

## **Q&A with Herbert Gans, author of *Imagining America in 2033: How the Country Put Itself Together after Bush***

Herbert Gans is one of the most influential and prolific sociologists and social commentators of our time. He is the author of *Imagining America in 2033: How the Country Put Itself Together after Bush*.



Part utopia, part realism, *Imagining America* is set mostly in the second and third decades of the century. It offers a set of progressive yet practical guidelines for restoring sanity and intelligence to nearly every aspect of life post-Bush.

In Gans's imagined future, elected officials, policymakers, activists, and citizens have transformed America into a much more humane and effective democracy. The book features three Democratic presidents; the major new domestic, foreign, and social policies their administrations pursue; and the political battles they fight.

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### ***The University of Michigan Press: What is your book about?***

**Herbert Gans:** It is a portrait of an achievable better society, and one that suggests fixes for the political, economic, and other missteps and mistakes that the country's political and economic leaders—and voters—have made since the beginning of the Reagan era.

It is also a book that describes some new and familiar but yet untried public policies and political strategies for a variety of fields, from domestic and foreign affairs to world peace, global warming and energy use, inequality reduction, family life, housing and community planning, education and the democratization of politics as well as the economy. All are intended to get the country on the right track.

### ***UMP: Why this book now? What was your inspiration for writing it?***

**HG:** Many years ago, in high school or college, I read Edward Bellamy's 1887 utopia, *Looking Backward* and was much impressed by his portrait of Boston in the year 2000 as an egalitarian, pleasant, comfortable, and cultured community. It was also an impossible community: the economy was run by an industrial army in which everyone served but only for a few years, resources for public and private initiatives were unlimited, everyone agreed about every issue

so conflict was absent, politics was unnecessary, and the community was ruled by a council of wise elders. Consequently I thought I would someday write a realistic utopia, describing a better society but one in which scarcities, disagreements, inequality, ugly politics, and other of the realities humans actually live with remain and have to be dealt with.

Bellamy wrote mostly about what America was like in 2000 and said comparatively little about how it got there; I wanted to describe a process of betterment. More important, I wanted to write a book that could be read as a commentary on today's America and that allowed me to describe some of the policies and politics needed now. 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.

***UMP: You call the book a "realistic utopia" and its title page describes it as a "utopian narrative." Tell us more.***

**HG:** According to the Oxford English Dictionary, utopias are, among other things, perfect societies or impossibly ideal ones. I go with the latter definition though I would put the word "unachievable" after ideal. A realistic utopia, although literally oxymoronic, portrays a society that is considerably better than the current one but is achievable through current forms of policy making and democratic political reform.

Describing the book as a utopian narrative signifies that although it is about an imagined society and is thus literally a fiction, it is not the work of a novelist. Instead, it is the work of a social scientist and planner who has combined analysis and imagination. At one point I thought of calling it a policy fiction. I suppose a narrative is something somewhere between non fiction and fiction. Still, readers should be free to ignore 2033 and other future years and treat it as a book about today's America.

***UMP: What does a good utopian narrative do?***

**HG:** I can't answer this one; this is what the literary critics write about though I notice that while they bewail the scarcity of utopias they do not produce any. In fact, just about all writing about the imagined future these days is dystopian and has been for a long time; one horror story after another and a further reason I wanted to write this book.

***UMP: : From the subtitle alone—"How the Country Put Itself Together after Bush—it sounds like you don't think much of the Bush II administration.***

**HG:** No, but I am hardly alone in thinking that Bush has been the country's most disastrous president and that he and his crew have badly damaged the

country in a number of ways. Still, it is not a major point of my book—and so many books offering that critique are being published all the time—Bush's former press secretary's as I write this. I would not have ended up with a very different book had I begun and finished it during the Clinton years.

***UMP: Would any of the major events that occurred after your book came out—the economics of petroleum-based society, the housing and credit crises—have changed the course of how your book was written? Or would they have?***

**HG:** The book would not have changed. Several chapters deal with the various energy, climate and other environmental crises—somewhere I mention \$8-10 a gallon gasoline. The current housing crunch is mentioned but I think of it as a temporary bubble (perhaps to be followed by other bubbles later). There's a more important phenomenon that should have received more attention in the book: the ever greater power of speculators (hedge funds is the polite term) in the economy.

