

The Commune in Socialist

Transition.

RECLAIMING
COMMUNES PT. 1/6



What is a commune?

A commune is a **sub-national political form in which the working class democratically plans production according to social and ecological needs.**

Communes are typically associated with a specific local community and can also be part of complex regional and national networks.



The commune is essential to Marxist theory and practice.

Contrary to anarchism and autonomism,* which seek to build isolated utopian projects, Marxism views the commune as inseparable from a wider revolutionary strategy for winning state power and transforming society.

***Note:** As opposed to anarchism, autonomism is rooted in the Marxist tradition. However, strategically, autonomism is similar to anarchism in its emphasis on withdrawal from capitalist society.



Marx's Study of The Commune

Karl Marx took a theoretical interest in the commune throughout his life.

In his later years (1870-1883), he investigated a range of communal formations, including Indian villages, Algerian peasant communities, and Indigenous communities in North and South America.

But his most in-depth study was focused on the *obshchina* of Russia, which were rural communes that existed in Tsarist Russia. →



Cells of Socialism

Marx insisted that the obschina could become “fulcrums of social regeneration” (*points de appui*), or cells of socialism, that demonstrate **a new form of communal production beyond the profit logic of capital**. But for that to happen, three conditions had to be met:

1. **Technology:** The commune had to integrate the technological achievements of capitalism to enable collective production.
2. **Integration:** Rather than exist as isolated political units, communes had to be connected with each other.
3. **Revolution:** A political revolution was necessary to transform the state and establish new relations with the communes.

Communal Socialism

We can learn two things from Marx's analysis of the commune:

1. **The commune is essential to building socialism** because it gives people direct experience in governing their own lives through democratic planning and production.
2. For the commune to reach its true potential, it has to be **connected to a broader process for winning state power.**



Real-existing socialist projects and movements have shown this in practice, including:

- **China:** More than 99% of the rural population (120 million households) were part of People's Communes that implemented socialist land reform.
- **Venezuela:** Communes have been essential to the Bolivarian process, with Chávez declaring communes as "the basic cells" of socialism in 2009.
- **Landless Workers' Movement (MST):** The MST considers its communal land occupations as key to building a sovereign socialist Brazil.





The Commune Needs Socialism

Communes that are detached from a wider socialist process face strategic shortcomings.

For example, although they contain real emancipatory potential, the disavowal of the state by both the Zapatistas and Kurdish autonomous communities has hindered their ability to construct national liberation movements that can meaningfully challenge imperialism.



Similarly, by cleaving themselves from society, anarchist and autonomous projects in the Global North pose little threat to their imperialist states. In fact, their isolation only makes them vulnerable to repression.

Lenin made note of this phenomenon in his 1908 essay *Lessons of the Commune*, pinning the failure of the Paris Commune, in part, on the communards unwillingness to “[expropriate] the expropriators,” which prevented them from assuming control of key institutions like the banks.



This is part 1 of 6 in our series on reclaiming the commune. Over the next five parts, we will explore specific case studies on the role of communes in socialist transition.