

Csák, János Zoltán. 2022. *Az amerikai géniusz* (The American Genius). Budapest: MCC Press Kft. 136 pp.

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This slim, small-format book occupies a curious intermediate position between two distinct genres: the subjective essay and the academic study. Its overall approach is eminently interdisciplinary, adopting a predominantly historical perspective while utilizing ideas and insights from philosophy, sociology, psychology, economics, political science, and even theology. The author, János Csák, is a person of versatile talents: the bio on the book jacket introduces him as an “economist-sociologist” who possesses an honorary professorship, but one who built his primary career in business, holding top positions in major Hungarian companies in the 1990s and the 2000s. He also entered a stint of diplomacy as the ambassador of Hungary in the United Kingdom (2011–2014). While the bio makes no mention of it, it may be of interest that Csák is currently (since 2022) Minister of Culture and Innovation in the Hungarian government.

In the brief foreword, the author reveals his strong and deep devotion to the culture and history of the United States, which he had the opportunity to discover during his many visits to the country, as well as his studies at the University of Michigan Business School in 1996 and during his stay as visiting researcher at the Heritage Foundation and the Acton Institute in Grand Rapids, Michigan in 2009–2010. He makes it clear that his book is written from the position of a benevolent observer who admires the foundational values and the spectacular achievements of the USA, but who is also concerned about the future of the nation, partly because, as he writes, “In America, the movie about the future of Europe is being played” (p. 9, my translation). In the introduction, he explains his main motivation for writing this book, which is that while the United States has produced amazing accomplishments during its more than two centuries of national existence, the country displays clear signs of crises. The signs are declining economic growth, weakening social cohesion, failures in foreign policy, increasing political tribalism, and strong disagreements about the future direction of the nation. Csák believes that these problems are not unique to the US but manifest themselves in most Western countries. His main project in this book, in his own words, is to locate what he calls the “American genius” (pp. 16–19), a kind of spiritual heritage and cultural mentality that has characterized the United States throughout most of its history, with each chapter of the book focusing on a particular aspect of this difficult-to-grasp essence of “Americanness.”

Based on the introduction, the reviewer expected a predominantly subjective, essayistic approach to the various manifestations of the “American genius.” Csák’s book has proven both more and less than that: while it does maintain a clear and strong authorial voice throughout, it exudes an aura of objective scholarly aspirations, carefully indicating the sources of specific data

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and quotes. All the while, it displays less focus and consistency in its treatment than what the introduction would have one believe.

Chapter 1 discusses the origins of the United States, concentrating primarily on the heritage of the New England Puritans and the ideas of the Founding Fathers, organized around the key concepts of equality, justice, and ordered liberty, especially as they are manifested in the US Constitution—although the author explores the principles of the founders in general and mentions the Constitution only as an afterthought, on page 36, which diminishes the paramount importance of the document as the cornerstone of the current American system of governance. Chapter 2 addresses the “theology of the United States” (p. 37), under which heading the author examines the ideas of nationhood from the founders’ generation up to the early twentieth century. He argues that the founders believed in a divine mission for their nation; however, that conviction evaporated as the US became more mixed in its ethnicity and culture due to successive waves of immigration, so new ideas had to be invented. He cites two of them, the “manifest destiny” of the 1840s, born out of the desire to conquer the American West, and the “melting pot” of the early 1900s, which reflected an idealized concept of nationhood, fashioning a new kind of unity out of its heterogeneous population. Csák does not dwell on these concepts very long, though, merely observing that they both reflected a widespread sense of exceptionalism, which was demonstrated by, among other things, Woodrow Wilson’s declaration during World War I that the United States has a mission to bring peace and justice to the world.

