INTRODUCTION

One of the most important processes operating in the contemporary world is the acceleration of the rate of population growth, particularly in the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. These countries, which account for more than four-fifths of the general increase in world population, have an exceptionally high rate of growth. In the last decade, the average annual rate of population growth has been 1.9 per cent worldwide, 2.2 per cent in Asia, 2.7 per cent in Africa and 2.8 per cent in Latin America, as against 0.6 per cent in the developed countries of Europe. Many political leaders and scientists believe that this ‘population explosion’ not only aggravates a whole series of economic, political and social problems, but that it is even the cause of poverty and hunger.

Many demographic problems are found in any country or region. They generally can be reduced to three basic groups that are closely interrelated and that interact: the relations between man and his environment; the socio-economic forms used for the production of

* Translated from Spanish. Author’s references are to Spanish language editions.
material goods; and the reproduction of the population itself. Karl Marx wrote that men establish certain links and relations to produce, and it is only in the context of these links and social relations that their relationship to nature exists and their production takes place.\(^1\)

The classic Marxist works owe the enormous importance of their analysis of demographic problems to the fact that, out of the numerous factors affecting these problems, they emphasised the fundamental socio-economic determinants and they formulated the thesis that each socio-economic formation has its demographic law. Marxism-Leninism disputes the existence of the 'eternal' or 'universal' laws of population that Malthus, in particular, claimed to have discovered.

Marx wrote that every special historic mode of production has its own special laws of population.\(^2\) He believed that, under the demographic law of capitalism, the working population, by producing capital accumulation, increasingly produces resources that turn it into a relatively surplus population; and that this demographic law is inherent in the capitalist mode of production.\(^3\)

We also know that, according to Marx, if the surplus working population is a necessary product of accumulation or of the increase of wealth on a capitalist base, then this surplus population becomes in turn the source of capitalist accumulation, and even a condition of the existence of the capitalist mode of production.\(^4\)

In capitalism, the demographic law is the law of relatively surplus population that characterises the degree and kind of use of labour resources. This law therefore determines the essential features of the relations of men (the population) with the economy, under certain socio-economic conditions. These arguments, based on the Marxist-Leninist method of understanding demographic laws, are the key to understanding the demographic situation of the Latin American countries.

II THE CAUSES OF ACCELERATED POPULATION GROWTH

At present, most of the Latin American countries are experiencing rates of population growth that are higher than in any other period of their history. Between 1850 and 1900, the average annual rate of population increase in Latin America was 1.3 per cent and between 1900 and 1940

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2. Ibid., Vol. 23, p. 646.
4. Ibid., Vol. 23, p. 646.
1.9 per cent, whereas in the 1960–77 period it reached 2.9 per cent, with Venezuela, Mexico, Ecuador, Brazil and the Central American countries heading the list (see Table 17.1).

There have been significant changes in the type of reproduction of this population. In the nineteenth century, population reproduction was typically colonial, in that birth rates were at the physical maximum (45–48 per cent), and mortality was also high (25 per cent).

In the post-war period, most Latin American countries recorded a slight decline or levelling off in birth rates, and a substantial drop in mortality. A typical example is Costa Rica, where the birth rate went from 46.9 per cent in 1900–4 down to 45 per cent in 1960–65, while mortality fell still further during that period, from 28.8 to 8.5 per cent.

It is clear, then, that the pronounced acceleration in the rate of population increase in the main group of Latin American countries has resulted from a much lower mortality, and especially infant mortality; in fifty years, Mexico, Costa Rica, El Salvador and Venezuela have reduced infant mortality by between 50 and 75 per cent.

The principal causes of mortality in Latin America, which have been the infectious diseases related to contaminated water, unsanitary conditions and lack of hygiene, have been rapidly curtailed by the modest measures taken in the areas of public health, social and personal hygiene and potable water.

Recently, the scientific-technical revolution has made great strides in all branches of knowledge, including medicine. New and inexpensive means of combating contagious diseases have been discovered. There is widespread vaccination of children, use of antibiotics and better maternity and child care. Medical services now reach more of the population. In Europe and North America, mortality declined over a period of 100 to 150 years, primarily due to an overall improvement in living conditions; whereas in Latin America, mortality dropped in a third or fourth of that time, largely thanks to the achievements of civilisation in general and medical advances in particular. Nor can it be denied that the socio-economic development of these countries has also had an effect. There has been, for example, a huge increase in urban population, which in Latin America enjoys community and social services that are vastly superior to those available to the rural population.

