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Summary

The debate on territorial concerns - and the role public policies play in their reduction - has re-emerged over the last decade as a result of confirmation of the persistent and profound economic and social imbalances that make Latin America the most unequal region in the world. Development indicators based on averages and statistical agglomerations have barely managed to represent the condition of Latin American society inasmuch as socio-territorial instability and differences are concerned. In effect, in this type of global analysis, the territorial dimension and differences in intra and inter-regional development have generally become invisible.

Analysis on decentralisation, equity and territorial development in Latin America has been provided by different scientific disciplines and social schools of thought. Geography, sociology, anthropology, the economy and the law have contributed with studies and proposals elaborated from their different positions and perspectives that, in some cases, have served as references when public policies are being designed. In general, this analysis has tended to reveal the decisive historic factors of centralism, the institutional inheritance of Spanish colonialism and the evolution of capitalism. On the other hand, said analysis has allowed for State or market pre-eminence in socio-territorial inequalities to be confronted. In this study, the different concepts and perspectives that have helped understand socio-institutional change and the processes of decentralisation and regional development will be revised and combined. While not engaging in a conceptual revision, the contributions of local and regional development theories, decentralisation theories and neo-structuralism, as well as a neo-institutional focus, will be particularly considered, as well as the latest proposals from the focus given by new public management, governance and the multi-scale planning of territorial development with equality.

Since the forming of nation states in Latin America, territorial unbalance and inequity has been part of its social panorama. With a policy of economic development and the subsequent acceptance of military governments, centralism and socio-territorial inequity – far from diminishing – have tended to worsen. The metropolitan proliferation, political centralism and the population’s territorial concentration, production, financial decisions and social services are examples of this. In the same way, the rural exodus, residential segregation according to socio-economic situation and the disjunction between rural and urban development are areas where no changes appear to have occurred. With the spread of neo-liberal ideology and, as a result, the recommendations of the Consensus of Washington, structural adjustment policies established a new institutional framework for relations between State,
society and territories. In this scenario, territory became both a ‘market good’ and a ‘consumer good’ so as to more efficiently describe the economic system of each nation and of Latin America as a whole. In this context, decentralisation policies and territorial development were strongly conditioned to market laws and tended to increase the differences between winning and losing regions, as well as between rural and urban zones.

At the beginning of the nineties, as a way of responding to socio-territorial differences, the Latin American states, independent of their federal or single institutional structure, supported a series of institutional reforms that included revising the models of the territorial organisation of government and public administration. Occurring during a period of democratic transition, these reforms made inroads into the revision of the constitutional charters and institutional groups that created political systems on a national and sub-national level. The State’s territorial organisation was subject to in-depth revisions and decentralisation ideology was installed as one of the pillars that, in theory, would help break the chains of centralism, improve the institutional foundations of democracy and encourage the elusive development of equity. Among the different perspectives and ideas that emerged from these transformations, both local development and the territorial perspective came to prominence in the public debate. This did not only have to do with the need for new tools to understand the confrontation between what is global and what is local but was also, in the same way, connected to explaining new multi-scale planning on an economic level and to understanding the transformation of the State’s relationship with territory and the remodelling of the capitalist system. The emergence of China as a superpower and successive economic crises in Asia, Europe and the United States, for example, have pushed through a new world order that must be understood multi-dimensionally and beyond the metanarrative, focusing on rescuing the political, economic and social peculiarities of each territory.

In a scenario of democratic transition, institutional reform promoted since the nineties by the different Latin American governments has included measures to improve the relationship between State, society and territory. Whether or not in individual federal countries, the policies of political-administrative decentralisation have been orientated towards reducing socio-territorial disparities and modernising the existing political-institutional framework. As a result of partial or integral constitutional reforms, countries such as Colombia (1991), Chile (1992), Ecuador (2008), Bolivia (2006), Peru (2002) and Argentina (2002), among others, pushed through a series of decentralising measures with a regional focus. In the beginning, there was a heavy orientation towards local economic development, with a significant increase in public spending and policies that were aimed at tackling poverty head on. However, these measures did not manage to achieve either the
expected economic alignment or social cohesion in territorial development. Intra and inter-regional socio-territorial disparities have, in general, been maintained or have not been significantly reduced.

