

Imagining America in 2033: How the Country Put Itself Together after Bush
Herbert J. Gans
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The University of Michigan Press

**IMAGINING
AMERICA
IN 2033**

BOOKS BY HERBERT J. GANS

The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans
(Free Press, 1962; updated and expanded edition, 1982)

The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community
(Pantheon Books, 1967; Columbia University Press, 1982)

People and Plans: Essays on Urban Problems and Solutions
(Basic Books, 1968)

More Equality
(Pantheon Books, 1973)

Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste
(Basic Books, 1974; revised and updated edition, Basic Books, 1999)

*Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News,
NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*
(Pantheon Books, 1979; 25th anniversary edition,
Northwestern University Press, 2004)

Middle American Individualism: The Future of Liberal Democracy
(Free Press, 1988; paperback, Oxford University Press, 1991)

*People, Plans, and Policies: Essays on Poverty, Racism, and Other National Urban
Problems* (Columbia University Press and Russell Sage Foundation, 1991)

The War Against the Poor: The Underclass and Antipoverty Policy
(Basic Books, 1995)

Making Sense of America: Sociological Analyses and Essays
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Democracy and the News
(Oxford University Press, 2003)

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HERBERT J. GANS

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ANN ARBOR

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IN MEMORY OF MARTIN MEYERSON (1922–2007),
MENTOR AND FRIEND—WHO FIRST ENCOURAGED
ME TO THINK CREATIVELY ABOUT THE FUTURE

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PREFACE

As the title suggests, this book is an imagined history of the first third of the twenty-first century. It describes an extraordinary period in American life in which the country put itself back together after the political and economic disasters to which it had been subjected at the start of the century. The history is selective, for it reports mainly on the major public policies of the period and the politics that help make these possible.

America in 2033 boasts a fairer economy, a more democratic polity, and institutions that cater to a greater extent to the people they are supposed to serve. Inequalities of class; race; gender; and, of course, power remain. Old problems have not disappeared, and new ones appear all the time, but American society is less polarized, its people freer from anger and paranoia and more trusting of others, including the government. For the moment even the world is nearly peaceful.

Some of the policies that have brought about the imagined better future are new, some are familiar, but they address many of the

primary issues that I think will be facing America in the coming years. My history focuses especially on the period between 2012 and 2032, when most of the national rebuilding takes place.

To bring that history to life, I have imagined four presidential administrations: those of James Caruso (2012–20); Frank O’Hara (2020–24); Susan Gordon (2024–32); and Stephen Hernandez, who has spent his first year in the White House when the book ends. All but O’Hara are Democrats, although of a somewhat different stripe than now existing party leaders. That all but one is liberal reflects a hopeful opinion about the future of American liberalism. (None are intended to resemble anyone living or dead.)

For brevity’s sake, I have omitted the contributions of individuals, agencies, and groups who were responsible for most of the ideas and the work for which the four leaders received or took credit. The ordinary citizens and interest groups that pressed the politicians for innovation and change and for some of the specific policies discussed here have received less than their due as well.

When all is said and done, however, and as the Bush era demonstrates once more, innovation generally is formulated from the top, by the expert and other functionaries embedded with the politicians whose values, ideas, and electoral ambitions make new programs and policies happen.

A supportive polity is also needed—one reason the history devotes a chapter to the improvement of representative democracy. And since I sought to foresee a better future, the book’s polity may be more supportive, and political opposition to desirable policies more easily defeated, than in the real world. True, imagining that corporate executives and Wall Street financiers can sometimes act on their long-term interests or that they can be defeated politically may be *too* utopian. However, even they are influenced by structural changes in the society.

The structural changes that are already visible include global and national forces that will spread current reductions in job security and wages to yet other Americans, even as the prices of all forms of energy and many other necessities continue to rise.

As a result, the economy in which ordinary people live will require government help, particularly the retail economy on which so much of the overall health of the American economy now rests. Washington will have to put money in the pockets of consumers

and other customers, for example by creating better jobs and other income supports for them. Indeed, the big retailers and industries that depend on them will lobby the government for such programs, pressure it to take health insurance off their shoulders, and practically force it to create a twenty-first-century welfare state.