While the first two chapters follow each other in chronological succession, chapters 3 and 4 both surprise the reader. The former is a brief, objective, and data-heavy summary of the impressive economic, social, and military development of the United States throughout its history. Clearly benefiting from the author’s economic expertise, it warns that the continuing federal budget deficit and ballooning pension and healthcare costs greatly limit the amount of discretionary spending by Congress and thus constrain meaningful political decision-making for the future. Chapter 4 is a lucidly written summary of what the author calls the “internal moral contradictions of the American experiment” (p. 57), or the long and dark history of discrimination, suppression, and persecution of Blacks and Native Americans by the white majority. While this historical detour is no doubt justified to provide a balanced account of America’s past, it remains unclear how it contributes to a better understanding of “the American genius.” Perhaps Chapter 5 is meant to provide the explanation, by focusing on the inherent contradiction between the idealized self-image of America as an exceptional nation and its many historical crimes and moral lapses. The author evokes the psychological concept of cognitive dissonance to account for this phenomenon and cites famous speeches of Abraham Lincoln to showcase a rare example of a major American politician fully aware of the moral controversies involved in utilizing brute force in service to noble aims. Yet this chapter seems to end rather inconclusively, despite quotes from such a wide array of sources as Thucydides, Tocqueville, and Jefferson.

The book concludes with chapter 6, which promises to be the most exciting chapter for a nonspecialist reader, as it discusses the “American genius today or ideas about America’s present and future” (p. 95). The author presents a strongly critical assessment of the contemporary political climate in the US: he condemns the “barren culture wars” (p. 118) both parties partake in, and castigates the general inability of the American political class to engage in meaningful debates about the strategic issues faced by the nation, such as the future of marriage and the family, state and federal support for children, the decline in social mobility, consensus-based regulation of legal immigration, and the like. While he is fully justified in much of his criticism,

this chapter regrettably abandons the predominantly objective and balanced tone of discussion characterizing most of the book in favor of a rather partisan appraisal of the current American political situation. The author characterizes Democrats as representatives of the "Puritan-Jacobin-Marxist-left liberal" (p. 96) worldview—an improbable combination of adjectives clearly implying an unfavorable opinion of this political side as a whole—while Republicans are described as the flag bearers of "Biblical-classic liberal-republican-conservative" values, an array of positive attributes. The Democrats' worldview is illustrated by Herbert Marcuse and Saul Alinsky, left-wing thinkers and activists from the 1960s, and Hillary Clinton's 1969 BA thesis on Alinsky also receives an honorary mention, while vital Republican ideas are represented by Ronald Reagan and major contemporary conservative think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, and the American Enterprise Institute. Such a contrast appears distinctly unfair, as if two marginal figures from half a century ago would accurately represent the variety of views and opinions of twenty-first century Democrats, while similarly controversial characters could easily be selected from the Republican side as well, beginning with former President Donald Trump, whose name the book never mentions. Whatever one may think of the current political climate in the US, it is unfortunate to present such a skewed comparison between the opposing political blocs as if only one of them stood for all the fundamental American values, while the other is bent on subverting and destroying them. Although the author urges a renewed national discussion about the crucial issues of America's future, his overall argument seems to suggest that he considers the left side of American politics to be able to contribute very little to such a conversation.

In his conclusion to chapter 6 and in the brief epilogue, the author takes an unequivocal stand in support of the foundational ideals and moral values of the United States and singles out the family, educational institutions, and churches, as well as the government as the main custodians to pass on these values to future generations. He also repeatedly criticizes the cult of wealth and money in America as detrimental to the preservation of these social values and issues some dire warnings regarding the nation's future if the current bitter political conflicts further intensify, not even excluding the separation of certain states from the union. His final sentence is a paraphrase of the famous line of the Hungarian poet János Batsányi (1763–1845): "Cast your watchful eyes over America!" (p. 122)

In summary, the book's main value is its thoughtful and mostly balanced but predominantly positive appreciation of the major impact of the United States on the world, especially on Western civilization. Csák is an unabashed transatlantist and a cultural conservative in his political sympathies, one who is rooting for the continuing success of the United States as the vanguard of the West. His wide erudition is on display throughout, and his critical insights invite reflection as well as occasional dissent. All in all, the book provides an engaging brief introduction to and interpretation of the past development of the United States, but the lack of even-handedness in its diagnosis for America's current problems detracts from its value as an objective assessment of the country's present and future.