

An outline of the problem and the thesis purpose

The purpose of the following thesis is to present the public reception of famous philanthropists from different parts of Europe at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries as manifestations of one and the same cultural phenomenon.

The idea of the philanthropist conceived as a social role related to Enlightenment humanitarianism appeared in the Western Europe at the end of the eighteenth century, and disseminated eastward in the post-Napoleonic era. Unlike its modern definition, the word 'philanthropist' carried a strongly positive and non-ironic connotation. For many philosophers of the time, philanthropy (Greek 'philanthrōpía') indicated an alternative to the Christian idea of charity and promised to become the central social virtue in a rationalised society. Accordingly, the philanthropist was not only a person who practiced philanthropy, but a personal model of an Enlightened virtuous man.

What was crucial for the way philanthropy became personified at the time were the transformations of celebrity culture. As suggested by historians of fame, one of the key changes of the era was the emergence of the modern celebrity sometime between 1750 and 1850. In opposition to the traditional mechanism in which fame was reserved for venerable ancestors, there appeared a characteristic manner of thinking about fame bestowed upon the living. The words such as English 'celebrity' and French 'célébrité' came into wide use to indicate a great popularity during one's lifetime, a feeling of being constantly surrounded by the attention of one's contemporaries, and an impression of intimate closeness between an admirer and an idol in spite of the social distance separating them. Unlike the older models of social distinguishment, celebrity depended on public opinion rather than on posthumous judgement, on fascination rather than admiration, and on markets rather than learned opinion. It was a dynamic type of fame that used the mechanism of publicity and therefore crucially depended on an interaction between a famous figure and their audience.

As it happened, the figure of the philanthropist found its embodiment precisely in the shape of this marketised and earthly kind of renown. At the turn of the nineteenth century, there appeared a number of people whose fame took shape of celebrity and who were perceived as icons of humanitarianism and secular role models. The waves of fascination with such figures, recurring throughout the period in Europe and North America, have been noted by historians, although only in relation to individual philanthropists or to particular social movements, leaving out the problematisation of the phenomenon as a whole.

Up until recently, neither humanities nor social sciences possessed epistemological tools to properly account for someone's fame or celebrity. Therefore, the problematic has been rather marginalised, as celebrity was diminished to an unserious, secondary epiphenomenon easy to disregard. Today, those prejudices are increasingly being considered outdated, as historians are becoming aware of the findings of the nascent field of celebrity studies and recognise fame as a nodal point of crucial historical topics such as mentality, capitalism or identity.

Celebrity has a similar relevance to a historical debate in the following work. The reception of famous philanthropists is significant for the history of humanitarianism and the crucial question about the reasons for the wide success of modern philanthropy. Many scholars see

philanthropy as a decisive factor in determining the shape of European culture in the nineteenth century. In the 1980s and 90s, a seminal discussion took place between historians of positivist, Marxist, and more anthropologically-oriented persuasions about the widespread adoption of the Enlightenment-inspired philanthropic ideology and mode of action. Within this debate, understanding why humanitarian icons were lionised in a manner novel in terms of fame is a direct attempt to fill the gaps in history of philanthropy that have been pointed out by scholars such as Thomas Haskell or Alan Kidd.

As I argue in the dissertation, the contemporaneous and widespread emergence of philanthropic figures whose popularity drew on the mechanisms of celebrity was not an incidental by-product of the wider humanitarian movement. Rather, the phenomenon may be treated as a symptom of a new kind of fame being birthed, philanthropic celebrity, which emerged from a certain resonance between the cultural changes happening in the different parts of Europe. In the following work, I undertake the deep analysis of three selected cases – John Howard (1726-1790), a British prison reformer, Jean-Frédéric Oberlin (1740-1826), an Alsatian pastor, and Stanisław Staszic (1755-1826), a Polish writer and statesman – and point to the similarities that appeared at different stages of the process responsible for their social distinguishment. Here, by fame I do not mean a ‘natural’ consequence of their benevolent achievements, but instead I am interested in the cultural conditions that fostered an emergence of attitudes, opinions, and behaviours of people who considered philanthropic celebrities as worthy of attention and who attached a special meaning to them achieving eminence.

The methodology

The method adapted in the following dissertation is inspired by the work of historians interested in fame such as Leo Braudy, Fred Inglis, Tom Mole, and particularly Antoine Lilti, as well as by the work of celebrity scholars such as Jeffrey Alexander’s cultural sociology.

This work conceives of fame, including modern celebrity, as a process of social construction of reputation. It entails rejecting the so-called subjectivist position, which suggests looking for the source of fame in the outstanding achievements, talents or abilities of the famous person. Instead, the attention has been given to the cultural conditioning determining the manner in which a person was brought to fame. Here, fame refers to the creation of audience tastes priming it to consume certain aesthetic means (newspapers, books, rumours) that contain certain symbolic messages (a vision of success or other form of exemplarity, a hope for the future). The famous individual’s role is to give cohesive frame to the process. In this sense, understanding fame comprises three research tasks: firstly, examining the circumstances that laid the ground for a person to become famous, such as the shaping of audience preferences; secondly, analysing the course of distinguishment, mapped by the media, the actors, and the events involved in it; and thirdly, investigating the symbolic level on which fame operates, i.e. the manner in which an audience reads and makes sense of it.

