuals felt when the process of civilisation appeared at the same time to be a process of corruption.⁵⁶

Why, then, had the blessings of progressive civilisation also the potential power to result in a corruption of the moral and social order of society? This question is related to a complex of problems concerning currents of political thought in eighteenth-century Europe. Pocock has claimed that what was at stake for many European intellectuals was an essentially republican concept of virtue that was threatened by the development of a self-interested commercial society. In his influential work *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), Pocock traces this tradition of republican humanism to Renaissance Italy and shows how influential it was on European political thought during the eighteenth century. The tradition of republican humanism was complex and full of nuances, but the scholar John Robertson asserts that the dominating elements were the ideas of a free republic of citizens with a militia, and participation in politics as the highest virtue of social life. The ever-present threat of corruption was materialized only when individuals put private, material interests before public virtue.⁵⁷ Consequently, in a republican perspective, the potential for corruption was inherent in every political community.

Wadström was very aware of the potential in human nature for corruption, and perceived it as a direct threat to his colonial undertakings. If this destructive inclination was not thoroughly regulated, it would destroy the possibility of virtuous republican communities in the planned free labour colonies on the coast of Africa. According to Wadström, this was a fact derived from the very nature of man:

the disposition of man, naturally tends to DESPOTISM, not only in *accumulating power*, to influence and govern others, which too often leads to the deprivation of life, but also in *accumulating money or wealth*, which too often terminates in the forcibly depriving others of their property, in both cases unchecked by the community in which he lives.⁵⁸

Wadström was not a philosopher, however, and only rarely did he describe the potential decay of the colonial community in a language close to the tradition of republican humanism. Instead of focusing on abstract concepts such as civic virtue, one should try to understand what it was in commercial society that Wadström saw as threatening and detrimental. In this case the abolitionist argument for colonisation and Wadström's critique of the European social order become two sides of the same coin: those aspects of commercial civilisation harmful to social order were the same which needed to be regulated in the new free labour colonies. Nonetheless, the same factors of progressive civilisation that created affluence in Europe should do so also in the African colonies. Next, Wadström's argument for the introduction of civilisation in African colonies and the regulation of its harm-

ful consequences will be examined by focusing on how he treats two factors of civilisation in eighteenth-century political economy. These were the problematic issues surrounding the moral and material consequences of the division of labour and the growth of luxury.

The Contradictions of Progress

For Adam Smith, the consequences of the division of labour were some of the most paradoxical elements of commercial society. The division of labour was problematic since it had an inherently dual character: while it created the opulence that distinguished commercial society, it inevitably resulted in the workers becoming morally and intellectually impoverished. The material prosperity that resulted from the division of labour in advanced societies was only achieved at the high social cost of menial labour, which created workers ‘as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become’.⁵⁹ In addition, opulence itself created certain problems; if luxuries were not introduced correctly they could lead to indolence and laziness among the workers.

Wadström regarded the introduction of the division of labour in the colonies to be of great importance for their success. The introduction of the division of labour and new technology, such as the plough, was needed to guarantee a flourishing colonial production. If such modernities were introduced on African soil, considered by Wadström to be especially fertile, it would secure such an abundant crop that the colonists would only have to work four hours a day to earn their livelihood. Wadström referred to ‘political arithmeticians’ such as Benjamin Franklin, whom he claimed had proven the immense potential of efficient and advanced agriculture. The detrimental effects of the division of labour would be prevented since the workers could spend the remaining hours of the day on ‘leisure, pleasure, instruction and contemplation.’ This extra-curricular activity would be combined with a ‘manly and generous education’ to guarantee that the Africans would become virtuous colonial citizens.⁶⁰

Wadström also found a place for the negative consequences of the division of labour in his argument. Luckily for future African colonies, the Africans themselves were unacquainted with the division of labour. As the Scottish philosopher Lord Kames had observed, peasants were ‘generally more intelligent than artificers, to whom the division of labour, in manufacturing countries, has assigned *one, simple* operation’. This observation was used by Wadström to support his argument that the introduction of advanced production would be possible in Africa.

Any prejudices against the capabilities of the Africans were unwarranted, owing to the fact that their intelligence had not been attenuated through the division of labour. The Africans were at a level of civilisation as ripe for advancement as any of their European counterparts: 'we are not thence to conclude unfavourably of their intellects, any more than of the intellects of those European peasants whose practices are the same'.⁶¹ Undoubtedly, it was a very contradictory argument; the uncorrupted nature of the Africans served as a justification for introducing the very same form of production that would eventually mean their doom.