It is worth mentioning the case of Chile which, being one of the most centralised countries in Latin America, has generated intense debate regarding the scope of the decentralisation process and of institutional reforms for regional development. The experience of Chile and, in particular, of the Tarapaca region, provide a specific reinterpretation of socio-territorial and political-institutional changes. It was not without reason that Tarapaca was designated a pilot region for the decentralisation process in Chile in 2010. Amongst other factors, the characteristics of this distant, multicultural area bordering Bolivia, as well as its historical relations with the State and the centralised power justify the choice of this case study.

One of the main unknowns of this study questions how the scenario of democratic transition and socio-institutional change has affected the reconfiguration of the Chilean socio-territorial panorama and of State-region relations. In the context of democratic restoration and within the framework of decentralising reforms, the regions looked to become nuclei for economic, political and social integration. However, after two decades, the regionalisation process is still being heavily questioned for its superficiality, artificiality and ineffectiveness. Considering these elements, this thesis attempts to prove that the decentralisation process has clashed with the common territorial narrative on the concentration of power and wealth, where public policies, given their spatial blindness, have become instruments that, far from reducing socio-territorial inequality, have tended to make it worse in many cases.

Within Chile’s extensive and uneven territory, there has been certain negligence in the way socio-territorial inequality has been expressed. Its legitimisation has been made palpable in the collective imagination that agrees with the affirmation that ‘Santiago is Chile’; therefore, the regions have had little opportunity to shine. In the case of the Tarapaca region, central level responsibility has generated a certain level of dependence on special measures and subsidies. In the majority of the cases analysed, the region ends up being subordinated to the decisions made centrally. It is not surprising, then, that protests and citizen uprisings in the most distant regions in the last few years have protested against centralism. Whether as a ‘State that abandoned its regions’, a ‘Failed State’ in the process of decentralisation or a State that ‘absorbs’ and ‘asphyxiates’ regions, the creation of territorial autonomy has become a topic with many nuances.

It is true that that creation of socio-territorial equity does not exclusively depend on the role of the State and public policies or on the actions of a deregulated or self-regulated market. There are no recipes for success in these matters, but rather pacts and relationships that determine the course and
orientation of local and regional development. According to this premise, the main aim of this study is focused on generating prudent knowledge of a critical nature regarding the process of regionalisation in Chile, going into depth into the experience of the Tarapaca region from the beginning of the transitional democratic period up to the last coalition government led by Michelle Bachelet (1990-2010). Bearing this in mind, this study is organised into five interrelated sections. These reflect an analytical thought process that lasted more than four years and which involved an interpretative methodological strategy that involved referencing quantitative and qualitative information. Studying the case of the Tarapaca region provided the resources to examine the processes, structures and phenomena in greater scope. In this sense, the experience of the Tarapaca region has specificities as well as elements that help to understand both the obstacles to regionalisation and State-regional relations built up in Chile during the last two decades. This strategy was strengthened through analytical triangulation of different sources of information, specifically documental analysis, applied strategic informative semi-structured interviews and the systemisation of information obtained from the national and regional press.