Placing the fame process within the cultural background of individual actions, rather than the actions themselves, entails a certain reversal of the classic approach to the sources. For one, it brings the attention to the sources often considered misleading and distorting the facts about an individual life, such as to journals and magazines, popular poetry, cheap literature, reports

of opinions and rumours, memoirs, early biographies, and to some extent to correspondence and iconography. When trying to establish how opinions about famous figures were shaped, these kinds of sources constitute outstanding material, even if the opinions they present are exaggerated, based on falsehoods, or mutually exclusive. Furthermore, this use of sources counters a traditional biographical perspective. Sources produced by or directly pertinent to the central figure's life are used only as a supportive material. It is simply much more important in understanding fame to consider what was written about a figure, despite falsehoods and conjectures often contained in such opinions. Such a perspective can be called 'anti-biographical', and the entirety of the work may be treated as a collective and comparative anti-biography.

Below, the comparative approach is utilised when the particular elements of the fame process in each case are analysed in conjunction. The point of such a comparison is to distinguish meaningful similarities and differences at each stage of the process. Effectively, it is possible to determine to what extent philanthropic celebrity was uniform across cases and constituted a single phenomenon with different manifestations.

Structure and main findings

The dissertation is divided into four Parts (I-IV).

Part I, the 'Life of fame', is dedicated to introducing the selected figures as well as to determining some basic facts about their social distinguishment. Its aim is to establish when and to what extent did they become famous, and to point at the key situations when they attracted public opinion as philanthropists.

Chapter 1 links John Howard's philanthropic renown to the years 1773-1790, when he undertook his self-imposed mission to inspect British gaols, followed by the inspection of other penitentiary institutions, hospitals, and lazarettos throughout Europe. Initially, an important role was played by Howard's celebrated testimonies in the Parliament and the resulting fascination of the press, then carried into pamphlets, poetry, and early biographies dedicated to the philanthropist. The gradual increase of Howard's popularity can be divided into three stages: the initial curiosity he gave rise to as an expert witness between 1773 and 1779, the flourishing of his image as a philanthropist in the 1780s, and the early posthumous discussions about his heritage in the 1790s.

Chapter 2 describes the popularity of Jean-Frédéric Oberlin as crucially connected to his pastorship and his efforts to improve the life in the village of Waldbach (present-day Waldersbach) in the Alsatian valley of the Ban de la Roche. Although he had been engaged in these activities since 1766, the pastor became better known to the French public only at the end of his life. His wider fame exploded directly in reaction to him being awarded a golden medal by the Paris-based Société Royale d'Agriculture in 1818. A particular trigger was the report on Oberlin's achievements composed by François de Neufchâteau that stimulated the interest of journalists and literati, and consequently created a vogue for the pastor resulting in a number of secular pilgrimages to the distant Waldbach.

In turn, the philanthropic face of Stanisław Staszic described in chapter 3 fed on the relationship between him and the people of Warsaw that emerged since he moved to the city

at the beginning of 1800s. This image emerged firstly among some Warsaw students as well as among members of the Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk ('Society of the Friends of Learning'), and took a firmer shape in the 1820s in response to Staszic's donations and organisational work as a statesman. The moment when Staszic was decidedly framed as a philanthropist was just after his death, when the public announcement of his benevolent last will dedicating his entire wealth to charities and hospitals caused a media event. An outpouring of press notes, student poetry, and expressions of nationalism lasted for several months, resulting in a patriotic demonstration during his funeral, when he was hailed as a national hero, and some hasty reactions by the Russian authorities.

While Part I introduces the topic of the thesis, aiming to distinguish moments and issues of particular interest for the proper analysis, the subsequent sections have stricter analytical goals related to the respective stages of fame process, i.e. the circumstances surrounding the emergence, the mechanisms, and the symbolic reading of a famous person.

Part II titled 'Audience receptiveness' focuses on identifying the factors that impacted the creation of collective tastes and preferences facilitating the lionisation of philanthropists. Attention is given to the socio-historical settings directly preceding the moments when Howard, Oberlin, and Staszic gained attention in their respective public spheres.