Yet the introduction of the division of labour was not Wadström's main argument why free labour colonies could succeed. The bedrock for his colonial propositions was his belief in the inherently superior nature of free labour in relation to slave labour. The division of labour would follow as a natural consequence once the productive potential of wage labour had been unleashed through the abolition of slavery. The superiority of free labour was a postulate of Adam Smith, whom Wadström paraphrases in asserting that 'the labour of slaves which, to vulgar eyes, appears the cheapest, is in truth incomparably the dearest of all labour'.⁶² This Smithian argument was granted so great an authority by the abolitionists that Drescher has called it the ideology of free labour.⁶³ The superiority of free labour was also an important part of the greater framework of civilisation theory: societies advanced in accord with Smith's axiom of the 'natural effort of every individual to better his own condition', and if slavery prevailed, this natural effort could not be exercised. As Wadström puts it '[Slavery] cramps the powers of invention, and, by destroying emulation and reward, arrests the progress of every useful art'.⁶⁴

As the preceding quote shows, Wadström thought that reward for labour was necessary for any progress to take place. But these rewards were not constant. As society develops its needs also change. Civilisation, for Wadström, was nothing less than the cultivation and refinement of the natural passions in man. This was an idea inspired by the leading Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume, who thought that the process of civilisation was equivalent to the socialisation and refinement of the natural passions through commerce, manufacture and trade. The most decisive sign of refinement was the expansion of the needs and wants of the people, and this refinement was propelled along by the desire in every man to better his own condition and live more comfortably than previous generations. Increased wants were symbolized by opulence, which Hume saw as both a key incentive and the quintessence of progress. For it was luxury goods that aroused the desire in man for a grander way of life than that of his ancestors.⁶⁵ In Hume's theory of civilisation, it was man's taste for luxuries, along with the opportunity

to acquire them, which provided the incentives essential to economic development and facilitated the progression from feudal to commercial civilisation.⁶⁶

Wadström had read Hume and consequently insisted that civilisation in Africa must begin by changing the disposition of the Africans. This change would be carried out by arousing and properly directing the desires of the Africans, who were still in a rude and static state of natural production.⁶⁷ In other words, what was needed was something to quickly awaken the slumbering 'Scottish' self-interest among the Africans in free labour colonies. Accordingly, Wadström thought that in order to promote improvement in Africa, it would be necessary to begin by introducing a certain amount of luxury goods. The introduction of such goods would result in a win-win situation, according to Wadström, since the Africans would receive civilisation and the Europeans would gain a new market for their goods. Wadström described this process in a very telling anecdote on how he had contributed to the proliferation of civilisation during his meeting with an African prince:

I gave his majesty a pair of common enamelled Birmingham sleeve-buttons, with which though ignorant of their use, he was infinitely delighted. [...] Transported with his new ornaments, the king held up his hands to display them to the people. His courtiers soon surrounded my hut, entreating me to furnish them all with buttons, which I did with pleasure, reflecting that this fondness for European baubles might one day come to be made subservient to the noblest purposes.⁶⁸

Luxury was a vehicle of civilisation, and the taste for it, as Wadström's example intended to show, would spread like wildfire as soon as it was introduced even on a very small scale. However, luxury could also bring certain unwanted consequences, and if introduced in a superfluous manner it would lead to 'indolence, selfishness' and 'inattention to others'.⁶⁹ Luxury goods were another of the contradictory elements of commercial society, and their moral consequences were heavily debated during the eighteenth century.⁷⁰ Hume, who participated in the debate, even felt the need to distinguish between innocent and vicious luxury in order not to throw out the baby with the bath water. While innocent luxury was a natural result of the refinement of the passions through the process of civilisation, vicious luxury was that which took the form of decadent excesses and vices. The historian Christopher Berry has pointed out that, for Hume, innocent luxury was an essential ingredient in all civilised societies; it was a product of development and inspired people to further their own cultivation and refinement.⁷¹

Wadström followed Hume's distinction between different forms of luxury to the letter. Innocent luxury was necessary for the formation of civilised society, but

superfluous forms of luxury would only lead to indolence and eventually endanger social order in the colonial community. Wadström therefore proposed the governmental regulation of all forms of vicious luxury in the colonies, particularly the superfluous possession of precious metals and money. This followed the idea that luxury was to be a result of the progress of civilisation, not a superimposed excess with harmful moral consequences. Accordingly, luxury goods were only to be introduced in the colonies as far as they corresponded to the level of civilisation in the society in question. This posed a peculiar problem for Wadström: bearing in mind the 'rude state' of the Africans, what kind of goods could be introduced that were not excesses by African measures?⁷²