Thus, the first chapter provides a theoretical framework and acts as a way of putting the debate on the consequences of socio-institutional changes in the Latin American socio-territorial panorama into context. The starting points are the paradigms of economic and social development, as well as the concepts and theories linked to Latin American territorial development. State, society and territorial relations are observed, assuming the influence of centralist colonial structures in the creation of Latin American nation states. In particular, the emergence of structuralism and the policy of economic development are considered as turning points that led to the modelling of the debate on development-underdevelopment according to relevance and territorial significance. The emergence of neo-liberalism and the neo-structural undercurrent in Latin America is immediately analysed, as well as the influence of these on public policies and territorial development. After going through the main tendencies of economic and social thought in Latin America, the concepts and debates related to a scenario of democratic restoration, social deficit and territorial concerns are revisited. Among other topics, the thought processes and models that revolve around territorial inequality as an axis of public policies, the rearrangement of the State and the territorial dimension in the criteria of universalism and focalisation are analysed. The analysis of the relationship between State, society and territory in Latin America, centralist-decentralisation reasoning and the creation of multi-level governance for territorial development with equity in the last part of this chapter all deserve a special mention.
The second chapter aims to describe the Chilean State’s process of territorial construction and (re)organisation. In this context, the relations the Chilean State has maintained with the Tarapaca region in different historical and social scenarios are explored. After mentioning a short-lived period of federalism (1826-1828), the relations the Chilean State maintained with the Province of Tarapaca after the War of the Pacific (1879-1883) are looked into. The militarised and colonising geopolitical stamp left by the Chilean State was particularly and vehemently maintained in the area, at least until 1930 when Arica finally became part of Chile and the saltpetre industry began its decline, after being one of the country's strategic economic activities. Given these precedents, State-region relations are analysed as a source of agreement, conflict and tension between centralist-decentralisation reasoning. As a result, the public policies specially implemented for the development of this distant area bordering Bolivia can be considered not only as advances but also as a source of dissemination and/or creation of new socio-territorial inequalities. This situation was also evaluated when analysing how the territorial question became relevant again during the military regime (1973-1990). It is common knowledge that the military regime imposed a set of measures aimed at regionalising the country. However, in spite of its discursive significance, a centralised, authoritarian and vertical political-institutional scheme predominated, which meant that the decentralisation process became something that was not enforced. In this way, the historical-institutional analysis is conceived as a resemantisation of the events that have marked State-region relations, the decentralisation processes and the configuration of the socio-territorial panorama at a national and sub-national level.

The third chapter forms part of an analysis of the main institutional reforms pushed through by the coalition governments (1990-2010) on the topics of decentralisation and regionalisation. The former was outlined bearing in mind the interpretation of the international scenario that, in the last few years, had been characterised by economic instability, the development of info-communicational techniques and the widespread growth of means of transport that influenced changes to the human-territorial relationship. Specifically, this section explores the inheritance and enclaves of political-institutional centralism, as well as the different emphasis that each coalition government placed on decentralisation and regionalisation. The elements of continuity and socio-institutional change are also identified as regards State, society and territorial relations. Finally, considering the persistence of strong socio-territorial inequities, the policies that led, among other transformations, to the creation of the new borough of Alto Hospicio and the creation of the new region of Arica-Parinacota from the dividing up of the old Tarapaca region are analysed.

The last two chapters are dedicated to an analysis of the Tarapaca region’s experience of regionalisation.
In the fourth section, the main socio-territorial transformations at a national and sub-national level are described, as well as the resulting inter-jurisdictional inequalities, urban-rural differences and the phenomenon of urban and residential segregation. In general, the first section of this chapter aims to reconstruct and update the analysis carried out on Tarapaca’s repositioning on the Chilean socio-territorial map. Then, this section delves into the construction of regionalism both from a socio-political point of view and from the configuration and intersection of cultural identities. It is important to mention that this section reaffirms that the inefficiency or strength of the decentralisation process cannot only be explained by recurring public policies with centralised designs. The internal socio-political dynamic and peculiarities have been crucial in crystallising the process of decentralisation and regionalisation. This section also explores the emergency of new territorial actors as well as the reappearance of old social and political leaders who found a platform in the new decentralised arrangement. In the same way, a brief analysis of the influence of private agents and their coordination with the State and with civilian society and the community is considered. It is particularly significant to look at the socio-territorial changes that accompanied the expansion of mining in the north of Chile from the nineties onwards.

