

Zsuzsanna Modla

Philanthropy as symbolic capital: Sinas, the “Golden man”¹

Abstract

This study attempts to introduce and analyze the phenomenon of social responsibility in the light of Bourdieu’s theory of capital to highlight that philanthropy can be a means of transforming economic capital into social capital.

According to my hypotheses, this symbolic practice is sometimes a strategic decision on the donor’s part – even though Bourdieu himself expressed his doubt about it². To deduce my theory some insight will be given into the activities of the Sina family – and par excellence Sina Simon – aiming to identify factors that can explain why only limited success crowned their intentions to be integrated into the Hungarian nobility.

Greek traders in Hungary - the beginnings

Greek merchants established significant commercial centers in Hungary from the 16th century. After Francis I. Rákóczi granted privileges to them in Transylvania in the first half of the 17th century, there was a significant increase in the Greek population of Northern Hungary in the second half of the century (Babanasis 2012). They played an important role in 18th-century Hungarian trade as well as in the development of early capitalism (Babanasis quotes Füves 2012) and urbanization. One of the sources of their wealth was the low tariffs³ established for them by the Peace of Pozsarevac (1718), confirmed in the Peace of Belgrade (1739), and this privilege was one of the main reasons why in the 17th

¹ Sina Simon's grandfather, sr. György Sina was one of the models for the protagonist of Mór Jókai's novel *The Golden Man*.

² He argues with historians who tend to “conceive symbolic practices as explicit strategies of domination, and to interpret generous or charitable conduct as ‘calculated acts of class appeasement’ (Bourdieu 1986:257)

³ Greek traders paid only 3% duty, while domestic traders were required to pay 1 / 30th of duty and a range of other taxes.

century almost the entire Hungarian trade was in the hands of the Greeks. (Later, the authorities of royal Hungary tried to take away some of their privileges by a series of decrees; this came to an end with the Decree of Loyalty (1774) (Babanasis quotes Füves 2012).) The large amounts of capital they raised was used in mainly three ways: they purchased land, house and nobility, they also gave loans and invested in factories, banks, and other businesses⁴, and they engaged in charitable, philanthropic practices: supporting the building of schools and churches, publishing Greek-language books and providing the salaries of teachers and priests.

Sponsorship, donation, charity - the Greek tradition

In the Greek history of the 18th-19th century, private donations were recorded in the following categories: national philanthropy, social charities, and private donations and sponsorships in the fields of culture, education and research, and healthcare. After all, all of them can be considered financial assistance (to individuals, ethnic and social groups, or public institutions) that involve a private intervention in public life (Chatziioannou 2012). Greek cultural history provides countless examples for traders living abroad who by donating posthumously join their national community because, as Chatziioannou points out, "charity is the terrain on which the nation-state's aspirations of unity and economic development meet the expectations of the private trader to gain national identity and social recognition" (Chatziioannou 2012:44-45).

Among the donors in the Greek diaspora, particularly in the Russian Empire from the 18th century a social archetype appeared: the „national benefactors”, whose primary goals were the support of education – both primary secondary and higher education, research institutes, specialized institutions, and libraries. In parallel, in the second half of the 19th century, a “new” form of private intervention emerged, somewhere between mercy and charity, as a form of social philanthropy: acts with collective responsibility and public benefit, such as support for hospitals, kindergartens, poor houses, prisons, but also theaters, music schools and museums (Chatziioannou 2012).

⁴ In 1793, 67 Greek merchants had houses and shops in Pest, while 35 Greeks acquired (bought) noble titles (Popovics 1997: 3).

The Sinas - role models for the “national benefactor”

“Science is power; a power which, on one hand, prevails over the soulless nature through research and inventions [...]”