Wadström had a strikingly creative plan for introducing the necessary luxuries into Africa. Since he believed that Africans lacked civilisation altogether, the immediate introduction of any such luxuries would inevitably lead to moral decay. Instead, the Africans should primarily be subjected to controlled forms of luxury in order to carefully awaken their desires for improvement. The colonial government should therefore establish 'a public retail shop, or rather *sample-room*, where specimens of all approved articles of luxury should be displayed'. These items would serve as incentives for the Africans to acknowledge the possible fruits of free labour. As a sign of benevolence, they would then be sold with fixed prices to hinder unscrupulous merchants from exploiting the Africans' new taste for civilisation. Through such regulatory measures, Wadström thought that the necessary introduction of luxury goods could be accomplished in a manner 'compatible with the happiness and improvement of the community'.⁷³

Conclusion

It has been argued that Wadström's political writings from the years between 1789 and 1795 can profitably be read in the context of the British anti-slavery debate. Such a reading has shown how Wadström consciously used the concepts of classical political economy in order to make his case for the abolition of the slave trade and the civilisation of Africa. In order to partake in the anti-slavery debate, Wadström had to adjust his argumentation according to the key concepts of contemporary political discourse crucial to the debate itself. These concepts did not belong to romantic Swedenborgianism, but, as I have shown, to the vocabulary of classical political economy. In contrast to the traditional portrait of Wadström as primarily a Swedenborgian mystic, his role as an ardent protagonist of the contemporary ideals encompassed in the anti-slavery debate, one of the

great movements of social and political reform in late eighteenth-century Europe, has come to light. The extent of the British Empire made questions concerning slavery a global affair, and Wadström was one of the cosmopolitan participants in the cause to abolish one of the Empire's most detested institutions.

It has been shown how Wadström argued against the slave trade by asserting that free labour colonies in Africa were a viable option. The prosperity of the planned colonies was to be secured by introducing the contemporary ideas of commercial civilisation among the Africans. Wadström saw his own plans for free colonies as part of a more general movement for spreading enlightenment, improvement and civilisation throughout the world. His support for this comprehensive project of civilisation stands in sharp contrast to the image of Wadström as chiefly a Swedenborgian visionary. It should not be assumed, however, that Wadström had to be either a progressive political economist or a Swedenborgian exclusively. As the Swedish historian Jakob Christensson has shown, Swedenborgians such as Carl Fredrik Nordenskjöld saw no contradiction in propagating mystic ideas and enlightened republican notions interchangeably.⁷⁴ Neither did Wadström see any conflict in his own different projects. That such apparent paradoxes seemed natural is, as Christensson has emphasized, a feature historians must pay attention to in order to understand the men of the eighteenth century on their own terms. Wadström's colonial dreams were hopelessly optimistic and would never prove to materialize, but they can serve as able testimonies to how even the proponents of utopia had to be in dialogue with their time.

Notes

1. For a careful investigation of Wadström's Swedenborgian activities, see Harry Lenhammar, *Tolerans och bekännelse tvång: studier i den svenska swedenborgianismen 1765–1795* (Uppsala, 1966).
2. The actual circumstances of Wadström's African journey are complex; for a detailed description, see Phillip K. Nelson, *Carl Bernhard Wadström: mannen bakom myten* (Norrköping, 1998), p. 39–44.
3. These are *Observations on the Slave Trade and a Description of Some Part of the Coast of Guinea, during a Voyage Made in 1787 and 1788 in Company with Doctor A. Sparrman and Captain Arrhenius* (London, 1789) and *An Essay on Colonization Particularly Applied to the Western Coast of Africa, with Some Free Thoughts on Cultivation and Commerce; also Brief Descriptions of the Colonies Already Formed, or Attempted, in Africa, Including those of Sierra Leona and Bulama*, vol. 1–2 (London, 1794–1795).

