

Of plymouth plantation

Law, Common Law



Response Essay One William Bradford's Of Plymouth Plantation gives a first-hand account of many of the various factors at play which ultimately led to the Separatist movement and their subsequent decision to leave their European confines for the freedom of the New World, to start afresh in "those vast and unpeopled countries of America," Bradford writes. His narrative thus spans the years from the birth of the Separatist movement in 1607 to well into the settlement of Plymouth (1647). At length, Bradford describes the condition of this foreign land and the hardships the colonists endured as they endeavored to eke out an existence "on their own terms." Their experiment came at a price, however. As none of the colonists possessed the means to fund their expedition, merchant investor backing was sought and secured. And to ensure that the investors recouped their monies they insisted that the foundation of the colony be based upon a communal property system. But as happens in communes and tribes, certain serious and intractable problems arise. It becomes costly to police the activities of the members, all of whom are entitled to their share of the total product of the community, whether they work or not. Any surplus or profit from this system was demanded by the merchant investors as payment on the debt owed by the colonists. The system bred ill-will and seething discontent among the colonists, many of whom had become resentful at the present state and ceased working all together. And by spring of 1623, the colonists were beginning to starve. Seeing this, the Governor brought an end to the "Common Course and Condition," and thus began a system of private property ownership. In Bradford's notes for Of Plymouth Plantation, he draws the parallel between the Pilgrim's communal system of property rights and

those espoused by Plato in his Republic. " The experience that was had in this common course and condition...may well evince the vanity of that conceit of Plato's and others 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. " This communal stewardship of the land demanded of them by their investors afflicted the community with a prevailing sense of slavery and injustice. But the main thrust of dissent among the colonists did not lie with their investors. The conflicts arose between the colonists themselves. The strong " had no more victuals and clothes" than the weak. The older men felt it disrespectful to be " equalized in labours" with the younger men. Husbands did find it rueful that their wives were made to work for other men. It would seem clear that the unilateral application of work-share would be the only fair way to resolve the issue of the division of labor in a community where there could be no individual property. If everyone were to end up with an equal share of the property at the end of the first seven years, as stipulated in the agreement made with the merchant investors, everyone should do the same amount of work throughout those seven years. However, an inevitable problem arose: how to deal with those who did not put in their fair share? The Pilgrims had encountered what is known in public economics as the free-rider problem: someone who enjoys the benefits of any given activity without paying for it. Under the stipulations of communal property, then, one might reasonably expect that inability or the lack of industry on the part of one can be made up for by the extra effort of another. Those seen as free riders are often resented because they are thought to be taking more than their fair share of

a resource or failing to shoulder any part of the cost or production of it. The only remedy for such a situation is to begin to police the work and output of all members of a community. At which point, a community begins to break down. A variation of this same theme was seen in the Soviet Union with state ownership of land. And for this reason, private property is the single governmental arrangement which will permit a people to be free, though the construct of personal productivity.