(Baron Simon Sina’s letter to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 1858)

“The happiness of the peoples — the public welfare — lies directly in the education of the people themselves [...] – I am determined to promote the sacred purpose of school education [...] regardless of religious background, with incentives and scholarships, books and stationery...”
(introduction of Baron Simon Sina’s foundation established in the Gödöllő-Hatvan-Lőrinci estate)⁵

To these “national benefactors” – appearing in the territory of the Russian Empire – joined donor merchants from Ipiros (now northern Albania) and western Macedonia who later moved to the northern Balkans and Europe. Such figures were, among others, Apostolos Arsakis and Evangelos Zappas in Romania, Nikolaos Stournaris in Italy and the Sina family, most notably the representative of the third generation, Simon, who became a significant philanthropist in Hungary during the Dual Monarchy era (Chatziioannou 2012).

Under the leadership of György Sina Jr., Sina Bank reached the peak of its development. At that time perhaps their only real competition was the Rothschild banking house. György Sina was undoubtedly one of the engines of Hungarian economic development. As the manager of István Széchenyi's private property, he took part in the establishment of the Danube Steamship Company, was part of the Tisza regulatory plan, and – despite all their conflicts, presumably stemming from their different habits – the most significant project of the two men was the Chain Bridge that Széchenyi called “the child of theirs”. (Deák 2012:81)

⁵ In Hungarian: „A tudomány hatalom; oly hatalom, mely egy részről kutatásai s találmányai által a lelketlen természet felett vív ki mind több s több győzelmet s azt mintegy adózójává teszi, más részről fényt árasztó szövetnékénél fogva, a szellemi s erkölcsi világban szintűgy szétoszlattván lassanként a tudatlanság s előítéletek ködeit, midőn az értelmet fejti, a szívet nemesíti, a Valónak megismerésére s megkedvelésére vezet, egyszersmind a társadalmi hiányokból származó bajokat is orvosolja; s eképegyént, nemzetet s végre az egész emberi nemet azon tökély s boldogságra képes emelni, melyben az Alkotó eszes teremtményeit adományai által, ha ezekkel kellően élni tudnak és akarnak, e földön részesíteni kívánta.” (báró Sina Simon a Magyar Tudományos Akadémiához írt levele, 1858)

„Miután a népek boldogsága – a közjólét – egyenesen magában a népnevelésben rejlik: a magas kormány messzelátó bölcs intézkedéseit e részben is tehetségemhez képest őszinte jó szándékkal ohajtván támogatni és sikeresíteni – elhatároztam, hogy az iskolai nevelés szent célját, a jószágaimban létező iskolákban vallás különbség nélkül őszton és szorgalmi díjjakkal, könyvek és írószerekkel az alább írt feltételek alatt előmozdítsam...” (báró Sina Simon Gödöllő-Hatvan-Lőrinci uradalomban létrehozott alapítványának bevezetőjében)

Simon, the son of György Sina Jr., represented as it was said "the civic thrift and accuracy of the German as well as the chivalrous waste of the Hungarian" (Pulszky 1884:204). And most probably this mixed attitude made him one of the greatest Maecenas of Hungary. The careful upbringing certainly served as the basis for his interest in arts and sciences, and just like his father, he had a good relationship with Széchenyi. By helping to implement his ideas, Simon became one of the greatest patrons of the public institutions that emerged and began to flourish in the era. After his father's death in 1856, Baron Sina Simon became one of the richest lords of the Habsburg Empire— his inheritance amounted to about 80 million forints, and the land of the 29 family estates was 241,000 acres in total (Kerényi 2006:22).

The withdrawal from the economic life of the third generation of Greek, German and Hungarian wholesaler families alike was very common (Bácskai 2006). This was not the case with Sina Simon, although it is true that his aim was to increase social prestige rather than wealth, so he was no longer attracted to the opportunities inherent in business. For him, money was more of a tool with which he could live like a lord, and do good (Kerényi 2006) and gain social capital. He provided support in times of emergency (floods, fire, closure of factories) but also recognized the relevance of longer-term causes, so he subsidized economic initiatives such as the Hungarian Economic Association, founded in 1857, or the publication of Economic Magazines and the Budapest Review for years. As an enlightened, liberal⁶ nobleman Sina Simon found it important to make his landlords interested in generating profits and also cared for the further training of his employees. He understood the necessity of the cultural and intellectual development of the Hungarian people – he supported the National Theater, the College of Fine Arts, and the National Museum as well. However, his most important but interestingly not as famous donation is the amount that he provided to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. On August 14, 1858, he made an offer of 80,000 forints, which was the first and largest private donation and which greatly contributed to increasing the support of other wealthy people.⁷

