

A Fitter Course

November 25, 2021

The times may not seem to indicate jubilations and thanksgivings, but any time is a good time to practice gratitude — to those who deserve it, and on a more basic level, too — so, regardless of the pandemic, the misguided responses, social unrest, racial mistrust, the threat of totalitarianism and war, remember: things could be worse.

At Thanksgiving, especially, it might do us good to consult William Bradford's account* of the History of "Plimoth Plantation," a document that recounts how his fellow Pilgrim settlers established, endured, barely survived, recovered, and eventually thrived in Massachusetts.

By the spring of 1623 — a little over three years after first settlement in Plymouth — things were going badly. Bradford writes of the tragic situation:

[M]any sould away their cloathes and bed coverings; others (so base were they) became servants to [the] Indeans, and would cutt them woode & fetch them water, for a cap full of corne; others fell to plaine stealing, both night & day, from [the] Indeans, of which they greevosly complained. In [the] end, they came to that misery, that some starved & dyed with cold & hunger.

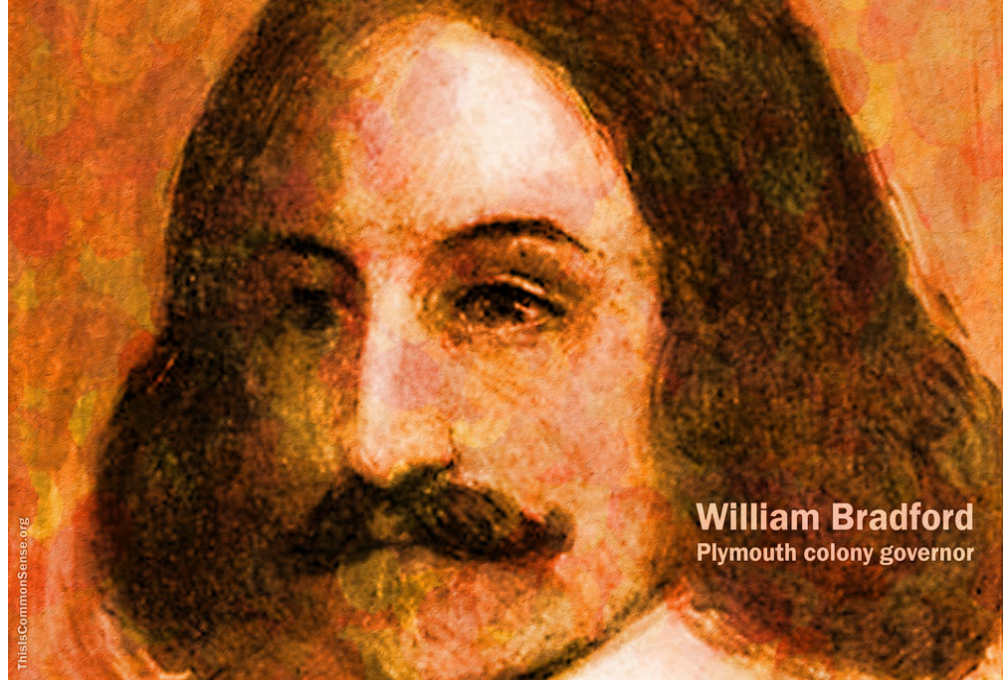
The problem? The colony had been engaging in something very like communism.

The experience that was had in this comone course and condition, tried sundrie years, and that amongst godly and sober men, may well evince the vanitie of that conceite of Platos & other ancients, applauded by some of later times; — that [the] taking away of propertie, and bringing in comunitie into a comone wealth, would make them happy and flourishing; as if they were wiser then God.

Bradford relates the consequences of common property:

For this comunitie (so farr as it was) was found to breed much confusion & discontent, and retard much employmet that would have been to their benefite and comforte. For [the] yong-men that were most able and fitte for labour & service did repine that they should spend their time & streingth to worke for other mens wives and children, with out any recompence. The strong, or man of parts, had no more in devission of victails & cloaths, then he that was weake and not able to doe a quarter [the] other could; this was thought injuestice. The aged and graver men to be ranked and equalised in labours, and victails, cloaths, &c., with [the] meaner & yonger sorte, thought it some indignite & disrespect unto them. And for mens wives to be commanded to doe servise for other men, as dresing their meate, washing their cloaths, &c., they deemd it a kind of slaverie, neither could many husbands well brooke it.

Yes, the s-word: Slavery. Common property was mutual slavery.



The solution? *The plan for society that Bradford attributed to God.* He brooked no pleading that common property didn't work because of corruption, sin. As he put it, "seeing all men have this corruption in them, God in his wisdom saw another course fiter for them." The course? I'll use a word of coined by Robert Poole, one of the founders of Reason magazine: Privatization.

Basically, what the Pilgrims privatized was land, and the fruits thereof, assigning to

every family a parcell of land, according to the proportion of their number for that end, only for present use (but made no devission for inheritance), and ranged all boys & youth under some familie. This had very good success; for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corne was planted then other wise would have bene by any means [the] Govror any other could use, and saved him a great deall of trouble, and gave farr better contente. The women now wente willingly into [the] feild, and tooke their litle-ons with them to set corne, which before would aledg weaknes, and inability; whom to have compelled would have bene thought great tiranie and oppression.

Thus began the years of bounty in Massachusetts. There's much more in Bradford's account worth reading, including the increasingly tragic relations with the native Americans. And, indeed, one learns from reading such first-hand accounts how imperfect a creature is man.

But it is obvious that some systems of property and governance work better than others, and, on the day that our government has set forth as a day of Thanksgiving, it is worth being thankful for living in a land that has upheld — to at least some degree — the system of private property that America's Pilgrim's learned to see as God's "fitter course" for corruptible man.

This is Common Sense. I'm Paul Jacob.