

Abandoning the “Common Course and Condition”

“Socialism, social and economic doctrine that calls for public rather than private ownership or control of property and natural resources. According to the socialist view, individuals do not live or work in isolation but live in cooperation with one another.”

“Furthermore, everything that people produce is in some sense a social product, and everyone who contributes to the production of a good is entitled to a share in it. Society as a whole, therefore, should own or at least control property for the benefit of all its members.” (Encyclopedia Britannica)

The initial socialist approach to the Pilgrim’s early economy was not a structure that they initially chose or sought; rather, it was part of the conditions they accepted in negotiations with the Merchant Adventurers before they left.

Frankly, the Pilgrim leaders had expressed their desire to own their own lands and homes and even work two days each week for their own gain. But the Adventurers would not hear of it. The contract was a “take it or leave it” proposition. The Pilgrims reluctantly took it. (Patton)

It was not an experiment seeking the appropriate economic structure – the following conditions (noted in Bradford), include the requirements that each of the Pilgrims had to initially follow (from July 1, 1620)

The contract between the Adventurers and the Pilgrims consisted of ten points.

1. The adventurers & planters doe agree, that every person that goeth being aged 16. years & upward, be rated at 10li., and ten pounds to be accounted a single share.
2. That he that goeth in person, and furnisheth him selfe out with 10li. either in money or other provisions, be accounted as haveing 20li. in stock, and in ye devission shall receive a double share.
3. The persons transported & ye adventurers shall continue their joynt stock & partnership togeather, ye space of 7. years, (excepte some unexpected impedimente doe cause ye whole company to agree otherwise,) during which time, all profits & benifits that are gott by trade, traffick, trucking, working, fishing, or any other means of any person or persons, remaine still in ye comone stock untill ye division.
4. That at their coming ther, they chose out such a number of fitt persons, as may furnish their ships and boats for fishing upon ye sea; imploying the rest in their severall faculties upon ye land; as building houses, tilling, and planting ye ground, & makeing shuch comodities as shall be most use full for ye collonie.
5. That at ye end of ye 7. years, ye capitall & profits, viz. the houses, lands, goods and chatles, be equally devided betwixte ye adventurers, and planters; wch done, every man shall be free from other of them of any debt or detrimente concerning this adventure.
6. Whosoever cometh to ye colonie hereafter, or putteth any into ye stock, shall at the ende of ye 7. years be allowed proportionably to ye time of his so doing.

7. He that shall carie his wife & children, or servants, shall be allowed for everie person now aged 16. years & upward, a single share in ye devision, or if he provid them necessaries, a duple share, or if they be between 10. year old and 16., then 2. of them to be reconed for a person, both in trasportation and devision.
8. That such children as now goe, & are under ye age of ten years, have noe other shar in ye devision, but 50. acers of unmanured land.
9. That such persons as die before ye 7. years be expired, their executors to have their parte or shaff at ye devision, proportionably to ye time of their life in ye collonie.
10. That all such persons as are of this collonie, are to have their meate, drink, apparell, and all provissions out of ye common stock & goods of ye said collonie.

The cheefe & principall differences betwene these & the former conditions, stood in those 2. points; that ye houses, & lands improved, espetially gardens & home lotts should remaine undevided wholly to ye planters at ye 7. years end. 2ly, yt they should have had 2. days in a weeke for their owne private imploymente, for ye more comfote of them selves and their families, espetially such as had families.

But because letters are by some wise men counted ye best parte of histories, I shall shew their greevances hereaboute by their owne letters, in which ye passages of things will be more truly discerned.

Challenges with the Common Course and Condition

For ye 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 ye other could; this was thought injustice.

The aged and graver men to be ranked and equalised in labours, and victails, cloaths, &c., with ye 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. Upon ye poynte all being to have alike, and all to doe alike, they thought them selves in ye like condition, and one as good as another; and so, if it did not cut of those relations that God hath set amongst men, yet it did at least much diminish and take of ye mutuall respects that should be preserved amongst them.



