

DANIEL SWIFT ON LONDON'S HOUSING CRISIS

The *Evening Standard* is a squarish, excitable tabloid handed out for free in the London Underground every afternoon, and it's also a useful barometer of the city's sensibility. If you want to know what Londoners are worrying about, this is a good place to start. Until recently, its chief recurring story—amongst photos of American pop stars in the English rain and ads for Burberry overcoats—has been about how many bicyclists on London roads are squashed by trucks. This is a story in class-specific code. People who ride bicycles tend not to be of the same social class as people who drive vans associated with trades: plumbers, builders, any job that might require you to bring a lot of tools and materials with you. It's perfect snobbery. Who would not pity those elegant Ariels flying on bikes and being squashed beneath the grimy wheels of Caliban's truck?

But since the summer of 2013, this promising fairy tale has been supplanted on the cover of the *Evening Standard* by another recurring cause for concern: that of house prices rising at an unsustainable and absurd rate. By the end of 2013, it was revealed that the average house price in London had increased by 18% that year: which meant that the average home in London was increasing in value—or cost, depending upon how you look at it—by £1250 per week. This is, of course, considerably more than the average salary, and the *Evening Standard* and many other English newspapers began to write ominously and with increasing hysteria about this “housing bubble.”

The part of London that soon assumed a mythic status in the coverage of this crisis was the borough of Hackney, which is to the north-east of the center, an area of Victorian houses, parks, and slightly shabby gentility. It's an area in which my parents, when they bought a house in the early 1980s, would never have dreamed of looking. Here, in late 2013 and early 2014, house prices were rising by 23% per year, and the newspapers were soon filled with stories taking Hackney as a demonic emblem of all that was most vicious in the housing crisis: windowless basements sold to millionaires for cash; families forced out of the area where they had lived forever. A conventional article in the *Guardian* newspaper recently claimed that “London is being hollowed out, turned into a playground for international finance, its communities left to hang,” and went on to compare the rise in house prices in north-east London to the spread of the Ebola virus. The word itself—Hackney! What a terrible name—became the punchline to almost

any joke about the vacuity of modern London life. Now, I've made quite a few of those jokes myself, because in the early summer of 2013, just as the bubble was inflating and the news story moving into feverish high gear, I bought a flat in Hackney. I like to think of myself as a pioneer, even though I know that's almost certainly not the case. It's far more likely that I'm a metaphor.

* * *

As I walk around my new neighbourhood I come in time to believe that one way to read the progress of gentrification is by close inspection of the colours that people have painted their front doors. There is old Hackney, of those families who have lived in their houses for twenty years or more, and their doors tend to be primary colours: blue, red, children's paintbox green. Then there is the mid period of those who moved out here during the first sharp increase in London's property prices around the millennium, and their front doors are pastel, muted shades: dusty blue or murky green. Then there are the new arrivals, those houses which have recently changed hands, and often these newest doors are either black or matte grey.

We might see this as a shift in money mapped onto a movement away from colour, or we can put it another way: as these houses became more valuable, so their brightness—and that, by extension, of the neighbourhood—was felt to come from something intrinsic.

Faced with the housing crisis, everyone has moved into a new style of metaphorical thinking. The *Guardian* sends a journalist to follow an estate agent as he does his rounds on a Saturday, arranging viewings of terrible-sounding properties and making buyers feel anxious, and I smile at what a crook this man clearly is before I realise that he is the same estate agent who sold me my flat. Later, they run a piece about relative house prices in two different streets in England, one in a small town in Yorkshire and the other in a fashionable neighbourhood in London; the gimmick is that the two streets happen to have the same name, and that name is also the name of the governor of the Bank of England. How do you represent a housing bubble? The term "housing bubble" is already a metaphor, and whoever thought up the phrase must have been a genius: it's an image of frailty used to represent a crisis which in turn depends upon a failure of representation.

* * *

Cities have historically been a way to represent humanity's ideas about its own ideals and failings. Allegorical cities are always present in the Christian imagination: Think Sodom and Gomorrah, and then think of the Augustine who arranged human history around an ideal city. There are good cities and bad cities, each cluster of buildings inevitably becoming a symbol of something else and a way to compare. Often, when humanity has come to reflect upon the best and worst in itself, it has reverted to what Dickens called "a tale of two cities."