4. Robin Hallet, *The Penetration of Africa: European Enterprises and Exploration Principally in Northern and Western Africa up to 1830*, vol. I (London, 1965), p. 185–187.
5. Nelson 1998, p. 99–101.
6. William Dickson, 'Strictures on Miss Williams's Memoirs of Wadström', *The Monthly Magazine* (1799), p. 865.
7. In Dickson's article on Williams's memoir, he also criticises Wadström's views on abolitionism and civilisation in the *Essay*. If Dickson had in fact written the essay, this criticism would be very self contradictory. Reservations are for the influence of 'Old Whig' principles Dickson admits he had on the *Essay*. See Dickson 1799, p. 869.
8. It is one of Wadström's own relatives, Ellen Hagen, who has been most responsible for creating and spreading a significantly exaggerated and fabulous image of Wadström. Unfortunately Hagen's depiction of Wadström is still used by historians today. See Dick Harrison, *Slaveri: en världshistoria om ofrihet, 1800 till nutid* (Borgå, 2008), p. 11–18, and Ellen Hagen, *En frihetstidens son: Carl Bernhard Wadström* (Stockholm, 1946).
9. Nelson 1998.
10. Ronny Ambjörnsson, *Det okända landet: tre studier om svenska utopister* (Hedemora, 1981).
11. Ronny Ambjörnsson, *Fantasin till makten!: utopiska idéer i västerlandet under fem hundra år* (Stockholm, 2004), p. 117.
12. Deidre Coleman, *Romantic Colonization and British Anti-Slavery* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 66.
13. Robin George Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (London, 1970), p. 39.
14. Judith Jennings, *The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade 1783–1807* (Midsomer, 1997), p. 46, 56, 78. Wadström was one of many witnesses that the London Abolition Committee had gathered. 1792–1798 is the time Jennings labels as a breakdown for the abolitionist cause.
15. Jennings 1997, p. 82.
16. Michael Turner, 'The Limits of Abolition: Government, Saints and the 'African Question', c. 1780–1820', *The English Historical Review* 446 (1997), p. 319.
17. Parliamentary Archives, HL/PO/JO/10/7/919.
18. Carl Bernhard Wadström, *Propositions for Consideration, Laid before the Subscribers of the Bulam Association, at a Meeting Held on the 29th of April 1794* (London, 1794).
19. Wadström 1794–1795, vol. I, p. 3.
20. Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery 1776–1848* (London, 1988), p. 153–155.
21. William Baker, 'William Wilberforce on the Idea of Negro Inferiority', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 31 (1970), p. 433.
22. Wilberforce quoted in Baker 1970, p. 437.
23. *Substance of the report delivered by the Court of Directors of the Sierra Leone Company* (London, 1794), p. 123.
24. Quotes from Wadström 1794–1795, vol. I, 59.

25. Wadström 1794–1795, vol. 1, p. 63.
26. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York, 2003), p. 706.
27. Smith 2003, p. 706, 718.
28. Wadström 1794–1795, vol. 1, p. 64–65. Wadström uses the example of the Dutch East India Company with references to Adam Smith.
29. Wadström 1794–1795, vol. 1, p. 63–65.
30. Wadström 1789, p. 61.
31. Wadström 1794–1795, vol. 2, p. 363.
32. Coleman 2005, p. 101.
33. David Winch, 'Classical Economics and the Case for Colonization', *Economica* 30 (1963), p. 392–393.
34. Wadström 1789, p. 47–48. Wadström returns to the same argument in *Essay on Colonization*, vol. 1, p. 62.
35. Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labour versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (New York, 2002), p. 20.
36. Bruce Mazlish, *Civilization and its Contents* (Stanford, CA, 2004), p. 17–18.
37. cf. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, vol. 1, *The History of Manners* (New York, 1978), p. 47; Jean Starobinski, *Blessings in Disguise; or, The morality of Evil* (Oxford, 1993), p. 3; Jorg Fisch, 'Zivilization, Kultur', in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, Vol. 7, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze & Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart, 2004), p. 679–774.
38. Starobinski 1993, p. 3.
39. Wadström was fairly well read in Scottish Enlightenment philosophy. The list of references for the *Essay* contains Lord Kames, William Robertson, David Hume, Georg Forster and Adam Smith.
40. Ronald Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 218–221.
41. Anthony Pagden, 'The Defence of Civilization in Eighteenth-Century Social Theory', *History of the Human Sciences* 1 (1988), p. 40.
42. Mazlish 2004, p. 41.
43. Baker 1970, p. 436.
44. PA, HL/PO/JO/10/7/919.
45. Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade by the British Parliament*, vol. 1 (London, 1808), p. 489.
46. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London, 1993), p. 28.
47. Dickson 1799, p. 867.
48. cf. Ambjörnsson 2004, p. 101, and Coleman 2005, p. 69.
49. Essentially *Observations on the Slave Trade and Essay on Colonization*.
50. cf. Stephen J. Braidwood, *Black Poor and White Philanthropists: London's Blacks and the Foundation of the Sierra Leone Settlement 1786–1791* (Liverpool, 1994), p. 9.
51. Wadström 1794–1795, vol. 1, p. 4.