And would have bene worse if they had been men of another condition. Let none objecte this is men's corruption, and nothing to ye course it selfe.

I answer, seeing all men have this corruption in them, God in his wisdom saw another course fiter for them.

But to returnee. After this course setled, and by that their core was planted, all ther victails were spente, and they were only to rest on Gods providence; at night not many times knowing wher to have a bitt of any thing ye next day.

And so, as one well observed, had need to pray that God would give them their dayly brade, above all people in ye world. Yet they bore these wants with great patience & allacritie of spirite, and that for so long a time as for ye most parte of 2. years; which makes me remember what Peter Martire writs, (in magnifying ye Spaniards) in his 5. Decade, pag. 208.

They (saith he) led a miserable life for 5. days togeather, with ye parched graine of maize only, and that not to saturitie; and then concluds, that shuch pains, shuch labours, and shuch hunger, he thought none living which is not a Spaniard could have endured.

But alas! these, when they had maize (yt is, Indean corne) they thought it as good as a feast, and wanted not only for 5. days togeather, but some time 2. or 3. months togeather, and neither had bread nor any kind of corne.

... others of them were worse put to it, wher they were faine to eate doggs, toads, and dead men, and so dyed almost all. From these extremities the Lord in his goodnes kept these his people, and in their great wants preserved both their lives and healthes; let his name have ye praise.

Yet let me hear make use of his conclusion, which in some sorte may be applied to this people:
That with their miseries they opened a way to these new-lands; and after these stormes, with what ease other men came to inhabite in them, in respecte of ye calamities these men suffered; so as they seeme to goe to a bride feaste wher all things are provided for them.

Bradford Notes That Socialist Living (“this comone course and condition”) wasn’t Working ...

Bradford here expresses his belief that Socialism is not a Godly order or economic system.

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 ye 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.

For this comunitie (so farr as it was) was found to breed much confusion & discontent, and retard much imploymet that would have been to their benefite and comfote.

Pilgrims Seek a Better and More Abundant Result

The leaders of Plymouth colony decided to scrap their socialistic agreement with the Adventurers and the philosophy of “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” Individuals were now able to own their own homes, property, and keep the fruit of their own efforts. What happened? (Patton)

All this while no supply was heard of, neither knew they when they might expecte any. So they begane to thinke how they might raise as much corne as they could, and obtaine a betere crope then they had done, that they might not still thus languish in miserie.

At length, after much debate of things, the Govr (with ye advise of ye cheefest amongst them) gave way that they should set corne every man for his owne perticuler, and in that regard trust to them selves; in all other things to goe on in ye generall way as before.

And so assigned to every family a parcell of land, according to the proportion of their number for that end, only for present use (but made no devisiion 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 waise would have bene by any means ye Govr or any other could use, and saved him a great deall of trouble, and gave farr better contente.

The women now wente willingly into ye feild, and tooke their litle-ons with them to set corne, which before would alegd weaknes, and inabilitie; whom to have compelled would have bene thought great tiranie and oppression.



In 1621, the Pilgrims planted only 26-acres. Sixty acres were planted in 1622. But in 1623, spurred on by individual enterprise, 184-acres were planted. Somehow those who alleged weakness and inability became healthy and strong. It's amazing what incentive will do to improve the situation. (Patton)

The Pilgrim experience dating from 1623 was and is yet a prototype for the US. The Pilgrims learned the hard way that:

- (1) Socialism does not work; it diminishes individual initiative and enterprise;
- (2) Socialism is not a Godly economic system; and
- (3) Famine and drought can be used by God to humble a people and set them on a proper course. (Patton)

The Pilgrims responded. The real question today is: Can Americans learn these vital insights from the Pilgrims? (Patton)



Information here is from: Bradford; Encyclopedia Britannica; Bellevue University Economics Department, Dr. Judd Patton.

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young