

Socialism Failed Miserably For The American Pilgrims, Just Like It Does Everywhere

Private property rights and personal responsibility saved the Plymouth colony from the edge of extinction and laid the economic foundation for a free and prosperous nation.

It is widely known that the early Pilgrims came to the New World to escape religious persecution. What is lesser known is that their spiritual adventure was also a commercial enterprise. Today's self-identified democratic socialists like to claim real socialism has never been tried in America, but they need to brush up on their history. The Pilgrims did try it — and it failed.

In the early 17th century, King James I chartered a joint-stock company with private investors, the Virginia Company of London, to manage the establishment of future colonial settlements in North America. Any English settlers who wanted to leave England for the New World were required to obtain a license from the government and a land patent from the Virginia Company. They also had to raise money from investors to fund their voyage and the establishment of a new colony. Investors expected to receive produce from the future colony to cover their investment and generate a handsome return.

When one group of Puritans from the Separatist Church, led by Rev. John Robinson, decided to migrate to the New World, where they could establish a new place to adhere to God's teachings, they sent two representatives, Robert Cushman and John Carver, to London to secure a land patent in the existing Virginia colony. A London merchant, Thomas Weston, probably one of the earliest venture capitalists, led a group of investors and offered the Puritans a deal they couldn't refuse.

The deal stipulated that everything the colonists produced would belong to a "commonwealth," and at the end of seven years, everything would be equally divided between investors and colonists. To make sure the investors would get their money back, this deal forbade colonists from having any personal time to work on any private business during the seven-year contract term.

The terms of this deal seem harsh today but are understandable if we put ourselves in the investors' shoes. Lending money to a group of people traveling to a faraway land was a risky business. There was no guarantee the travelers would make it, and even if they did, the investors would have no control over what happened next.

The representatives of the Separatist Church accepted the deal without telling their congregation all the details. On Sept. 6, 1620, the Mayflower departed from England with 102 passengers, including members of the Separatist Church and nonbelievers. After a 66-day-long journey, the settlers arrived in Provincetown Harbor, Plymouth Colony, which is now Massachusetts.

Squanto Came to the Rescue

The early settlers' life was arduous. During the winter of 1620, only 44 out of the original 102 passengers survived, including their first elected governor of the colony, John Carver. The survivors probably wondered whether it had been wise to come to the New World — and how long the rest of them would survive. Fortunately, an Indian named Squanto came to their rescue.

Squanto was no ordinary native. Early settlers in 1610 had captured him and sold him into slavery. A group of Catholic friars freed him and brought him to England, where he learned to speak English. In 1618, serving as an interpreter on an English ship, he was brought back to the New World.

Squanto taught the Pilgrims how to plant and fish, even brokering a peace treaty between the Pilgrims and other Indian tribes. Many Pilgrims thought God had sent Squanto to help them, and without him, they never would have survived and thrived. The fall of 1621 brought a great harvest, and the native tribes and Pilgrims joined together for a festival, which later evolved into our Thanksgiving holiday.

Plymouth Barely Survived Under Socialism

Even with the help of the Indians, the colonists had a hard time surviving. Although the word "socialism" hadn't been invented yet, the Plymouth colony bore many resemblances to a socialist society. Since investors back in England demanded that the colony operate communally, everything was owned by every colonist jointly. No one was allowed to own private land or to work on his private business.

The communal social and economic structure proved disastrous. Not all colonists were willing to work hard or at all for the “commonwealth.” William Bradford, one of the signers of the Mayflower Compact, who was later unanimously voted the second governor of the Plymouth settlement, admitted, “[S]ome [settlers] doe it not willingly, & other not honestly.”

Many settlers resented that whatever they produced went into a common pot and was divided among them equally. In addition, knowing that at the end of the seven-year term they were required to surrender half the wealth they’d accumulated to investors in England offered no incentive to work hard.

Since not everyone was pulling the same weight, the colony was constantly running out of food, a typical problem in all the socialist countries, from China to Venezuela. As French philosopher Jean Bodin wisely pointed out, that communal property was “the mother of contention and discord” because “for nothing could properly be regarded as public if there were nothing at all to distinguish it from what was private. Nothing can be thought of as shared in common, except by contrast with what is privately owned.”

The Pilgrims Ditched Socialism and Thrived

By 1626, the Plymouth settlers couldn’t return sufficient profits that the investors in England had demanded, and they were forced to restructure the debt they borrowed from investors. Conceding the problem, Bradford wisely recognized that a change had to take place, and he gathered the settlers to a brainstorming session. He recorded in his book “Of Plymouth Plantation”:

So they began to think how they might raise as much corn as they could, and obtain a better crop than they had done, that they might not still thus languish in misery. At length, after much debate of things, the Governor (with the advice of the chiefest amongst them) gave way that they should set corn every man for his own particular, and in that regard trust to themselves; in all other things to go on in the general way as before. And so assigned to every family a parcel of land, according to the proportion of their number, for that end, only for present use (but made no division for inheritance) and ranged all boys and youth under some family.

After turning the communal property into private property, letting everyone be responsible for themselves and their own families' wellbeing, Bradford noted drastic changes in all the colonists' behaviors:

[I]t 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. The women now went willingly into the field, and took their little ones with them to set corn; which before would allege weakness and inability; whom to have compelled would have been thought great tyranny and oppression.

These hardworking and motivated colonists turned Plymouth colony into one of the most successful colonies in North America.

Today's self-identified democratic socialists might need to pick up a copy of Bradford's book if they think real socialism has never been tried in America. One of the most important legacies of early settlers is that they experimented with socialism in the 1620s, and it didn't work. Private property rights and personal responsibility, two pillars of a free market economy, saved the Plymouth colony from extinction and laid the economic foundation for the free and prosperous nation that we all enjoy today.

Rather than repeating always failed socialist experiments, Americans ought to remember the powerful lessons early settlers learned in the 1620s: Socialism is incompatible with free people. It always leads to failure and misery. The United States of America must never become a socialist country.

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