There are two street markets within a fifteen-minute walk from my new flat. Walking due east I pass a gloomy Victorian church and am soon on Ridley Road, where the metal stalls out on the street are covered in shallow plastic tubs filled with produce and each costing a pound: strawberries, bright lemons, plantains, okra. Here one may buy four types of mango, Thai rice, cheap phone calls to Nigeria; bright printed west African cloth in bales, saltfish, chow mein. This is where I buy eggs, onions, and Yemeni bread, and on this street is my local launderette. It's run by a smily, fair-haired Turkish man who is assisted on some days by an equally smily and elegant Iraqi. One day, as I am collecting my laundry, the Turkish man smiles and tells me how the neighbourhood has improved: that the Nigerians who used to wash their clothes here would complain about the prices and haggle over loose change, but now, with the new people in the area, he finds nothing but charm.

Walking south, over the train lines and through London Fields, I pass the cricket pitch where men still play in white and an open-air swimming pool. At the bottom of the oblong park is another pedestrian street: Broadway Market. Here, on Saturdays, the same metal stalls are full of fennel salami, alcohol-infused chocolate truffles, salt beef on rye and eight varieties of balsamic vinegar. This is where I come to buy fresh-roasted coffee in a blend of Ethiopian and Brazilian beans. The label on the brown-paper packet promises that this is "socially responsible" and a "Guilt-free pleasure!" I wonder which particular historical guilt these coffee beans will permit me to defer: the British empire? Global capitalism?

I walk past squid ink tagliolini and double-baked banana bread. Opposite the Vietnamese pho stall a man in a string vest and a fedora plays a bluegrass version of "The Teddy Bears' Picnic" on a double bass, and ten steps away is a sidestreet and council estate where signs announce closed-circuit cameras and anti-climb paint. Broadway Market is beyond satire

because it has already done the work itself. That is: satire takes real things and exaggerates them into symbols, but everything on sale here is already valued for its representative richness, for what it will say about its consumer. Exhausted by all this cultural criticism, I buy a tuna steak, marinated in soy and then flash-fried, served on gem lettuce instead of a bun. It's delicious, raw on the inside, scorched at the edge.

* * *

There are several ways to think about the ownership of property. The *London Review of Books*, in a recent essay on land ownership, quotes the historian Andro Linklater that since the early sixteenth century:

The idea of individual, exclusive ownership, not just of what can be carried or occupied, but of the immovable near-eternal earth has proved to be the most destructive and creative cultural force in written history. It has eliminated ancient civilisations wherever it has encountered them, and displaced entire peoples from their homelands, but it has also spread an undreamed-of degree of personal freedom and protected it with democratic institutions wherever it has taken hold.

John Locke argued that the preservation of property is the central reason for men to unite into a commonwealth, and that the rights of citizens in turn arise from the laws to defend property; and yet, the enclosure of common land, beginning in the same period, is also and equally obviously the first step to great unfairness. The private possession of property has for the last six hundred years in the west been the precondition for both freedom and oppression, for both democracy and enslavement, equality and oppression.

We can see this curious ambivalence in attitudes towards the ownership of property in current radical political movements. According to the "Declaration of the Occupation of New York City," which is the pamphlet-sized official manifesto of the Occupy Wall Street movement, the very first concern in their list of grievances against organised capitalism is: "They have taken our houses through an illegal foreclosure process, despite not having the original mortgage." This comes before any mention of bank bailouts, student debt, the manipulation of the media or the cost of wars. In Italy, the fascist group called "Casa Pound"—part of the rise of right-wing populist movements across Europe, such as Golden Dawn in Greece—takes

as a central complaint the rising costs of housing in Rome. One would think there could be no more bourgeois complaint than this, but questions about property ownership draw us directly into the heart of the western political imagination.

Thinking about property is another way of thinking through our roles and responsibilities in society. I hope so: hope, that is, the the movement of people around London's boroughs does not tend only towards unfairness, even as I know that each slice of fennel salami I enjoy has a larger cost, and that my Brazilian coffee beans are perhaps not quite as free from historical guilt as they promise. I came home a couple of months ago to find that the other people who live in my building had decided to repaint our front door without consulting me. I didn't really mind, because they've all been living here for a decade or so, while I only just arrived. But had I been asked I might have chosen a colour other than slate grey.

