

HANDOUT 1

Changing Course in Plymouth, 1623

Part I

As was its practice, the Virginia Company specified that for the first seven years the Pilgrims should organize communally. In good faith, the colony began as directed; the colonists worked the fields together, and each family received a share from the common larder.

However, we know that long before seven years had passed, this communal organization was abandoned and each family was given responsibility to provide its own food. In his *History of Plymouth Plantation*, Governor William Bradford recorded this decision, reached after the dismal, meager harvest of 1623:

... 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 thing 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 ...

Part II

It is hard to believe that people who had been through so much together and shared such deep commitment to common beliefs would reject community effort as the means for ensuring their very survival. But they did, leaving us to puzzle out the problem. Fortunately, the development of the economic understanding in the centuries since the Pilgrims struggled at Plymouth can help us with the task. Hearing the words “communal economy,” any economist worth his salt would quickly respond that the solution to the puzzle is that the Pilgrims were human! Certain that, like all people, the Plymouth colonists responded to incentives in predictable ways, the economist would hypothesize that communal living turned many Pilgrims into shirkers.

Today, we’d say “sloughing off” or failing to “pull your own weight” instead of “shirking.” Regardless of what we call it, it’s easy to see that a significant amount of shirking would have stifled economic growth, kept the colonists on the brink of starvation, and fostered arguments and discontent. But, you protest in disbelief: “The Pilgrims, shirkers? Certainly not those hard-working, dedicated souls!”

Let Governor Bradford's words provide the evidence to test the economist's hypothesis:

For this community [common ownership] (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 labor and service, did repine that they should spend their time and strength to work for other men's wives and children without any recompense. The strong, or man of parts, had no more in division of victuals and clothes than he that was weak and not able to do a quarter the other could; this was thought injustice. The aged and graver men to be ranked and equalized in labors and victuals, clothes etc., with the meaner and younger sort, thought it some indignity and disrespect unto them. 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. Upon the point all being to have alike, and all to do alike, they thought themselves in the like condition, and one as good as another; and so, if it did not cut off those relations that God hath set amongst men, yet it did at least much diminish and take off the mutual respects that should be preserved amongst them. And would have been worse if they had been men of another condition. Let none object this is men's corruption ... God in His wisdom saw another course fitter for them.