Based on the new interpretation of secondary sources, chapters 4, 5, and 6 describe the changing attitudes towards philanthropy and towards celebrating great men that played a role in the social and political life of, respectively, the United Kingdom of the second half of the eighteenth century, Bourbon Restoration France, and the Polish lands under the Duchy of Warsaw and the Congress Kingdom of Poland before 1830. My analysis identifies a certain level of similarity between these seemingly different historical contexts. All three of these societies were undergoing a significant crisis of collective identity following recent wars and the consequent restructuring of society. In response to this situation, in each case there was a search for new forms of cultural expression that would mirror the new shape of the collective, especially in regard to the egalitarian ideals given prominence after the American or the French Revolutions. This was why, rather than turning to posthumous monuments to recall the old order, new exemplary figures were sought after in the public discourse based on the media and the idea of a civil society in which everyone's voice was supposed to matter equally. At the same time, in each of the aforementioned historical contexts, philanthropy was gaining traction as a force stimulating social cohesion, and sometimes as a platform of concordance for people of disagreeing political affiliations.

Part III focuses on 'Mechanisms of fame' that give insight into the course of the social distinguishment of famous philanthropists. However, the object of interest is not identification of the historical facts about each person, but rather the capturing of the specific character of fame in each case, or what Jeffrey Alexander called the 'aesthetic surface' of celebrity: determining the particulars about media behaviour, media events, and cultural intermediaries engaged in these activities as well as about the fashioning of the philanthropists, groups of their admirers, and the relationship between an admirer and an idol. Here, it is important to note what significance the mechanisms of the mediatised public sphere carried for the distinguishment of Howard, Oberlin, and Staszic.

The course of each process of achieving fame was characterised by a noticeable tension between the lofty meanings ascribed to the philanthropists as moral exemplars and the mediated form of their reception. However, apart from this tension, the specific modes of distinction were largely different in each of the cases studied here. The subsequent chapters analyse the symptoms of this tension in each context. In the case of Howard ([chapter 7](#)), it appeared throughout the discussions held about him in the press, especially during a 1786-7 controversy related to an idea of erecting a statue of the philanthropist and during a debate about glorifying his character in the light of his son's mental illness, as well as in the reports about Howard's fans' obsessions with him and the para-social relationship they seemed to have developed. [Chapter 8](#) points to similar themes recurring in the relationship Staszic had with his Warsaw audience. There, the key topics were the minister's self-fashioning during his public appearances, and his authority among the students and the youth. As I argue, the wave of media attention following Staszic's death and the solidification of his reputation into that of a philanthropist partly stemmed from the interaction between the image built by the minister and by his fans, who associated his appearances with theatrical performances. A much less direct interaction is described in [chapter 9](#), which shows the French fame of Oberlin as only marginally dependent on the press or public appearances. Rather, the tension between the old and the new modes of fame was realised on the pages of the popular travelogues, whose authors transposed their approaches to public figures, including the mechanisms of celebrity, onto the story about the secular pilgrimage and meeting with the fascinating hermit from the Ban de la Roche.

[Part IV](#), the 'Discursive return', comprises of the analysis of the discourse revolving around the philanthropic celebrities. The crux of the analysis is to recreate the symbolic meaning ascribed to the philanthropists. This entails paying attention not to the whole of the conversation, but rather to particular fragments of it that contain a commentary on the shape of the entire discourse and became reflexive, the fragments when the discourse returned to itself.

[Chapter 10](#) shows that the discussions about seemingly distant and unrelated philanthropic celebrities actually bore similarities so strong that they could be perceived as parts of the same discourse about one person, the emergent figure of the Philanthropist. Abstracting from three case studies, the chapter presents a number of features by which the model philanthropist could be defined: a status resembling secular sainthood, natural virtue as the source of philanthropic achievement, modesty and austerity in conduct, adaption of certain ideological tenets related to the Enlightenment, and personal tragedy as the main tool of projecting his psychological depth. Beyond identifying similarities in the symbolic readings of the philanthropists, this section also shows how they were symbolically embedded in the local contexts. [Chapter 11](#) describes the attempts made by some members of their audiences to legitimise philanthropic celebrity as a new type of fame. This often required creating folk theories about the history of fame, often turning into historiosophical teleology, and new narratives about the national or cultural identities which great philanthropists were to champion, promoting national renaissance or reconciliation.

The final part of this thesis, 'Conclusions', sums up its findings and suggest possible directions for further research. One of the key results is the successful linking of individual

philanthropic careers to the wider phenomenon of philanthropic celebrity, establishing it as having developed similarly in different parts of Europe, and identifying the degree of this similarity. The comparative analysis indicates strong analogies between the social settings (Part II) and between the symbolic readings in different cases (Part IV). The main differences pertained to the mechanisms of fame (Part III), and especially which media were involved in shaping the images of famous philanthropists. This suggests that the collective needs for lionising certain figures constituted a more important factor than the media fashioning, which could be understood to work as a catalyst rather than an engine of the process. The resultant picture of individual careers of philanthropic celebrities offers new insights into the question of why certain figures rather than others gain fame and a place in the collective imagination. Furthermore, the work demonstrates the potential of celebrity studies for historical research, offering historians a new conceptual anchor for the processes pertaining to the reception of modern philanthropy.