from **London Letter: Letter from Hackney (Salmagundi #184
// Fall 2014)**

DANIEL TORDAY ON LENA DUNHAM'S *GIRLS*

And while it's been written about ad nauseam and doesn't need me to weigh in on its epoch-defining quality, Lena Dunham's *Girls* has a similar capacity for experimentation and life. *Girls* is about a recent liberal arts school graduate named Hannah Horvath who wants to be an essayist. We watch as she and her friends struggle to maintain jobs and relationships. She does not hold herself aloof from anything or anyone—Dunham regularly disrobes, whether for sex or to bathe with friends (there is more bathtub-conversation-ratiocination in *Girls* than even Nathan Zuckerman could dream of). But the show's texture and Dunham's voice feel more alive than anything I've seen in some time. Season Two includes a stand-alone episode in which Hannah meets a successful doctor after she's been dumping trash (from the coffee shop where she works) into his trashcans. He is separated from his wife, and she spends a couple of days in his Brooklyn brownstone. She wears his robes, drinks his coffee, passes out in his steam room. There is a quiet intensity to these ~27 minutes that surpasses even Dunham's reputation-making debut film, *Tiny Furniture*. The most exhilarating aspect of that film was its perfect ending, and the ending of the Dr. Brownstone episode is better: after fighting with the doctor, she drops one last piece of waste in the trashcan outside his house.

“If a story is not always, therapeutically, an axe for the frozen sea within us,” Lorrie Moore writes, alluding to the sit-down comic Franz Kafka, “then it is at least a pair of brutally sharpened ice skates.” The characters in these shows may not want to *be* short story writers, but they act like they're *in* a short story. *Louie* is not unlike *Seinfeld*, depicting a stand-up comic in the mundanities of his New York life as a stand-up comic, but it is unlike *Seinfeld* in virtually every other discernible way. In *Seinfeld* and *Louie* and *Mad Men* (Megan Draper), the characters want to be on TV. In *Girls* they want to be Joan Didion.

***from* “Some Notes of a Fiction Writer in the Third Golden Age of Television” (Salmagundi #184 // Fall 2014)**

PROVISIONAL DOUBT AS AN ARCHITECTURAL SPACE

People make the mistake of thinking of impossibility
as if it were a corner visible dimly through a blanket

called “a failed way of thinking.” I see the impossible
as an example of the simulacra

that demands that you decide whether it is a new thing,
or simply the old thing emptied of itself.

Remembering the impossible is like remembering
a struggle that shows no signs of struggle but is a record

of a permanent closed door that always looks
as if it just happened. The scene is the early 1960s:

a room, a fog-gray wall, an absence of ambition
as a response to self-doubt. Along the way, the ceremony

of switching on a light, setting a table, the ordinary useless
shapes of the nonchalant. Meanwhile,

the room keeps disappearing like some relentless nothing.

— **Mary Jo Bang (Salmagundi #184 // Fall
2014)**

GARRISON KEILLOR ON BEING A MIDWESTERNER

I am from the Midwest and — and it's a useful disguise, it is a very useful disguise. I suppose that it's a matter of creating low expectations. And coming from a small town, even more so. It's my home. I think I have a limited interest in writing about it. Though I have been writing about it now for a long time. I like to — I like to get away from it. I love to get away from it. But I do find that when I get away from it, that I think even more about it. I went to Paris and Rome and Venice in August and a lot of what I thought about when I was walking around was about growing up in Minnesota. You have to get away from the Midwest to remember it, I think.

from **“Garrison Keillor: An Interview” (Salmagundi #184 // Fall 2014)**

NEW FICTION BY JOYCE CAROL OATES

As long as she isn't underage. We don't do underage.

A reputable tattoo shop also will not oblige customers who are obviously drunk, high, or mentally ill. Professional ethics!

Leanda wasn't drunk, and Leanda wasn't high. This was a fact.

Foxy Joe Hall had executed all three of Carroll's super-action-heroine manga-tattoos. These were smart, cool, sexy tattoos nothing like the black butterfly which was too girly for Carroll Johnston. Like black-lace lingerie Carroll wouldn't be caught dead in.

How's your tats? Enjoying them?

You know I am, Joe! Absolutely.

No one saw Carroll's tattoos except very special people. No one was so trusted except very special people. The stylish three-inch manga-tats were on her belly, on the inside of her left thigh, on her right buttock. Carroll was a solid-muscled girl of almost-thirty built like a Henry Moore sculpture. You might mistake her for hefty or overweight seen from a little distance but not up-close. She was plain-faced, snub-nosed, icy-blue-eyed, *cool*. Her hair was metallic-blond. In Vineyard Haven, Edgartown, and Chilmark she'd been going door-to-door that summer requesting signatures on a petition to recall those Martha's Vineyard officials who hadn't been vigilant enough regarding sand dune conservation and it was said Carroll Johnston was so forceful she'd accumulated more signatures than any other petitioner in memory.

These tats she'd had now for several years were kept secret inside her baggy clothing—cargo pants, T-shirts, prized old Dartmouth swim-team sweatshirt—if older family members/ relatives were anywhere near.