52. Evidently there are some connections between Swedenborg and classical political economy when it comes to the ideas of utility and the value of labour. However, my proposed contradiction lies not in their conceptions of labour and utility, but in different notions of civilisation. cf. Emanuel Swedenborg, *Om himmelen och dess underbara ting och om helvetet* (Stockholm, 1906), p. 273–278.
53. Wadström 1794–1795, vol. 2, p. 179.
54. Wadström 1794–1795, vol. 2, p. 180.
55. Wadström 1794–1795, vol. 2, p. 245.
56. John Greville Agard Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History* (New York, 1985), p. 48, 118.
57. John Robertson, 'Scottish Enlightenment and the Limits of the Civic Tradition', in *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Istvan Hont & Michael Ignatieff (London, 1984), p. 138.
58. Wadström 1794–1795, vol. 2, p. 245.
59. Smith 2003, p. 987.
60. Quotes from Wadström 1794–1795, vol. 1, p. 23, 85.
61. Quotes from Wadström 1794–1795, vol. 1, p. 17–18.
62. Wadström 1794–1795, vol. 1, p. 78. Adam Smith's wording was 'The experience of all ages and nations, I believe, demonstrates that the work done by slaves, though it appears to cost only their maintenance, is in the end the dearest of any.' Smith 2003, p. 493.
63. Drescher 2002, p. 15–16, 31–33.
64. Wadström 1794–1795, vol. 1, p. 180. Wadström is here again referring to Adam Smith.
65. David Hume, 'Of Commerce', in *Writings on Economics*, ed. Eugene Rotwein (Madison, WI, 1955), p. 14.
66. Alan Macfarlane, 'David Hume and the Political Economy of Agrarian Civilization', *History of European Ideas* 27 (2001), p. 86–87.
67. Wadström 1794–1795, vol. 2, p. 256.
68. Wadström 1794–1795, vol. 1, p. 21.
69. Hume, 'Of Refinement in the Arts', in *Writings on Economics*, ed. Eugene Rotwein (Madison, WI, 1955), p. 30.
70. Wadström was probably also familiar with the debates on luxury in his native Sweden. However, these debates were considerably earlier and Wadström does not refer to them, or writers in Sweden, when he elaborates his thoughts on luxury goods. For a recent article on the Swedish debates on luxury see Leif Runefelt, 'Från yppighetens nytta till dygdens försvar – den frihetstida debatten om lyx', *Historisk tidskrift* 124 (2004), p. 203–224.
71. Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 142–145.
72. Wadström 1794–1795, vol. 2, p. 244, 256.

73. Quotes from Wadström 1794–1795, vol. 2, p. 234.

74. Jakob Christensson, *Lyckoriket: studier i svensk upplysning* (Stockholm, 1996), p. 196–213.

Summary:

The Political Economy of Colonisation: Carl Bernhard Wadström's Case for Abolition and Civilisation

This article is an analysis of the Swedish abolitionist and Swedenborgian Carl Bernhard Wadström's (1746–1799) writings in the British anti-slavery debate in the years between 1788 and 1795. Previous historical scholarship has seen Wadström primarily as a Swedenborgian visionary on a quest for religious fulfilment in Africa. An alternative perspective on Wadström's writings is offered in this article by highlighting his comparatively overlooked polemical publications and Parliamentary testimonies in the British anti-slavery debate. Instead of treating Wadström's writings and colonial plans as manifestations of his Swedenborgian dreams, they are reassessed as contributions to the contemporary anti-slavery debate. The focus is on how Wadström participated and argued in this debate in order to show the ideological tenets underlying his views. Wadström is linked to the Scottish Enlightenment discourse by showing how he uses the concepts of classical political economy in his argumentation for the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. Through this alternative reading of Wadström's writings, it is possible to gain another entry point into the complex and motley character of late eighteenth-century political thought in Northern Europe.

Keywords: anti-slavery, colonisation, Africa, political economy, eighteenth-century.