

Socialism Didn't Work at Plymouth Plantation, Either  
A hidden history of Thanksgiving.

By

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Like an in-law preaching politics from a stuffing-and-turkey lectern, The New York *Times* crashes Thanksgiving dinner charging conservatives with mythologizing Turkey Day. Kate Zernike's "The Pilgrims Were...Socialists?" ridicules a "Tea Party view of the holiday," in which "the first settlers were actually early socialists," "realized the error of their collectivist ways and embraced capitalism."

"In one common telling," Zernike writes, "the pilgrims who came to Plymouth established a communal system, where all had to pool whatever they hunted or grew on their lands. Because they could not reap the fruits of their labors, no one had any incentive to work, and the system failed—confusion, thievery and famine ensued."

Where on the A.M. dial would anyone get such outlandish ideas?

The impetus for this story predates talk radio, the Internet, and Fox News. The agreement between the Pilgrims and their backers, which predated even Plymouth Rock, stipulated that for seven years the colonists were to "have their meat, drink, apparel, and all provisions out of the common stock and goods."

Another possibility is *Of Plymouth Plantation*, written by the colony's longtime governor, William Bradford. Therein, he details how the Pilgrims "languish[ed] in misery" sharing their labor and its fruits. The collectivism "was found to breed much confusion and discontent and retard much employment." Two years into the experiment ironically forced upon them by their capitalist underwriters, Bradford parceled common land out to individual families to exploit for their own selfish benefit.

"This had very good success," Bradford explained, "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. 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." The Pilgrim Father's two-paragraph rejection of collectivism is among the most enduring and persuasive arguments for private property in the English language. Just don't say this to The New York *Times*, which interprets Bradford's words as nothing of the sort.

The *Times* rejects the idea that the Pilgrims practiced a form of socialism, and then takes the ostensibly unnecessary step of rebutting the notion that socialism exacerbated their hardship. Worse still, they chalk up this quite conventional view of past historians to heavy-breathing ideologues of the present. The first volume of John S. Barry's *History of Massachusetts* says in 1855

of the Pilgrims what the *Times* paints as a modern corruption: “The indolent, sure of a living, would labor only when compelled to; the willing were discouraged by the severity of their toils.”

“The arrangement did not produce famine,” Kate Zernike writes. “If it had, Bradford would not have declared the three days of sport and feasting in 1621 that became known as the first Thanksgiving.” Indeed, after having lost more than half their population through that 1620-21 winter, the colony’s improving situation that fall was “far from want,” in the words of *Mourt’s Relation*, the classic first-person accounts of life in Plymouth. At that first Thanksgiving, the Pilgrims, along with Massasoit and ninety of his men, feasted for days on venison, wild turkeys, waterfowl, and corn. But the celebration came a year after their arrival, followed the deaths of more than half the community, and coincided with a harvest time spell of good fortune. In other words, the festivities represented the first time the beleaguered immigrants could afford to relax. As *Mourt’s Relation* acknowledged of the inaugural Thanksgiving, “it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us.”

The socialistic scheme contractually imposed upon the Pilgrims wasn’t ditched until two years later—when the investors failed to live up to their side of the bargain. As the first of the five volume *Commonwealth History of Massachusetts* relates, “by the spring the famine prospect was the worst ever experienced.” By abandoning collectivism in 1623, the book explains, “the gaunt spectre of famine vanished forever.” The book was edited by a professor at Harvard University, not heretofore regarded as a hotbed for the ideas of Glenn Beck or Sarah Palin, and published eighty-two years before the first modern Tea Party rally. Surely the anonymous “Tea Party historians” the *Times* so easily dismisses aren’t also time travelers?

Alas, Zernike misleads even in her rebuttal of a strawman. She never actually quotes a “Tea Party historian” claiming famine among the Pilgrims. She just says that these chroniclers say what she says that they say, and then goes about rebutting what she never proves they said in the first place. Compounding this shoddy journalism is bad history. There may not have been a famine in 1621, but the historiography shows that the food situation was terrible in 1623 and that the Pilgrims feared famine. This immediately anticipated the disavowal of the “common course.”

The *Times* piece neither quotes a named “Tea Party historian” nor rebuts one with a primary account of Plymouth (she at least cites historians citing Bradford). In an article claiming to refute such historians, either omission is catastrophic. The exclusion of both makes the piece laughable. Instead, the *Times* relies on academics, four centuries removed from Plymouth Colony, who contend that the settlers struggled for myriad reasons unrelated to socialism and later succeeded not because of free-market reforms but because they became more adept farmers. Prosperity under private property and poverty under communalism is seen as a mere coincidence.

Zernike acknowledges that the Pilgrims overthrew their pooling arrangement, but “not because the system wasn’t working. The Pilgrims just didn’t like it.”

Says who? Not the actual colonists.

The governor of Plymouth Colony for more than three decades concluded, “The experience that was had in this common course and condition, tried sundry years and that amongst godly and sober men, may well evince the vanity of that conceit of Plato’s and other ancients applauded by some of later times; that the taking away of property and bringing in community into a commonwealth would make them happy and flourishing; as if they were wiser than God.”

Alas, this contradicts the Gray Lady and its cited academic experts. Does William Bradford think he is wiser than *The New York Times*?

Written By **Daniel J. Flynn**

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