⁶ During his university studies, he was greatly influenced by Ludwig Rembolt, who was later dismissed from the university for his liberal views (Kerényi 2006:21).

⁷ For eight years, the baron transferred 10,000 forints to the Academy's treasury each year, and the interest on the amount also belonged to the Academy, which has amounted to HUF 14,700 over the years.

In addition to public institutions, religious institutions could also count on the Sinas' help, regardless of their affiliation. Baron Sina Simon supported the construction of the Basilica, and also donated several times to the Evangelical and Reformed Church (Kerényi 2006). As a forerunner of his age – and in fact, even today – he considered the support of education to be one of the most important issues, so in addition to practical (e.g., horticulture, viticulture) education, he also monitored the operation of primary and higher education institutions. He considered it relevant to provide appropriate training for those who lived on his estate, so he often had children educated at his own expense, as did his wife. Baroness Sina provided education for 12 Catholic and 12 Helvic disadvantaged young girls (Kerényi 2006:28). Baron Sina Simon was also a classic Maecenas as he supported talented artists of his time, including Miklós Barabás. Among the several graphics and paintings the artist made for the Baron, the most significant is certainly *The Foundation of the Chain Bridge*, which Sina donated to the Gallery of the National Museum, which laid the foundation for his collection during these years.

According to the calculations of the contemporary Lőrinc Tóth, Sina Simon distributed donations in the total amount of 550,000 forints in the territory of the Monarchy from taking over her father's inheritance in May 1856 to March 1876 (Kerényi 2006:30). The Sinas were not only great benefactors of the Hungarian but also of the Greek nation. They donated the Athens Observatory and the Athens Academy to the Greek people – just to name a few.

György Sina Sr. wanted to become European: leaving the Ottoman Empire behind and founding the Sina trading house in Vienna – after renouncing his citizenship – he soon became the owner of the largest bank with business partners like the imperial court. In recognition of this, he was awarded the title of Austrian and later Hungarian Baron by Francis I of Austria. His son, György Sina Jr., used his wealth inherited from his father very well and made the family one of the most affluent and influential families in Europe. He considered himself a world citizen in the Habsburg Empire, but already practiced charity activity in Hungary. In 1838, for example, after the flood on the Danube, forty thousand forints were given to the flood victims, "with this amount, which doubled the royal gift, it ignited the private people's willingness to donate, which even the most arrogant did not dare to expect" (Némethy (ed.) 1938:97). The representative of the third generation, Simon, was a classical philanthropist who, as he believed in the Enlightenment, worked for a meritocratic world that could overwrite descent under the aegis of science. The

upward social mobility of the three generations of the Sina family was made possible by their economic capital and its “conversions”. In my opinion, in this process philanthropy played a decisive role.

The social capital and the philanthropy

“Innocence is the privilege of those who move in their field of activity like fish in water.”

(Pierre Bourdieu)

According to Bourdieu's theory, capital, which is “the principle underlying the immanent regularities of the social world” (Bourdieu 1986:241) could take various forms: not only economic, but symbolic, cultural, and social alike and they are somehow interchangeable.

Social capital is the totality of resources available as a result of belonging to a group (Galánati 2014), in essence the institutionalized (lasting) network connections and by a whole set of instituting acts designed simultaneously to form and inform those who undergo them (Bourdieu 1986:249). However, as Bourdieu points out, the existence of these networks is not a 'gift' but a continuous 'institutionalization activity', 'the product of individual or collective investment strategies', which are consciously or not, but sooner or later aimed at creating and maintaining socially beneficial relationships (Bourdieu 1986:249).

