


Editor's Note

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In 1776, when drafting the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson famously cribbed John Locke's 1689 *Two Treatises of Government*, but changed that English thinker's phrase "pursuit of property" into "the pursuit of happiness." Jefferson's usage may have altered Locke's meaning, but it also implied that happiness, in its own way, is a sort of property—a thing to have and to hold, and a foundation of democratic society. The essays in this issue explore the complicated relationships between independence, property, and happiness at the turn of the century, especially among African Americans and women.

In "Women's Property and the Downward Spiral into Fraud: Questioning the Persistent Narrative of Progress in Women's Legal Status," Laura F. Edwards deploys marvelous historical and legal detective work to unearth the history of coverture. Although deeply rooted in English common law, coverture was solidified in the nineteenth century as a way to facilitate commercial transactions: property owned by one person was more easily bought or sold than was property owned by a family. Before legal thinkers such as University of Virginia law professor John B. Minor codified coverture, there were other practices—such as entail, which persisted in Virginia far beyond its official outlawing in the era of Jefferson's Declaration—by which women retained control of property within extended families. Edwards originally delivered this piece as the SHGAPE Distinguished Historian Address at the Organization of American Historians conference in New Orleans in April 2024, and we are delighted to feature it here in the journal.

The following three research articles by Ava Purkiss, Hannah Alms, and Ronny Regev serendipitously align to offer compelling insights about the relationship between work, play, and property in African American life. "A Paradox of Pleasure: Black Joy during 'the Nadir,' 1875–1905," is Purkiss's extended meditation on the concept of enjoyment, offered alongside analysis of a largely overlooked 1897 speech by W. E. B. Du Bois. Purkiss invites us to consider "joy" as a unique category of analysis. For Black Americans in the "Nadir"—the most dismal period of Jim Crow and racial violence—was life all oppression, or was there also room for fun? While some activists prioritized racial uplift to the exclusion of enjoyment, Du Bois argued that enjoyment has both intrinsic and operational values: it can embolden resistance, but it is also desirable in its own right. This insightful essay prompts us to consider leisure activities—sport, popular amusements, even word games—as intrinsically valuable human actions. Sometimes play prepares us for work, but it can also be its own autotelic objective.

In "'The Old Order Changeth': A Favorite Servant Contest and the Debate about Domestic Work in Washington, D.C.," Hannah Alms explores the case of a 1917 contest as a way to comprehend objectification of Black women in an era when many white women expressed nostalgia for slavery. Theresa Harper, an eighty-seven-year-old Black woman who was born into slavery, was chosen as the capital city's "favorite servant." As

represented in the white press, Harper was merely a worker, and her own voice was muted in favor of white writers who praised her service. Yet Harper was a human being, with her own motivations and, most certainly, her own enjoyments. Alms perceptively interrogates Harper's own silence: Did she not respond to her victory (and the accompanying ten-dollar prize) because she was not allowed to, because nobody chose to hear, or because she herself chose not to do so? Harper appears in the historical record primarily as a worker, but that is largely due to who was telling her story.

Ronny Regev's "On Patrons and Shoppers: Representations of Consumer Culture in the Black Press from 1890 to 1920" illustrates how the turn-of-the-century Black press portrayed retail buying as an activity for upwardly mobile African Americans. Regev draws a clear distinction between shopping and patronage: while the former term connoted something women did, primarily for leisure, the latter term implied a more rational or responsible activity coded as male. While shoppers might browse and buy for personal enjoyment, patrons did so to sustain Black institutions. Regev compels us to see how consumerism was part of the Black Freedom Struggle as early as the Progressive Era—well before the boycotts of the 1950s and 1960s—while also inviting us to blur the lines between shopping and patronage. Attaining things, whether as pleasures or necessities, could be its own kind of personal yet political statement.

In a thought-provoking historiographical essay, Logan S. Istre asks us to revisit a once-household name that has again become a topic of discussion in recent years. Economist Henry George wrote one of the nineteenth century's bestselling books, *Progress and Poverty* (1879), and finished second in the 1886 New York City mayoral race (coming in ahead of an upstart newcomer named Theodore Roosevelt). George was most famous for his "single tax," the idea that a tax on land—especially undeveloped land—would stimulate economic growth while also generating revenue. Early twentieth-century scholars either saw George as a writer who vaguely anticipated more explicitly progressive minds (this was the interpretation of Charles and Mary Beard), or as a thinker in the Jeffersonian tradition whose ideas were rooted in America's democratic tradition (Vernon Parrington's view). After a lengthy, latter twentieth-century hiatus, a new generation of historians has been taking George and his ideas seriously. As Istre astutely observes, George's reemergence says as much about our own era's relationship to property and democracy as it says about that relationship during America's original Gilded Age.

As usual, we conclude this issue with a robust section of book reviews. I hope you enjoy reading this issue as much as we have enjoyed producing it.