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WASHINGTON CONSENSUS: DEAD OR ALIVE?

The origins of the Washington Consensus lie in the debt crisis of the 1980s in Latin American countries. Their economies – built on the import substitution strategy, strongly protectionist, living on borrowed money and wasting that money – were on the verge of bankruptcy. The cure was adopting new economic strategies advised by international financial institutions, mostly, the International Monetary Fund. Also, western economic think tanks were preparing receipts for economic recovery of Latin American countries. Institute for International Economics, located in Washington, D.C., also presented its proposal – called Washington Consensus – that was accepted by governments of most of Latin American countries. In very short way it can be described as a set of neoliberal reforms that had to help Latin American economies to get out of the deep crisis.

It is almost twenty years since the Consensus was adopted. In that period Latin American countries went through a lot of economic, political and social crisis. In my paper I would like to answer the question: Are the recommendations of Washington Consensus still actual for Latin America? Moreover, are they still implemented? A lot of factors make it difficult to prove that the ideas of neoliberal transformation in Latin America are today commonly accepted in the region. As the 21st century started, deep creeks have appeared within the consensus. The financial crisis at the turn of the centuries, disappointment of citizens from neoliberal reforms of its governments, and disillusionment from the U.S. policy toward Latin America caused that it seems to be proper to find new – not necessary Washington – consensus.

The origins of the Washington Consensus lie in the debt crisis of the "lost decade" which is what the 1980s used to be called in regards to the Latin American economic situation in that period. There were several causes of debt in almost all Latin American states. First, there was an extremely high level of foreign debt, most of it floating interest rates. Second, the impact of a very large rise in international interest rates, mostly in U.S. dollars, at a time when this currency was raising, upon the service debt. Third, decline in export earnings due to a deep recession and fall of prices for main export products. And finally, it was a loss of confidence on the part of lenders (Kuczynski 1988, 73). By August, 1982, the government of Mexico declared that it could not meet all the loan payments that were due. This caused considerable concern in the international financial community. In the middle of the lost decade most of the new democratic governments in Latin America realized that the old development model of the post-world war period was inadequate now. Until the eruption of the debt crisis, Latin America developed an import substitution industrialization (ISI), believing that it would be a panacea for its underdevelopment and economic problems. ISI became official policy and was pursued vigorously through increasing domestic manufacturing. The aim of the ISI was to use the resources of the state-led development to stimulate industrialization that would lead to homegrown manufactures replacing those previously imported. ISI worked for some time, but by the 1970s and 1980s it was clear that the strategy was no longer appropriate. We can mention at least a few reasons for its discrediting. It had led to immensely bloated and inefficient state sectors, to widespread and endemic corruption within state controlled industries. The proportion of the GNP generated through the state sector climbed to 60–80 percent, reaching nearly to the levels of socialist economies and progressively squeezing out the private sector. Most of the state-owned industries turned into gigantic patronage agencies filled with the party or regime in power. The inequality of ISI to adjust quickly or flexibly to the changing international economic environment, and the uncompetitiveness of local products that were secured by high tariffs also caused its discreditation (Wiarda 2005, 169). The disastrous effects of the lost decade of the 1980s that was the culmination of non-effective ISI caused conditions for deep reforms to appear.

As Latin American nations became even more dependent on external sources to solve their financial problems, the role of international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) became even stronger. The failure of the Cruzado Plan in Brazil, and the slow collapse of the Austral Plan in Argentina, further cautioned Latin American leaders from embracing the siren of deep adjustment. By the late 1980s a number of countries had adopted the far-reaching goals of internal economic change (Roett 1992, 141). Partly it was the result of conditioning of the loans for debtors on structural reforms. It was argued that the Latin American nations must take the bitter pill of austerity through these structural adjustments. Government costs and inflation had to be reduced through such measures as fiscal reform, monetary restraint, cutting back jobs and services in the public sector and stopping government subsidies for basic goods and petroleum. Likewise, wages were to be held down as a way of checking inflation and keeping wage costs at bay in the ever more important export industries (*Politics of Latin America...*, 164).