Philanthropy not only plasticizers the phenomenon of capital exchange – how money can become symbolic, social capital – but also offers a great example of Bourdieu’s intention, insofar as he – with his capital theory – seeks to point out things that may not appear at first glance or show some other quality. Behind certain seemingly unselfish prosocial actions that are supposed to focus solely on the other’s wellbeing, there may be other motivations in reality - sometimes not necessarily conspicuous even to the individual (donor), other times not at all.

Of all the types of capital, social capital requires the biggest capacity for abstraction – in fact even for the one who is enriching her/his social capital, it can remain hidden. In Bourdieu’s approach, the investment is not necessarily conceived as a calculated pursuit of gain, but that it has every likelihood of being experienced in terms of the logic of emotional investment, i.e., as an involvement which is both necessary and disinterested (Bourdieu 1986:257). In the case of charity-philanthropy, it might be reasonable to

presume some kind of acquisition, accumulation, and conversion of capital in the background: philanthropy can be a tool for symbolic capital acquisition, meaning the process of converting economic capital into social one in order to acquire or confirm the desired social status.

So-called trade charities have always been sources of symbolic capital in different ages and cultures as well: tools by which traders have facilitated economic exchange by supporting trade infrastructure while strengthening their leadership as members of a national-religious community and as a local elite (Peterson 2005:88).

It is possible that the Sinas' philanthropy may also have been driven by the interest, among other factors, in becoming a fully recognized member of the Hungarian aristocracy. (Or, they might have thought that if certain "circles," such as the enlightened cultural elite allows them to step into them, and in it, philanthropy has a prominent role, other networks could open up.) The exchange acts of economic capital are coordinated by the market. In the case of social capital, they are organized by reciprocal (ethical) coordination, where the essential value is reciprocity (Galántai 2014:647), social capital is generated and affirmed by exchanges. However, the generous economic, scientific, and cultural development activities of the Sinas at one point remained without reciprocity ...

The failed integration of the Sinas

Although in 19th-century Hungary the Sinas had unparalleled wealth and they showed enormous generosity and commitment either in economic or cultural fields, the family could not become fully embedded in the Hungarian society, even though [Simon] "rather wants to be a Hungarian landowner and patriot than a businessman and a world citizen" (Tóth 1876:16) - so they finally left the country after 1857.

The family with serious economic capital (as well as embodied, objectified and institutionalized cultural capital) was presumably predestined by a religion different from the majority - in accordance with the traditionally closed character both in thinking and in the value structure of the Hungarian society (Bíró-Nagy (ed.) 2016). But the success of their intention is also questionable from the point of view of Bourdieu's theory - due to the high cost of the work of transforming economic capital into social capital and also its undisguised nature. As Bourdieu suggested the different types of capital can be derived

from economic capital⁸ but only at the cost of a more or less great effort of transformation (Bourdieu 1986:252), which is needed to produce the type of power effective in the field in question – there are some goods and services to which economic capital gives immediate access, without secondary costs; others can be obtained only by virtue of a social capital of relationships (or social obligations) which cannot act instantaneously, at the appropriate moment (Bourdieu 1986:252).

According to Bourdieu, economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital, but its transformed manifestations can never be traced back to it. Capital can function most effectively when it is not recognizable as capital, that is, when its true nature is disguised⁹.

The truth is that in the case of the Sina family, even the long-standing and not necessarily self-serving philanthropic activity could not "disguise" that it was essentially rooted in economic capital. Which means that their other capital could not exert influence because their economic capital root was not adequately hidden – and this (also) could have hindered their full integration into the Hungarian nobility. As Antal Deák points out when he talks about György Sina and István Széchenyi's "special alliance" (marriage of convenience): "Széchenyi was an *earl* and Hungarian, Sina was a *banker* and Greek" (Deák 2012:81).