But, as can be seen in Table 17.1, the growth of population varies among the different Latin American countries. Only relatively smaller and poorer countries continue to record a decline in mortality, which is still high, and this is the reason that their natural growth rates go on
### TABLE 17.1 DYNAMICS OF POPULATION GROWTH

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average annual population growth (%), 1960–70</th>
<th>Total fertility rate, 1977</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Countries with rising growth rate</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>6.2</td>
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<td>Guatemala</td>
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<td>Bolivia</td>
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<td>Haiti</td>
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<td>5.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>4.2</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Countries with stabilised growth rate</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>4.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>5.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>3.0</td>
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<td>Brazil</td>
<td>2.9</td>
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<td>El Salvador</td>
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<td>5.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>5.3</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Countries with declining growth rate</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>5.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
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<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>3.4</td>
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<td>Colombia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
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<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>1.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trinidad and Tobago</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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</tbody>
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rising. Another group of countries, containing almost two-thirds of the region’s population, seems to have already arrived at maximum growth rates; as a rule these are the most dynamic countries in contemporary Latin America. Finally, there is a third group of countries with declining growth rates, although some of them – because of circumstances that are largely transitory – have not yet reached their peak.

### III THE STUDY OF DEMOGRAPHIC PROBLEMS

According to the Mexican demographer, Raúl Benítez Zenteno, Latin America’s accelerated population growth and the inability of its socio-economic structure to meet the demands generated by this growth have
encouraged the rise and spread of Malthusianism in Latin America. Marx said that Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population* was a pretentious and mediocre plagiarism, since long before Malthus, ordinary political economics had discovered the so-called 'law of declining land fertility'.

Based on this, Malthus said that 'uninvited hungry mouths would come to the world banquet'. Malthus believed that man multiplies geometrically, while food production, limited by the extent of arable land, expands only arithmetically; and the bourgeoisie use Malthusianism in order to place the blame on the oppressed classes for their poverty and misery.

In his day, John Maynard Keynes took Malthusian economists seriously because they saw the evil in population increase, they feared it, and they considered it to be the cause of all present and future economic and social ills. Something similar is happening in Latin America. Governments try to present rapid population growth as the principal cause of economic underdevelopment, the slow development of the economy as a whole, and the general impossibility of any future development. There are even estimates of 'normal' population growth, according to which a large number of Latin Americans are considered 'excess'. More neo-Malthusian works have appeared in the last ten years than in the previous one hundred and fifty. By linking the population's low level of living conditions to the high level of its growth, authors deduce the 'natural' origin of poverty and social inequality.

Latin American's neo-Malthusians advocate a government policy of birth control as the only solution. In this vein, Colombia's former president Alberto Lleras Camargo said that Latin America's only salvation from hunger, poverty and backwardness lay in birth control, and the sooner, the better.

The United States has been particularly active in propagating neo-Malthusianism throughout Latin America. It widely publicises the 'efficiency' of birth control methods, referring to the examples of Puerto Rico, Japan, etc. Not only do they issue publications about population problems, but they also work in a practical way by organising medical clinics. This calls for a substantial investment of money, which is granted to the Latin American countries both through private funding and official agreements. In the 1961 world conference of the Food and Agriculture Organisation, John D. Rockefeller III, head of the

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Rockefeller dynasty, stated that the population explosion affected all the basic needs of mankind and, more than any other single factor, condemned to failure man's efforts to achieve his loftiest goals.

Research has been conducted in the capitalist countries to find an effective means of sterilising the population. Thus, in 1968 the United States biochemist Erlich invented a substance that, mixed with ordinary water, had appreciable results. The problem of population growth has therefore gained currency and even overtones of danger. In Marxist studies on Latin America's population problems, it is pointed out that the issue is actually how to use as fully as possible the labour resources of that region.

IV DEMOGRAPHIC PROBLEMS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

It would be wrong to deny that the accelerated populated growth in Latin American countries creates some difficulties, and it would also be wrong to declare that the rapid increase in human resources is solely a positive factor which, no matter what the circumstances, contributes to the socio-economic development of these countries. Under conditions of relative economic and cultural backwardness and in the absence of material means and reserves, the increase in human resources necessarily worsens the situation. The expanding Latin American population undoubtedly complicates the problems of employment and supply, and limits the possibilities of capital investment in technology because of the availability of cheap labour, etc. It also calls for more schools, hospitals, housing and jobs, for which 'demographic investment' is required.

Rapid population growth means that children and adolescents represent a disproportionate share of the population and that, therefore, there is an unfavourable distribution of labour resources. Because of this demographic composition, the index of active labour resources is lower in Latin America than in other parts of the world, where the economically active population index is 60 per cent in the United States and as high as 66 per cent in Sweden. In Latin America the population must be supported by a relatively lower number of workers than in more developed regions where labour productivity and per capita income are much higher.

Another feature of Latin America is that although the rate of growth for population is 2.8 per cent per year, for industrial employment it is only 1.7 per cent, and for agriculture no more than 1.4 per cent. The relative decline in the number of persons engaged in agriculture is more rapid than the increase in population in general and in employment in particular.