***UMP: Are there some aspects of human culture or society that you believe will never fundamentally change, no matter what political winds are blowing? Things like power and its acquisitions, money, economic inequality?***

**HG:** As long as needed resources are scarce, people will fight over them, through politics or with force. And as long as they get differential shares of those resources and occupy different positions in the hierarchical society that results, their values and expectations will differ, which adds further to the likelihood that they will fight for theirs and against those of other people—especially those they can dehumanize as foreigners, pagans, unworthy, subhumans, elitists, the great unwashed, etc.

***UMP: Do you subscribe to the idea that humankind generally—even taking into account the ebbs and flows—is a species that continually improves itself? Meaning are we more or less always getting better or improving ourselves, or is it two steps forward and three back?***

**HG:** We are told that as a species, humankind is eventually likely to be replaced by cockroaches. Meanwhile, some people and institutions bring about improvement, at the moment in the medical science and other natural sciences (although too many are also perfecting more efficient killing instruments). However, others—especially the Western European democracies—have created societies that are politically and economically more civilized than the U.S. (except in their treatment of dark skinned immigrants). But even as humans are getting technically smarter if not morally wiser, they are still puny animals who are no match for the colossus we call Mother Nature; all it takes are some earthquakes, a long lasting famine, a tsunami, some hurricanes or tornados or

the widespread flooding predicted when too much of the Earth's ice has melted for the few steps forward to be followed by many backwards. Genocides can still claim humongous numbers of victims but wars seem no longer to kill as many people as tsunamis, which is progress. (There's a whole chapter, No 3, much of which is devoted to the prevention of war and global disaster.)

***UMP: What are some of the scenarios in your book that you think may be more than utopian but actually implementable in the future?***

**HG:** The book is always a realistic utopia, and thus not a standard utopia populated by angelic humans realizing unachievable dreams. I tried very hard and very deliberately to limit myself to implementable scenarios and there are no economic, political and technological *dei ex machina* in the book.

***UMP: There's been some talk in the last few years about the end of the American era, so to speak. Even some talk about the end—or at least the decline of—the era of robust economies because of the rise in fuel costs due to demand, speculation, and "Peak Oil"; the globalized economy; and the seemingly global credit crunch brought on in part by the subprime meltdown. What's your take on that? Is the American period in some state of decline?***

**HG:** I did not think in terms of an American era, and since the long term economic downturn that began in the 1970s, there has been such an era only militarily which still persists as long as we wage unnecessary wars and spend as much on the military as the rest of the world combined. Standards of living are hard to measure but several countries, mostly in W Europe outrank us in the standard obtainable by their middle class or median income populations. Many have also virtually eliminated poverty—but they have used government to achieve progress while regulating private enterprise sufficiently to prevent it from sabotaging policies for a better life for ordinary people.

But perhaps a more important question to ask is, how can there be an American era when the Chinese are already lending us the money to keep our standard of living from declining further and the Saudis and a few others can decide whether to supply us with enough oil to enable the society to operate?

***UMP: What are some issues or subjects that you think might prove to be very important in years to come but that are perhaps "flying under the radar" at present?***

**HG:** That's a question for futurists, a profession that tries to predict the future, which I do not—my job has been to imagine it. Also, I am more worried about issues that are above the radar but that neither our economic nor political decision-makers—or the voters—are yet ready to confront; e.g. the growing economic inequality in the US and in the world which can only spur further

political conflict and violence. Also, the climatic and other emergencies which will eventually require a quick end to the excessive dependence on oil and on other global warming producing processes. That's one reason that long range planning and what I think I called a Council of Long Range Advisers show up in the book.

***UMP: Do you have a favorite utopian book yourself (even if things don't necessarily work out for the better in the book!)?***

**HG:** I retain a qualified fondness for Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, and also for Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, published in 1975, about the American Northwest's secession from the rest of the country in order to create what would now be called a completely green economy and society. It's as close to an almost realistic utopia as I have read.

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Read more about *Imagining America in 2033: How the Country Put Itself Together after Bush* at [www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=226276](http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=226276).