Certain social institutions – like the one that declares someone as part of the nobility – create a symbolic constitution filled with the alchemy of consecration (Bourdieu 1986:250), and it can be endlessly reproduced in and through the exchange (of gifts, words, women, etc.). These exchanges – that must be based on mutual knowledge and

⁸ I do not necessarily agree with the suggestion that economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital. In my opinion, being a member of a certain group and having an extended network, i.e., having a large amount of social capital, can be the basis for capital exchanges too. Indeed, belonging to a dominant group presupposes a large-scale possession of a capital, but this capital can also be a knowledge (the embodied state), sometimes an object (the objectified state), and the individual does not necessarily have to be wealthy... Networks (social capital), however, can realize opportunities where the possibility of certain capital exchanges arises, and even economic capital can be gained. Meanwhile, I agree that these transformed, disguised forms of economic capital are never entirely reducible to that. Indeed, they are able to produce their most specific effects only to the extent of their success at concealing (and not least from their possessors) the fact that economic capital is at their root.

⁹ In the Kabil society studied by Bourdieu, not only the capital, which is difficult to grasp economically at first, plays an important role but also the attempts at concealing or denying the capital per se. In an economy that defines itself by rejecting the 'objective' truth of 'economic' practices (i.e., the law of 'raw interest' and of the 'egotistic'), 'economic' capital can function only if it succeeds in having itself recognized by making the true principle of its efficiency unidentifiable through a transformation (reconversion): symbolic capital is denied capital, recognized as legitimate, i.e., unidentified (*méconnu*) capital (Bourdieu 1980: 200, cited in Némedi 2004: 27).

recognition – implied and reproduce the group and reaffirm the limits of it – in trade and in marriage alike. The Hungarian nobility, as the “guardian of borders,” found that the “newcomer to the group” Sinas could jeopardize the criteria for belonging to a group, “since any form of misalliance can change the group if it changes the boundaries of legitimate exchanges” (Bourdieu 1986:250).

There were times when social capital was separated from economic capital - impoverished nobles could easily gain access to public office, while wealthy citizens could only be an exception (Galántai 2014:647). In the lifetime of the Sinas – in much of the modern age – although we can speak of the dominance of economic capital, which ultimately made the family noble and then baron, it could not have had an effect beyond one point: Sina Simon's daughter did not find a husband among Hungarian nobles and they did not develop a “brotherly kinship that has long been key in the relationship of aristocratic families” (G. Merva (ed) 2007:177). As a result of the disadvantageous marriages of the girls, the immeasurable wealth of the Sinas faded by the early 20th century.

In this way, the history of the family is also a symbol of a failed capital conversion.

Conclusion

Beyond one's altruism there are different motifs. Agreeing with Bourdieu I do not think that philanthropy – the Sinas' or others – only can be described and interpreted as a hypocrite act: "it is a naively Machiavellian view that forgets that the most sincerely disinterested acts may be those best corresponding to objective interest" (Bourdieu 1986:257). However, I do not agree with the statement that “a number of fields, particularly those which most tend to deny interest and every sort of calculation guarantees success, only to those who distinguish themselves by the immediate conformity of their investments, a token of sincerity and attachment to the essential principles of the field” (Bourdieu 1986:257).

In my opinion “sense of investment” (Bourdieu term) has relevance: charity is a great investment. Certain kinds of acts, like volunteering in a highly prestigious NGO or entering a circle of major donors, are enabling one's presence in circles that foster the accumulation of social capital. Whereas emphasizing the donor role leads to symbolic capital: respect given by the society and this hidden capital is also able to produce economic capital. Sina Simon possesses this Bourdieu suggested sense – he was one of

those noble-minded Hungarian lords, whose first and last thought was the prosperity of his homeland and nation. It is sad that the homeland and nation did not appreciate it much. And as I tried to point out, in the absence of being accepted by the society perhaps not only the religious-ethnic factor but also certain other factors played a role – factors discussed by Bourdieu’s capital theory.

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