The fifth and final chapter looks into three areas of government action related to the governance of regional development. First, the mechanisms and instruments of territorial planning are analysed, in the understanding that they represent a powerful tool for regional development and guiding strategies in the short, medium and long-term. To plan regional development involves thought, creativity and agreement among different players in society. In this sense, in this section, regional planning as an emerging level of articulation along with other constitutive institutional levels of the State-region system is examined. Behind this analysis, classic planning models have been compared to newer and alternative methods, for example multi-scale planning. In the same way, this section not only emphasises the design and articulation of planning instruments for territorial development, but rather the relationships of power that have emerged from the autonomous aspirations of the Tarapaca region are also explored. For its part, the second section of this chapter explores inter-governmental (local, regional and national) relations, as well as the critical junctions related to the political decentralisation process and integrated territorial management of public policies. Finally, the outlines of governance and the political management of regional development in a scenario of socio-institutional change are analysed.

As a corollary, a brief section has been devoted to presenting the study’s findings and final conclusions. To this end, the aims of the study and the findings that emerged from the triangulation of information were revised.
As a result, it was possible to deduce that socio-territorial inequalities cannot necessarily be reduced to a central-periphery pattern. In various relevant dimensions of socio-territorial development (quality of urban life, territorial distribution of income and public safety, for example), the Greater Santiago area includes both the best and worst of Chile. Therefore, it can be concluded that the matter is more complex and nuanced. In the same way, in the discussion on decentralisation and regional development, it is important to consider the impact of internal factors. Even though there have been political-institutional factors that escape the scope of actions that can be decided on at a regional level but which are decisive for the region, the facilitating and obstructive internal dynamics of the regionalisation process cannot be ignored. In this respect, the patronage system and political sabotage, bribery and corruption have gathered momentum as a result of disputes for political power. In a regional climate such as this, where it is most common for political power to be concentrated among a few leaders, participation, rotation and the emergence of new leaders have only a small place. This has not only generated a certain amount of political and social disillusionment regarding the regionalisation process’s scope but details have also had to be provided about the fragmentation of the institutional system for regional development. Thus, the case of Tarapaca not only shows how the construction of regional development is played out in each territory, but also how an efficient, generous and transparent state is constructed due to the regions’ hard work.

An aspect that stands out is that the different coalition governments lacked a ‘political project’ that encouraged the drawing-up of agreements and of a ‘roadmap’ of the decentralisation and regionalisation process. This lack of planning and strategic vision has favoured the reactivation of the public system faced with the decentralising demands of society. The lack of a strategic, long-term political project has not only tended to slow down the decentralisation process but has also affected governance and the orientation of territorial development public policies.

The ineffectiveness of the regionalisation process that regional actors complain about is, to a great extent, related to weak political decentralisation, as well as to cultural and inter-subjective aspects such as the regional actors’ lack of conviction regarding the process of what they consider a false and undermined decentralisation. In this context, regional governments have become an imaginary and artificial entity that represent the national government in the territory. Regional and local actors perceive that decentralisation does not exist because they do not have the faculties to either decide or resolve issues. Public management in this scenario has tended to remain entwined with the bureaucracy of a State system that, in many senses, has continued to operate in a hierarchical, segregated and centralised way.
In the same way, institutional differences (especially at a municipal level), ‘learning as you go along’ regarding the functioning of the regional political-administrative structure, the limits to citizen participation (both in regulations and society itself), socio-institutional restrictions for the generation of new socio-political leaders, the fragmentation and inconsistency of regional identity and the weak territorial convergence between urban and rural spaces are factors that, among others, stand out as the critical nuclei of a process of unfinished regionalisation. The development of the Tarapaca region has not involved simple State intervention, but, rather, has been based on complex reasoning between centralism and decentralisation. The new political institutional blueprint created to strengthen regional development has had difficulty achieving a new, multi-scale, cooperative and integrated dynamic. As a result, regional governments have not been able to respond to citizen expectations of perfecting democracy and leading territorial development and, although advances have been made on decentralisation, these have found it difficult to achieve legitimacy among the different socio-territorial actors or consolidate a social and political culture that is truly regionalist.