That was the moment when some economists concluded that Latin America required a radical change of course by abandoning the state-led protectionism of the ISI model. In the 1980s even the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) - who up until that moment had strongly supported ISI - had begun to shift towards new ideas (Reid 2007, 134). These ideas about what would make Latin America prosperous were collected in 1989 by John Williamson. The recommendations he enumerated, were as follows:

1) fiscal discipline;
2) redirection of public expenditures;
3) tax reform;
4) financial liberalization;
5) adopting a single, competitive exchange rate;
6) trade liberalization;
7) eliminating barriers to foreign direct investments;
8) privatizing state-owned enterprises;

9) deregulating market entry and competition;
10) ensuring secure property rights (*Latin American Adjustment...*, 1990).[1]

This set of recommendations for economic development is called the Washington Consensus. Barbara Liberska, a Polish scholar researching the economics of Latin America, writes about the "decalogue" of the Washington Consensus (Liberska 2008, 23–35). As we talk about the consensus, it is important to explain whose consensus it was. Despite the fact that recommendations were directed to Third World countries, they were not among those who formulated the consensus. It had emerged among political elites in Washington, the American Congress, the presidential administration, economists of the IMF, the World Bank and the IDB, and American think thanks. It was consensus, but only in the sense that, it was consensus among different actors of U.S. politics, economists, and international finance institutions dominated by the United States.

The main elements of the Washington Consensus were privatization, deregulation and liberalization. It seems appropriate to add democratization as a political condition of economic recovery and development. Privatization of former state companies is said to lead to the enhancement of competition, and therefore efficiency. Deregulation, often seen as the second best option to privatization, involves the trimming of the state sector and the introduction of competitive practices that make this sector run among lines similar to those of the private sphere. Liberalization is a policy of openness to international trade and investment, so that countries can grow through increased exports and foreign investment. It also included liberalization of the capital account, which meant that individuals could now move money from their domestic currency to a foreign one (Kiely 2005, 99). Meanwhile, a democratic political system helps to provide a stable long-term climate in which the economy can grow and the middle class can prosper. In turn, economic development, free trade, and privatization help to provide a better climate for democracy and human rights to be established and consolidated (Wiarda 1997). Enforced by the U.S.-dominated international financial institutions and by the absorption of a free market version of neoclassical economics by local elites, the protection of secure investment climate quickly became the region's economic and political priority (Hershberg, Rosen 2006, 7). Also, the timing of the formulation of the decalogue at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s was not accidental. It coincided with the collapse of the iron curtain and then the Soviet Union, its ideological apparatus and the socialist bloc. Discreditation of socialist ideas and centrally planned economies created an urgent and widespread need for an alternative set of ideas about how to organize economic and political life (Naim 2000).

The results of the adoption of neoliberal reforms were mixed. Many countries stabilized their budgets by restricting budget deficits. Fighting inflation was finally successful, as some countries reached very low levels of inflation. Also, trade liberalization was successful. All Latin American states – except Cuba of course – changed their course in international trade almost 180 degrees. They liberalized foreign investment, opened

[1] John Williamson (ed.). 1990. *Latin American Adjustment: How Much Has Happened*. Washington, D.C.: Institute for International Economics.

up their markets, lowered tariffs, privatized state-owned enterprises, and abandoned the main ideological props of their former economic nationalism. Indeed, by the mid-1990s, it was the governments of developing countries – including Latin American republics – that most strongly embraced the liberal trade and investment creed. The new orthodoxy represented the intellectual victory of neoliberal economics (Holsti 2004, 234). In this situation, what is wrong with the Washington Consensus? Why do so many criticize it, why do some of those critics call for post-Washington Consensus order, and others announce its death? Why nowadays are there considerations of various projects and ideas that are completely different from the decalogue of the Washington Consensus? First of all, those few positive results of neoliberal changes did not produce higher economic growth nor improve the living standard of the majority of the societies. Neoliberal reforms of recent years and integration with global economy have not realized many expectations. Instead of high economic growth, in the period of 1990–2003 GNP rose 3.3 percent per year. Instead of industrialization, we can observe in many Latin American States deindustrialization and a downfall of employment in industry. Minimum wages did not increase. The GINI index grew from 0.53 in 1990 to 0.57 in 2005; the World Competitiveness Index dropped (Liberska 2008). Some researchers accurately point out that Latin America is not a monolithic, unitary entity. The continent houses multiple actors – some regional, some "informal" – albeit powerful, and all of them relevant (Domínguez 1998). Meanwhile the recommendation was the same to all developing countries without differentiating specific characteristics of each country. Those who criticized the Washington Consensus often underline that all Latin America was treated as one subject and neoliberal reforms were universal panacea for different diseases. It is not a necessary truth. Neoliberal changes in Latin American countries were taking place in different circumstances. Some countries reformed drastically and quickly – as for example Argentina during the Carlos Menem administration or Fujimori's Peru – while others did relatively little, such as Venezuela (Reid 2007). However, deep cracks have appeared within the Consensus's decalogue. Already at the end of the 1980s its legitimacy had come into question in the face of an increasingly effective citizens' backlash in the North and South, and there is growing dissension within the ranks of its backers (Broad, Cavanagh 1999).