Government will have to find the money, partly by reducing defense and other budgets. Later in the period about which I am writing government will need to complement and replace services now supplied by profit-making enterprises, look for ways of stimulating labor intensive economic growth, and levy more progressive taxes. The politicians I have imagined to be sitting in the Oval Office will not understand all the forces with which they have to cope and the structural changes that influence their policies, but they will know what they must do to hold on to their voters.

Although I write mainly about successful policies, I have included some promising ones that have so far been too impractical or unpopular to survive the political process. I include them because their time may yet come or because I wish it would come.

Conversely, the history leaves out the prosaic policies, routine politics, and customary ceremonies that always take up much of the time of the country's leading public officials. In addition, I slight the double-dealing, the backstabbing, the sexual and other affairs, the petty corruption, and the larger thefts of public funds and goods that are endemic to politics. Readers can imagine them or find them in the histories of earlier periods.

Being a sociologist and a social planner, I write with the frames and approaches of these disciplines. Sociology provides many of the analytic tools, including projection and extrapolation, but social planning offers the opportunity to predict and the freedom to imagine. Although both sometimes seek to predict the future, this book does not, instead mixing estimation, projection, and imagination. Since the history is written for general readers I have, however, kept the language free of technical qualifications and jargon.

ORIGINS

I have wanted to undertake this project for a long time. Like others of my age, I was fascinated by Edward Bellamy's utopia *Looking Back-*

ward: 2000–1887 when I was in high school, although by the time I was in college, I understood its many shortcomings. In graduate school I started thinking about someday writing what I called a realistic utopia, in which credible people, grappling with standard economic and political obstacles, were creating a better future. I was encouraged in this project by my two primary mentors, Martin Meyerson and David Riesman, both of whom were active in the post–World War II revival of interest in utopian planning.

A quarter century later, in the dark days of the Nixon years, I started to make notes for my realistic utopia. Another quarter of a century and another dark period later, I started once more and then began in earnest about the time the Supreme Court elected George W. Bush president in 2000.

The final product is not a utopia, however, because I never thought to describe a perfect and henceforth unchanging society. Nor does it quite fit the futurists' project, which emphasizes technological innovation.

Be all that as it may, I believe that imagining the future is a useful public and scholarly activity for sociology and the other social sciences—although not only for them. Every society needs to think seriously about the future and should be discussing alternative desirable futures in the appropriate policy and political arenas.

Finally, the question I was often asked when writing the book: why 2033? Originally I was going to end the story in 2050, but I could not project trends, consider the new technologies and social structures that might have appeared by then, or imagine the better society that far into the future. Once I stipulated that about a quarter century from now, the country's economy, polity, and other social structures would still resemble today's, 2033 seemed a more credible end point.

Actually, many of the changes I write about are only beginning to be implemented when my story ends, and some might take decades to come about, but remember that 2033 is an imagined date in this imagined history. Readers who are more concerned with the present should feel free to ignore 2033 and other dates, imagine the policies and politics in a contemporary setting, and think about them accordingly.

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Over the years many people, too many to mention, have helped with ideas and information: innumerable authors of books, reports, articles, blogs, and scripts that I read for my book, as well as friends and colleagues with whom I have talked about bits and pieces of the work.

However, I am particularly grateful to the late Peter Marris and to Frances Fox Piven, who read the entire manuscript, and to the people who commented on individual chapters: Leon Deben; Arlie Hochschild; Jeffrey Madrick; Peter Marcuse; S. M. Miller; Gary Sick; and my son, David. My wife, Louise, was as always my most demanding critic.

The book could not have been completed without the continued enthusiasm and moral support of Philip Pochoda, the director of the University of Michigan Press, who ignored the fact that it does not fit into any of publishing's established pigeonholes. Thanks also to his staff, especially those who provided twenty-first-century technical help to an author from the twentieth century: Sarah Remington; Christina Milton; Mary Bisbee-Beek; and my copy editor, Andrea Olson, whose close reading produced more clarity in my writing and fewer inconsistencies and mistakes in the narrative. I must take credit for the remaining mistakes.

New York City
October 2007