

Private Enterprise Regained

by Henry Hazlitt

Governor Bradford's own history of the Plymouth Bay Colony over which he presided is a story that deserves to be far better known—particularly in an age that has acquired a mania for socialism and communism, regards them as peculiarly “progressive” and entirely new, and is sure that they represent “the wave of the future.”

Most of us have forgotten that when the Pilgrim Fathers landed on the shores of Massachusetts they established a communist system. Out of their common product and storehouse they set up a system of rationing, though it came to “but a quarter of a pound of bread a day to each person.” Even when harvest came, “it arose to but a little.” A vicious circle seemed to set in. The people complained that they were too weak from want of food to tend the crops as they should. Deeply religious though they were, they took to stealing from each other. “So as it well appeared,” writes Governor Bradford, “that famine must still ensue the next year also, if not some way prevented.”

So the colonists, he continues, “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 [in 1623] after much debate of things, the Gov. (with the

advice of the chiefest among them) gave way that they should set corn every man for his own particular, and in that regard trust to themselves. . . .

“And so assigned to every family a parcel of land. . . .

A Great Success

“This had very good success; for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been by any means the Gov. 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 experience that was had in this common course and condition, tried sundry years, and that among 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. For this community (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.

This essay was written in 1949 and subsequently appeared in the first volume of FEE's Essays on Liberty, published in 1952. Governor Bradford's spelling has been modernized.

“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. . . .

“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. . . .

“By this time harvest was come, and instead of famine, now God gave them plenty, and the face of things was changed, to the rejoicing of the hearts of many, for which they blessed God. And the effect of their particular [private] planting was well seen, for all had, one way and other, pretty well to bring the year about, and some of the abler sort and more industrious had to spare, and sell to others, so as any general want or famine has not been among them since to this day.”

The moral is too obvious to need elaboration. □

Henry Hazlitt Through the Years



A young Hazlitt (left) and companions on an outing



Henry Hazlitt lecturing in FEE’s classroom in the 1980s



F.A. Harper, Henry Hazlitt, and Felix Morley at the first meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society in 1947