So, what is the condition of the Washington Consensus today, twenty years after the eruption of enthusiasm produced by the neoliberal proposals? Is it dead or alive? To answer this question it is necessary to analyze contemporary programs of economic development in Latin America. After two decades of technocratic reforms, and with commodity prices soaring, in one country after another leftist administrations are coming to power. This seems to be a response for a region caught between two sets of closely related challenges: on the one hand rising mass mobilization, and on the other strong public discontent with reform strategies, questioned by their failure to generate high levels of growth, to incorporate disenfranchised groups and to promote more equitable patterns of income distribution (Tussie, Heidrich 2008, 45). What is the Washington Consensus's sin that has produced such strong public opposition? As Joseph Stiglitz said, a neoliberal model of globalization was imposed onto Latin American countries without taking into account the different conditions in those countries, and brought very limited benefits for limited groups of the population, for very few economic sectors, and only for a few regions (Stiglitz 2002). Howard Wiarda enumerates four mistaken assumptions. First, according to him, was the belief that the freeing up of economies would give rise to a dynamic entrepreneurial class that could substitute for the state's role in the economy and stimulate economic growth. But dynamic entrepreneurial groups did not emerge. What passes for entrepreneurs is usually the friends, relatives, and cronies of a regime's powerful people. They often have special access to government contracts and monopolies. The second assumption was that as these economies were freed up, a lot of financial institutions would emerge that would assist in the development process. But banks, capital markets, stock exchanges, and the like in developing countries also tend to be weak and cannot be created quickly. Third, the assumption that the freed-up economies would produce growth, jobs, and benefits for the lower and middle class also failed. This assumption did not take into account the class structure and class attitudes in Latin America. These tend to be very rigid and not egalitarian. The effect was that the rich are getting richer and the lower classes have received few benefits at all and have often become worse off. The fourth assumption was that privatization would lead to greater honesty and efficiency in the running of major, formerly state-owned, industries. But in the developing countries of Latin America only the elites or foreign companies have money to buy these industries. Also, it was often military officers and crony officials close to the regime in power that had inside knowledge and thus an inside track to take over the former state-owned firms (Wiarda 2005, 176–178).

The impression that the Washington Consensus was a set of rigid, almost unalterable, theoretical propositions about which the powerful and the knowledgeable had no doubt was widespread. However, the often implicit corollary espoused by the more politically motivated of the Consensus's proponents was that most dissent with its policies was inspired by anti-market ideologies, nationalism and anti-Americanism. Also, it is worth underlining that since the beginning advocates of the Washington Consensus have been divided about the pace and sequence of reforms. Profound differences quickly emerged about the need for desirability of what came to be known as the application of a "shock therapy" approach to policy reforms. Others argued for a slower, more sequenced pace (Naim 2000).

Since Latin America and the Caribbean countries embarked on some kind of neoliberal reforms course in the 1980s and the 1990s, it is possible to observe that overall performance has been mixed. After the lost decade of the 1980s there was a good average growth rate in the first half of the 1990s, but a lower one in the second half. Arguably, the lower average in the second half was due to the effects of various financial crises, starting with the Tequila crisis in the mid-1990s, continuing with the repercussions of the Asian crisis in 1997 and 1998, and culminating in Argentina's collapse at the turn of 2001 and 2002 (Huber, Solt 2004). In 2002, Latin America's economy shrank 0.5 percent, scared investors took 39 million dollars out of the region, and 7 million more people plummeted into the ranks of the extremely poor, surviving on less than 1 dollar per day (Latin Trade 2003). In those circumstances it is not surprising that Latin American leaders have been looking for alternative ideas to those constructed by the Washington Consensus.