Whereas in 1950, some 53 per cent of the active population worked in agriculture, this figure has now dropped to 40 per cent. Paradoxically, the percentage employed in industry has not increased, but has even declined. In 1950, only 14.4 per cent of the active population worked in the manufacturing industry; in 1975, according to CEPAL estimates, it was down to 13.8 per cent.

A serious problem is the exodus of rural population to the cities—from a million and a half to two million annually—which is the chief source of the increase in urban population. As a result of accelerating urbanisation in the last thirty years, by 1976 about 63 per cent of Latin America’s population lived in cities. Large cities of more than 100,000 inhabitants have increased population most rapidly at rates of between 6 and 10 per cent per annum.

The high growth rate of large Latin American cities implies a macrocephalic structure; that is, huge concentrations of urban population. Perhaps the best example is Mexico City, which has 15 million inhabitants. A new phenomenon in Latin America’s urbanisation process in the last decade has been the appearance of the megalopolis, or super-city, which already exists in the most urbanised countries of the region. Latin America’s megalopolies have some of the same general features as do those in the United States that emerged from the network of commercial centres that developed along the seaboard—for example, Boston to New York and then New York to Washington, with a population of 40 million. In Argentina, a megalopolis is taking shape around Buenos Aires, extending from Mar de Plata to Rosario. Another megalopolis is formed in Brazil by the gigantic triangle of Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Bello Horizonte.

The accelerated population increase and rural-urban migration only make the unemployment more acute. Due to the excessive development of many Latin American cities, with no co-ordination or urbanisation and industrialisation, super-populations are created in the large urban centres.

The rapid growth of cities generates problems in housing, food and water supply, transportation and electrical energy. Educational and public health facilities are strained beyond capacity and all the ecological rules of human life are violated.
The population that abandons rural areas does not find regular work not only because the manufacturing industry is still in its infancy, but also because the city needs skilled labour. The lack of suitable centres to train qualified specialists and the illiteracy of many of the rural-urban migrants make finding work very difficult.

It should also be pointed out that although part of the working-age rural population emigrates to cities, this does not offset the increasing mechanisation of agriculture. Since industry in Latin America does not develop as rapidly as it should and there is not much demand for labour, many of the rural migrants become marginal and join the lumpenproletariat. Thus, to the unemployed and underemployed in the countryside must be added the army of those either totally or partly without work in the city.

Utilisation of labour resources is a pressing issue in present day Latin America. The population growth rate far outstrips demand for labour. According to some estimates, of a population of 343 million inhabitants in 1978, gross human resources — that is, the population aged from 15 to 64 — totalled 180 million, while the number of employed was 100 million.

Latin American countries are therefore characterised by an appalling underutilisation of labour resources; between 30 and 40 per cent of the working-age population does not have regular employment.

There are some who conclude from the foregoing that it is not the present social order that must be overcome, but the nature of man. And this is used by the many official and private agencies of Latin America and the United States to justify their efforts to impose birth control in order to reduce the number of poor, who represent a mounting threat to the stability of Latin America.

\[V \text{ MEANS OF SOLVING POPULATION PROBLEMS}\]

Western authors often make the baseless accusation that Marxists do not take into account the demographic factor and that they automatically label anyone Malthusian who proposes that population growth be regulated. Actually, Marxists have never denied the importance of a demographic policy and Marxism has never equated birth control by means of responsible maternity with neo-Malthusianism. In his article ‘The Working Class and Neo-Malthusianism’, Lenin wrote that one thing is the freedom to disseminate medical information and defence of the basic rights of the male or female citizen, and another is the social doctrine of neo-Malthusianism. Responsible workers will always fight
against efforts to impose this reactionary and cowardly doctrine on the class that is the most progressive, strongest and open to profound changes in contemporary society.  

Marxist-Leninists are not opposed to regulating births, but to neo-Malthusianism, which inculcates the idea that the principal means of solving the social problems of capitalist society is by birth control. In this way, they divert the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America from their struggle to transform society and from their battle against neo-colonial backwardness and exploitation.  

Population is the basis and the subject of all social production, and its number is one of the most important factors that affects society, by accelerating or braking development. Logically, every country—and the Latin American countries are no exception—really needs a well-grounded demographic policy; that is, a series of measures that will influence the demographic processes, especially in the displacement and migration of population. But the worst aspect of demographic policy as it is applied in the Latin American countries is that it is divorced from general socio-economic policy and used only for purposes of measurement. A factor restraining the Latin American governments is the negative attitude of the Catholic Church on the use of artificial means to limit births. Another important factor is the struggle by the masses to have demographic problems solved within the framework of radical overall changes.  

