



Gabriel Godeffroy

The idea of Central Europe in the life and work of Elemér Hantos (1880-1942)

Summary

Following the collapse of Austria-Hungary, as from 1918, which also resulted in the disintegration of its economic area, the Successor states experienced a structural economic crisis, accentuated by their protectionist and nationalistic economic policies. To find a solution to this situation, the Hungarian economist Elemér Hantos proposed the reconstruction of the economic area of Austria-Hungary, extended to the new borders of its Successor states, without restoring the old political order. Hantos envisaged not only an economic, customs and monetary union, but also a common policy in the fields of transport and communications, and of agriculture.

From September 1925, Elemér Hantos participated in the activities of the Central European Economic Congress in Vienna, which annually brought together free trade advocates, especially economists, businessmen and politicians, to discuss the conditions of economic rapprochement in Central Europe. Within this organisation, the debates focused on the “Austrian question”: Austria with the Successor states or with Germany? As the Central European Economic Congress was progressively becoming an organisation in favour of the economic attachment of Austria to Germany, Hantos founded the Central European Institutes in Vienna, Brno and Budapest to continue promoting his Central European project.

Elemér Hantos envisioned the economic unification of the Successor states of Austria-Hungary as a first step towards the economic unification of the whole of Europe. Within the Pan-European Union of Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi and the International Committee of the European Customs Union, he defended a regionalist approach to European economic integration. For Hantos, the Successor states were supposed, in a second phase, to merge with other regional groups, notably with a “Western bloc”, composed of France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg, to create a large European economic area.

In the context of the international economic and financial crisis, which was particularly acute in Central Europe, the great European powers looked for solutions to reorganise the Central European economy. Following the announcement of the Austro-German customs union project in March 1931, France presented, in March 1932, a Danubian project for the economic unification of the Successor states of Austria-Hungary, with the aim of preventing from the economic and political attachment of Austria to Germany. From 1934 onwards, the economic unification of the Danubian area appeared as a means of resisting the expansionism of National Socialist Germany in Central and Eastern Europe.

In my doctoral thesis, I have studied the history of the idea of Central Europe through the life and work of Elemér Hantos. In the spirit of the “French school” of History of International Relations, and more specifically of the research work on “economic circles and European integration”, I have analysed not only the “conceptual schemes” to which the idea of Central Europe “gave birth”, but also the “circles and movements” that “carried” the idea of Central Europe into the political decision-making spheres. My innovative and original biographical approach has enabled me not only to reveal a transnational network of supporters of the idea of Central Europe in three different periods, but also to fill the historiographical gap on the idea of Central Europe in the Successor states of Austria-Hungary in the 1920s and 1930s.

Keywords

Central Europe – Danubian area – Paneurope – League of Nations

Austria-Hungary – Successor states – Free trade – European integration

Central European Economic Congress – Central European Institute – Paneuropean Union – European Customs Union