Since the end of the twentieth century there has been a great debate over the influence of neoliberal reforms on Latin American economies and their development. Today it seems appropriate to talk about the post-Washington Consensus proposals and recommendations. It is an effect of broad criticism of the Washington Consensus and changes on the Latin American political scene. For a few years most of the countries of the region have been governed by leftist governments that have built their position on strong opposition toward the decalogue of the Washington Consensus. Leftist politicians have won elections in the last few years in twelve countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Venezuela, Uruguay, Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua. This has caused is to be difficult today to say that the Washington Consensus is alive. But it is also necessary to underline that Latin America's turn to the left does not mean that these countries are realizing the same economic strategy. There are a lot of differences between Hugo Chávez's Venezuela or Evo Morales's Bolivia and Chile governed by Michelle Bachelet or Lula's Brazil. These differentiations show that there are two trends in contesting the Washington Consensus. One is radical, and strongly anti-American. Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, and Rafael Correa represent it. They want to promote the idea of twenty-first-century socialism as an alternative to the Washington Consensus's neoliberal model. On the other hand, there is a more restrained model. Representatives of this position accept, in general, the current order of the market economy and the necessity of adjustment to globalization. However, they try to realize social policy which could eliminate the negative effects of neoliberal reforms. The aims of this kind of economic policy are speeding up economic growth and supporting social programs that help the poorest groups in their struggle with poverty.

The idea of twenty-first-century socialism (*el socialismo del siglo XXI*) is a project of UNAM professor Heinz Dietrich Steffan (Steffan 2000). According to this proposal, neither capitalism nor communism has been able to solve the most important problems of development. The twenty-first-century socialism model calls for the creation of an equable economy based on the value theory, and a political system based on a participating democracy (Gawrycki 2008, 50). The new socialism has to be built on the following foundations:

1) increased engagement of state in the economy and limitation of market economy rules;
2) state control of natural resources, renegotiation of hitherto existing contracts or nationalization;
3) utilization of financial resources from oil and gas on infrastructural development;
4) various forms of property;
5) better redistribution of income and liquidation of inequalities;
6) broad social programs;
7) participating democracy which could ensure the majority of society participation in the economic, social, cultural and political development (Liberska 2008, 30).

In 2005 Hugo Chávez claimed "we're starting to build our own socialist model." The main feature of this Venezuelan twenty-first-century socialism – or "chavismo," as others call it – is a drastic increase of public spending as a result of the huge rise in oil prices, as well as a bigger share of oil revenue taken by the government through taxes and royalties on its joint-venture partners. Chávez's anti-American and anti-neoliberal policy can be well described by his attitude toward economic integration in the Western Hemisphere. General disillusionment in Latin America from George W. Bush's foreign policy encouraged Chávez to coordinate policies among various governments. His initial project, Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), included a vague proposal to stimulate what was called a "humanist self-managing economy" (Parker 2005). Chávez's policy in Venezuela – strongly anti-liberal and anti-American – is the best example of modern populism in Latin America. He has increasingly seemed to see himself as Castro's successor. He conceived the Bolivarian revolution to be continental in scope, like its Cuban predecessor. Yet rather than a twenty-first-century socialist, Chávez most resembled some of the political figures from Latin American past: the twentieth-century populists and the nineteenth-century military caudillos (Reid 2007, 177). An attempt at building a twenty-first-century socialism model has also been visible in Bolivia since Evo Morales became president. He is the first Indian president in a country where the great majority of the population is indigenous. However, after almost two years in power, changes in economic policy have been very few. He has declared the nationalization of the oil and gas industries but has called on foreign investors in this sector to accept new contracts that would turn them from owners of hydrocarbon resources into providers of services for exploitation. After months of heavy bargaining, Morales eventually achieved his goal, with all foreign companies signing to the new rules. The policy of the Bolivian president is to redistribute wealth proceedings – not income – with plans to nationalize mining, and redistribute agricultural land in the eastern provinces (Tussie, Heidrich 2008, 61–62).