Latin American scientists redouble their criticism of Malthusian demographic theories. Most of them view demographic and birth control policy as supplementing the system of economic and social measures. Therefore, in their judgement, the solution to demographic problems does not lie in establishing birth control, but in a multilateral development of the economy and culture, in mobilising and more fully utilising resources, in the elimination of the great social and geographical imbalances, etc.  

Since the demographic laws and problems of each historical social formation are conditioned by the relations of production prevailing in the society and by the economic structure of the society, the solution to these problems must be sought in a change in the determining factors. The Argentine economist Rodolfo Hoffman says that, as a rule, "the slow economic growth experienced by Latin America seems to show the region's inability to use its productive resources efficiently. Economic activities should be expanded rapidly enough to meet the needs"  

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8 V. I. Lenin, Obras Completas, Vol. 23, p. 527.
generated by population growth". It is not the number of population that should be adjusted to the level of the economy, but the level of the economy that should be adjusted to the number of population. In this regard, it is important to take note of the Soviet Government's approach to the problem of population growth in developing countries, as expressed in its response to the questionnaire prepared by the Secretary-General of the United Nations and entitled 'Interdependence and Interaction Between Economic and Social Growth and Population Growth'.

Its replies indicated that even though rapid population growth may create difficulties, the problem cannot be solved by numerical changes in the population, but by promoting the growth, in every sense, of the economy; by establishing a national industry; by overcoming hunger and poverty; by raising the cultural level; and by granting women the same rights as men and incorporating them into economic, cultural and political life.

It is obvious that a reduction in birth rates can in no way spur production. There is no direct functional relationship between these two phenomena. And, in general, birth control will not be effective until the living levels of the population, especially in the areas of health and hygiene, have been raised appreciably. Birth control measures will succeed only if, instead of taking the place of socio-economic and cultural measures, they are based on them. What effect can official measures to limit births have in Latin America where a large part of the young population is illiterate and has little or no training in special skills, where even the Church cannot prevent the cohabitation of unmarried couples, and where 30 to 40 per cent of children are illegitimate? It is clear that in such conditions any birth control is condemned to failure. Furthermore, even the most effective family planning programmes cannot have immediate economic results on a national scale.

Meanwhile, only the objective laws of socio-economic development can transform the demographic situation in Latin America. The historical experiences of many nations testify eloquently that a rise in the living levels of the masses is the best automatic regulator of birth rates. And this is confirmed by Latin America's own experience.

Over the last hundred years, birth rates in all Latin American countries, without exception, have declined. That they will continue to
do so will depend on the following factors: (i) industrialisation; (ii) improved living conditions for wage and salaried workers; (iii) higher cultural and health levels for the general population; (iv) increased urban population; and (v) more participation by women in economic, cultural and political activities. It suffices to say that the birth rate in Latin American cities is one and a half to two times lower than in rural localities. In 1930, there were three cities in Latin America with more than a million inhabitants; by 1960, there were more than ten cities of over a million; and by 1980, more than twenty. And the population living in these cities accounts for one-fifth of the region’s total inhabitants.

With the drop in mortality, the socio-biological motive for large families disappears, since couples no longer have to fear the loss of children due to high death rates. This automatically implies a reduction in the number of children in a family and, consequently, lower birth rates. In addition, Latin America will feel the effect of these factors more immediately than did the industrialised countries, because of its exceptionally rapid urbanisation.

An important premise is the level of education, the training of scientific and technical specialists, and the incorporation of women into industrial and social activities. Large-scale participation by women in the educational process will not only do away with their ignorance but make them aware of their rights. This, in turn, will enrich women’s lives, broaden their interests, and liberate them from family traditions— all of which, logically, will result in lower birth rates. It can therefore be concluded that most Latin American countries, particularly the largest— Brazil, Mexico, Colombia and Peru— can expect a decline in their population growth rate over the next ten or fifteen years, a process that will accelerate even more in the coming decade.

Demographic problems cannot be solved without solving general socio-economic problems, without deciding on the means to overcome economic backwardness and to ensure multilateral development and social progress. These tasks can be accomplished if the Latin American countries rid their economic structures of medieval residue. The solution to the food problem is first and foremost to eliminate the *latifundium* and foreign ownership of property.

Incorporating new areas into the economy and increasing production in those already assimilated, in order to maintain a high level of employment, can be fully realised only if drastic structural changes are made in the economy.

No reduction in the birth rate can exempt Latin American countries from the need to stimulate their economies through structural reforms,
income redistribution, industrialisation, and measures to shake off the domination of foreign capital.

Man is capable of producing much more than he consumes, and if society cannot guarantee him the possibility of working productively to improve life for all, then it is not a question of killing him before birth but of transforming society. The peoples of the world are increasingly turning to the experiences of socialism: with socialism, unemployment disappears; the rates of socio-economic growth soar; and the life of each and every one acquires a new potential and new dimensions, and is materially and spiritually fulfilled.