Carroll looked on while Foxy Joe worked his miracle-precision needle on Leanda's pale shoulder. The girl's skin did seem to him weirdly thin—the girl was *mixed-race*—some kind of Asian or South Pacific—but her skin was whiter than his. Delicate like silk a rough-calloused thumb could tear.

from "Things Passed on the Way to Oblivion" (Salmagundi #184 // Fall 201

DAVID BOSWORTH ON REAGAN AND THE GOLDEN GOOSE

Golden Goose: The Genialization of American Prosperity

Most of Reagan's political authority evolved from his unmatched capacity to connect with what his aides called "mythic America." But the myths he drew on were precisely the ones that the studio system had reduced to sentimental mush, and as a consequence of constantly searching for the electoral equivalent of box office draw, Reagan quickly adopted a series of policies which, taken together and "denying dilemma," made no more sense than the standard plot line of a Hollywood thriller.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the sheer unreality of the first Reagan budget, whose economic and political impact is felt to this day. A late but total convert to the happy-talk news of supply-side theory, Reagan proposed drastically cutting taxes (especially for the rich) while significantly increasing defense spending, even as he maintained the traditional conservative promises of balancing the budget and shrinking the federal government. How could such a seemingly self-contradictory agenda succeed? The eventual magic of supply-side's Golden Goose (its paradoxical promise to generate more tax revenues through cutting tax rates), when combined with a commitment to eliminate waste, was supposed to bridge the already enormous gap between income and expenditures. But following the politics of the ice cream parlor, Reagan (like every president before him) wouldn't touch the gargantuan entitlements of Social Security and Medicare which were the primary engines of federal expenditures. He even rejected an exceptionally rare proposal by Republican Senators to trim those popular programs' cost-of-living increases. Instead, his budgetary efficiencies focused on cuts in social services for the poor, which, whatever one thinks about them politically and morally, were entirely insufficient to the daunting task of controlling the federal deficit.

In a show of impressive political salesmanship, Reagan managed to sway enough Democratic congressmen to pass his program. But the results quickly belied the pot-'o-gold promises Sunny Jim had made. Reagan had won the election, in large part, because the country was already suffering from severe economic trouble, but his program only intensified the pain. Supply-side's goose, now federally endorsed, laid an egg all right, but it wasn't a golden one. The deficit soared; Reagan's more pragmatic aides began to insist, against their boss's wishes, that some of his tax cuts needed

to be reversed; and the country suffered its worst economic downturn since the great depression. The general result, if not its specific parameters, shouldn't have been surprising, for in precisely the terms we have been using all along, Reagan's first budget was a con. It was a manifestly fraudulent proposal which, enriching the relative few, could only be sold to Congress and the public by boosting their "confidence" in its impossible dream of an imminent and painless prosperity for all. Reagan, the son of small-town Dixon, Illinois, was proposing an economic program whose core logic was worthy of Jeremiah Dickson. Indeed, he one-upped the boy prophet of *both!* by promising *all three!*: reduced taxes, increased security, and an end to deficit-spending.

But the con worked, and largely because Reagan *was* the Great Communicator, just the sort of genial demagogue who could subvert common sense on behalf of make-believe. Eventually, given the near unanimity of his aides' concerns and the manifest gravity of the bad news, Reagan relented and small shifts in policy were made, including the passage of "revenue enhancements." The economy would return to prosperity, and just in time to secure his re-election; yet the route back wasn't the painless one promised, nor even the moderate "soft landing" that most realists aim for in times of economic downturn. Rather than the abracadabra of supply-side's magic, the harsh medicine of controlling the money supply (as enforced by the Chairman of the Federal Reserve, Paul Volcker), and the crash-landing of a brutal recession, along with a serendipitous easing of the oil crisis, together reduced inflation and recalibrated the economy for renewed expansion. The size of that expansion would eventually prove impressive, but thanks to Reagan's policies on taxes, unions, and regulation, its benefits were as unevenly distributed as the economic suffering that preceded and primed its eventual surge. This accelerating inequality has been one of the clearest legacies of the Reagan years.

Further, because they felt compelled to deny the unreality of their original premises, the Reagan team never admitted, much less addressed, the full severity of the federal deficit. Arriving as a self-proclaimed antidote to liberal fiscal irresponsibility, Reagan ended up submitting to Congress eight consecutive unbalanced budgets. Rather than check the liberal penchant to overspend, he adopted it himself (if toward different ends), so much so that national debt was nearly *tripled* under his rule. Here, too, Reagan was at one with his people, for individual behavior quickly came to mirror the economic values of his administration. The new prosperity, it turned out, was being driven in part by a radical increase in both personal and governmental indebtedness. One of the secret sources of the Reagan

expansion was not so secret after all. It was the same practice favored by every profligate since the invention of money: consumption on credit.