On the other side of diverging from the decalogue of the Washington Consensus are solutions adopted by more moderate leaders. A lot of scholars mention here Luis Inácio Lula da Silva from Brazil, known to all as Lula. During the election campaign Lula repeatedly promised to change the country's economic model based on Washington Consensus recommendations (Williamson 2003). Since he took office in 2003, his promotion of social consciousness has radically changed the role of the state there, now providing minimum income levels to some 44 million people, or 25 percent of the population, through the Bolsa Família program (Tussie, Heidrich 2008, 56). President Lula asked, "How many countries have achieved what we have: fiscal responsibility and a strong social policy at the same time?" And he replied, "Never in the economic history of Brazil have we had the solid foundation, that we have now" (*The Economist*, Feb. 26, 2006). Lula's government followed a leftist agenda to deal with social problems, especially aid to the poorest sectors of the population, generating state jobs and increasing pensions. In macroeconomic policy, his fiscal largesse, however, contributed to an increasing debt. To sustain this, he has increased the size of the state in the economy.

In March 2007, there was the Economic Forum for Latin America held in Santiago de Chile. Latin American leaders, most of them building their economic agenda on the contestation of the Washington Consensus, discussed ideas and priorities in the economic development of that region. The program that emerged during the meeting has come to be called the Santiago Consensus. It can be perceived as a kind of complement to the decalogue of the Washington Consensus. There is talk about the necessity of continuing the positive effects of neoliberal reform, for example low inflation or opening of the economies. What is new is the necessity of reforms that would eliminate the negative effects of neoliberal politics. Barbara Liberska writes about the aims of the new economic program:

1) education reforms;
2) institutional reforms;
3) labor market reforms;
4) reforms that would ensure a stable financial system;
5) increase of innovations (R&D);
6) infrastructure development;
7) environment protection;
8) improvement of competitiveness;
9) reduction of poverty areas;
10) more fair income distribution (Liberska 2008, 34).

Does it mean that we have a new decalogue, this time the decalogue of the Santiago Consensus? Doubtful. Although the recommendations from Santiago are generally accepted, there are still big distinctions in the economic policies between countries of the region. Also, there is the issue of globalization and its benefits for developing countries. This is the subject of the so-called Montreal Consensus presented by former Canadian Finance Minister and Prime Minister Paul Martin. The heart of the Montreal Consensus is a more balanced vision of how developing countries and poor countries can share benefits of the global economy. It arises from the general perception that developing countries are not threatened by globalization per se as much as by being left out and left behind. The solution is not to reverse globalization itself, but rather find ways to share the wealth and integration it brings (Marie-Slaughter 2004, 246).

What is the condition of the Washington Consensus after two decades of neoliberal reforms in Latin America? Is it dead or alive? If we analyze the term "Washington Consensus" semantically, it would be definitively dead. There is no consensus over the issue of development of Latin American countries. Definitively there is no consensus between most Latin American governments and the U.S. administration. But there is also hardly any consensus in Washington on the issue of economic policy in Latin America. Barack Obama – building his policy on strong anti-Bushism – has begun questioning some goals of the North American Free Trade Agreement. The period of neoliberal reforms in Latin America is difficult to estimate. It is obvious that deep structural reforms that were in agreement with the Washington Consensus recommendation have been indispensable for getting the region out of the debt crisis and the lost decade. Huge external debt and the economic crash of the 1980s were results of the previous development model based on the import substitution industrialization. Trade liberalization, markets opening and democratization of political systems were top priorities for economic recovery. It is also obvious that there were mistakes in realizing the neoliberal model. They caused the economic turmoil from the turn of the century, continued social and economic inequalities, and the inability of democratic governments to provide goods and services for their populations to lead to widespread disillusionment with the Washington Consensus. After its early successes, the consensus has lost its luster (Wiarda 2005, 183).

The Washington Consensus is neither dead nor alive. It is the past. Its rules helped to recover Latin American countries from the deepest crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. But nowadays there is a need for a new economic program. The Washington Consensus did not resolve the most fundamental problems of the region: huge inequalities, vast areas of poverty, vulnerability to international financial crises, and technological underdevelopment. There is a general agreement that the neoliberal model is not a proper one, or more accurately, is not enough for Latin America. We can observe some attempts to complete this model. But it has to be complementary, not a negation, as the twenty-first-century socialism program seems to be.

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