

Pilgrims, Socialism, Free Markets, Bernie Sanders, Milton Friedman: a Thanksgiving Story

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The story of the Mayflower, the Pilgrims, and Thanksgiving is widely taught in American schools. What is seldom taught, however, is [what those Pilgrims learned](#), at great pain, about **Socialism** versus **Free Markets**.

The Pilgrim experience stands as the most authentic-ever, real-life comparison between socialism and free markets as the foundation for governance, commerce, and human interaction.

As a reminder, the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in November, 1620. They promptly lost half their population to starvation, sickness, and exposure that first winter, and they fared little better the second winter. We were all taught that a Native American named [Squanto](#) taught the survivors to fish, plant corn, use fertilizer, and hunt deer.

What most of us *never* learned (or glossed over) was that the [original contract](#) the Pilgrims brokered with their London sponsors required that everything the Pilgrims produced was to go into a common store, and every member



was to be allotted one equal share. Further, all the land they cleared and all the buildings they constructed were to belong to the *whole community* rather than to any individual.

To those with visions of utopian egalitarianism (which today's Left piously calls *Social Justice*), this must have sounded like the ideal society. Free of outside evil influences from Europe, personal property and greed were to be banished. Everyone was to work hard for the *common good*, and altruism was to be its own reward. In modern terms, it was to be a Bernie-Sanders utopia.

How did it work out?

Horribly!

In the two winters beginning in 1621 & 1622, many died from starvation, pneumonia, or both. Here are excerpts from Governor [William Bradford](#)'s own [retrospective summary](#) of the community's experience with what we now variously call collectivism, socialism, or communism:

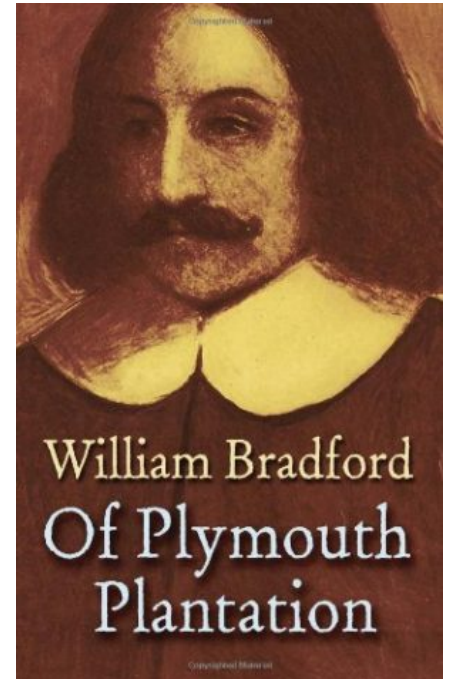
This community (so far as it was) was found to breed much confusion and discontent and retard much employment that would have been to their benefit and comfort.

For the young men, that were most able and fit for labour and service, did repine that they should spend their time and strength to work for other men's wives and children without any recompense.

And for men's wives to be commanded to do service for other men, as dressing their meat, washing their clothes, etc., they deemed it a kind of slavery, neither could many husbands well brook it.

...

Let none object this is men's corruption, and nothing to the course itself. I answer, seeing all men have this corruption in them, God in His wisdom saw another course fitter for them.



In other words, said the Governor, it simply *didn't work*. Mankind's inherent nature simply wouldn't accommodate it, no matter how "ideal" it may have seemed to its adherents.

In brief, Bradford had discovered that ***even these most idealistic of peoples had no reason to put in any extra effort without the motivation of personal incentives to do so.***

Wisely, in April, 1623, Bradford abruptly abandoned socialism. Instead, he assigned a plot of land to each family, permitting them to keep everything they grew or made and to market anything they didn't consume themselves. He actually harnessed all that awful human "greed" and put it to work in a *free-market* system of the type Milton Friedman was to espouse in 20th-century America.

However, for the Pilgrims, how did free markets and private property work out for the *same* people in the *same* place under the *same* circumstances?

Boffo!

The Pilgrims soon had more food than they could eat or trade among themselves. So they set up trading posts and exchanged goods with the Native Americans. They paid off their debts to their London sponsors and soon attracted a great European migration. They still had plenty of problems, but hunger was never again one of them.

As Bradford summarized the new approach:



The women now went willing into the field, and took their little ones with them to plant corn, while before they would allege weakness and inability, and to have compelled them would have been thought great tyranny and oppression.

...

This [new approach] had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been by any means the Governor or any other could use, and saved him a great deal of trouble, and gave far better content.

Most importantly for us today, Bradford wrote about the bitter lessons learned from the failure of original socialistic plan:

*Let none argue that this is due to human failing **rather than to this communistic plan of life in itself ...***

Yes, even in 1622, Bradford used the term “communistic”.

In modern times, when confronted with the undeniable historical record of socialism’s failures, the Left usually argues that the “right people” weren’t in charge, and if only they had been, their utopian socialist vision would have succeeded. If Bradford could speak, he would surely disagree based on the Pilgrims’ real-life experience.

So ...

Why isn’t *this lesson* featured up front, in neon lights, in American history classes? Why isn’t it the *lead story* of the Pilgrim experience? Why has the history even been [falsified](#) and its most important lesson ignored?

Perhaps it’s because the people who write our history textbooks *still* don’t want to believe it. Perhaps those authors still cling to the hope that some form of their beloved utopian socialism, collectivism, Marxism, communism, or whatever-ism will one day triumph over Private Property and Free Markets.

Unfortunately for those authors, [the historical record couldn’t be clearer](#). For Americans, the Pilgrims’ experience should rightfully be our *Exhibit One*. In our own time, [Milton Friedman](#) said much the same in this now-classic viral [video clip](#).

When it comes to bettering the life of the common man, Free Markets and Private Property work — the alternatives don't.



Granted, socialism, fascism, communism and other grand central-planning systems may work for a little while, after a fashion, most especially for those in power. But eventually they always fail, hurting most the people those systems were supposed to help — to the point of *killing them*. Yet even to this day, people keep falling for the false promises of those failed systems of human interaction and governance, [Venezuela](#) being among the most recent.

Finally —

For more than 3000 years at Passover, Jews around the world have been re-telling the story of their deliverance from slavery. And for over 2000 years at Easter, Christians have been re-telling the story of their redemption. Now that it's been nearly 400 years since the Pilgrims landed in America, perhaps we could begin **re-telling the full story of Thanksgiving every year**, headlining those life-and-death lessons the Pilgrims learned about the differences between Socialism and Free Markets.

*The inherent vice of capitalism is the unequal sharing of blessings;
the inherent virtue of socialism is the equal sharing of miseries.*
Winston Churchill

[Note: This is an updated version of articles written in January, 2011, and in the Novembers of 2012 through 2015.]

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