The premises for this historic shift, whose recklessness would eventually help trigger the great market crash of 2008, were long in the making. But in the past that temptation had been at least partially checked by various strands of our cultural heritage, including a show-me conservatism especially strong in the Midwest. In yet another instance of his adept demagoguery, Reagan drew on that very tradition to cover the true implications of his economic policies. His voice, gestures, and dress, the modesty of his manner and the innocence of his humor, all evoked the prudent ethos of Dixon, Illinois. Personally, Reagan projected the character of that small-town Midwesterner who, as decent and humble as he was democratically accessible, always dressed and spoke plainly, paid his bills on time, and saved what remained for the proverbial rainy day.

But as on the subject of race, Reagan's actual policies completely contradicted his personal image. A strong argument can be made that America would have arrived there eventually anyway, but it was under the cover of Reaganism that the nation rapidly completed its conversion to a debt-based vision of prosperity. Consume now, pay later because, well, "the infinite and the gold" were sure to come to the exceptional nation. Beneath the Jimmy Stewart mask, this was the actual legacy of the new "conservative" economics, based as it was on the dubious husbandry of the Golden Goose.

from **"Sunny Jim: The Genial Demagoguery of Ronald Reagan"**

(Salmagundi #184 // Fall 2014)

ADAM MICHNIK ON THE GESTURES OF POPE FRANCIS

The election of a pope from Argentina came as a surprise. The Catholic Church rejected Eurocentrism. And the new Pope spoke with the language of gestures. Following the example of St. Francis of Assisi, these gestures signify humility and poverty. Hence the trip to the outskirts of Rome to meet with the poor, and the washing of the prisoners' feet. And many calls to compassion. A Polish analyst pointed to Cardinal Bergoglio's words from before the Conclave: "If the Church does not emerge from within itself in order to evangelize, it will keep spinning around itself. It'll get sick. The evils growing within ecclesiastical institutions have their roots in this self-referentiality." And he concluded: "This should cast light on the possible changes and reforms necessary for the salvation of souls."

And so the Polish analyst asks: —what does the pontificate of Pope Francis herald? Will he be a pope of compassion, a pope of gestures? A pope of the peripheries, the poor, the lost, and the excluded? A pope of seekers and unbelievers, since he is calling for churches to always remain open? According to this analyst, who cites a German journalist, Pope Francis will be an "inconvenient" pope. "Through his very existence and his gestures. He will be inconvenient precisely the way Jesus of Nazareth or Francis of Assisi was inconvenient."

The gestures of Pope Francis —though they deserve attention and respect —do not answer the questions facing the Church today. And so: how will the Holy See relate to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and the *aggiornamento*? And how will it relate to the still obligatory tradition of the Council of Trent, with its triumphant Catholic anti-liberalism? How will the Magisterium relate to theologians, who have so frequently been criticized and censored by the Vatican? Will they have more freedom or will they continue to be treated like "enemies within the walls"? What will the dialogue with other Christian churches and other religions look like? Will the spirit of the Assisi Meetings return? John Paul II did a lot to overcome the Church's centuries-long animosity toward Jews, who were seen as the "driving force of all the persecutions of the Church." Will condemnation of anti-Semitism become a permanent element of the Church's teachings? How will Pope Francis respond to the sexual abuse scandals that emerged among the priests? Will he continue Benedict XVI's policies? And how

will he respond to financial corruption scandals within the Church? Will we hear new things about women's role in the Church? About sexual ethics, celibacy, contraception, or IVF? In some local churches we can see bishops focusing on issues related to sex. Will Pope Francis remind us that in addition to having sex, people also have souls?

In other countries we can see vulgarized and politicized forms of Catholicism joining forces with nationalism and xenophobia. Will Pope Francis be concerned about this? We can also observe attempts to define Catholicism as an anti-liberal and anti-modernizing force. This is accompanied by the conviction that the Church can function successfully only in the framework of an authoritarian state, while all attempts at dialogue and friendly coexistence with modern democratic culture lead to the marginalization of the Church, and belong to a liberal-Jewish-masonic plot aimed at the Church. Will the Holy See oppose this kind of thinking or favor it?

The gestures of Pope Francis—moving as they are in their beauty—will not answer these questions.

from **“The Catholic Church after the Election of Pope Francis”**
(Salmagundi #184 // Fall 2014)

