

**THE SOUTHERN CONE OF LATIN AMERICA:  
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS  
AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE INHABITANTS OF THE BUENOS  
AIRES METROPOLITAN AREA AND THE PATAGONIAN CITY  
OF SAN CARLOS DE BARILOCHE**

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**Abstract**

On the basis of a theoretical socio-ecological and socio-existential discussion, together with a rootedness approach, the results of a comparative study obtained from an empiric research on young inhabitants of the Patagonian city of San Carlos de Bariloche and the city of Buenos Aires (Argentina), 15 to 25 year-old, are analyzed in order to check what are the representations about the environmental problems in the Southern Cone of Latin America and the Antarctica. The population under study is analyzed in terms of representations, perceptions, attitudes, and behavior, in relation to urban everyday life, environmental problems of the region and the Antarctica.

“Rootedness” is considered as a “total phenomenon”: multidimensional and interdependent among its different dimensions –the spatial, the social, and the cultural dimensions–, and also as an explanatory variable, together with anomie, participation, and consumerism.

Keywords: city, environmental problems, rootedness, Antarctica, Latin America, anomie, participation, consumerism, youth.

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ENRIQUE DEL ACEBO IBÁÑEZ

## Contents

1. On the importance of the environment
2. Research and methodology thereof
3. The Southern Cone of Latin America: Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay
4. Some conclusions

### *1. On the importance of the environment*

Beyond the original concept of environment –which has been centered predominantly on both its physical and natural specification as “ecological system”, social sciences in general, and human Ecology in particular have stressed the anthropological and socio-cultural components inextricably united as well as integrated to any concept dealing with the environment. The environment is a total phenomenon: it is both a natural realm as well as a built up realm hence both interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches are required.

As we know, the Ecological School of Chicago had already achieved important, founding contributions. Counting on the prominent influence of G. Simmel’s sociology (1977, 1908), the theoretical-empirical production of the School of Chicago (R.E. Park, E.W. Burgess, R. Mckenzie, 1974) mainly between 1915 and 1925, is a real sociological landmark when it dealt with Urban Sociology in particular. Every eco-system is analyzed from its unity onwards and its constituent components such as population, milieu, social organization, and technology.

From 1950 onwards, the Neo-Ecological School would somewhat contribute to a higher differentiation between the “ecological-human realm” and the “sociological-urban realm”. It is in this connection that Hawley (1991, 1950) considers that the “community” is a collective response to the habitat involved, an adaptation, so to speak, of the human organism to the milieu it lives in. It is Hawley’s contention that *culture* is an “eco-system considered from an analytic outlook” while an eco-system is “culture considered from a synthetic outlook”. Thereafter, O.D. Duncan (1959-a, 1959-b) will stress that both the *material* culture (technology), and the *non material* culture (organization) have emerged from the *population-environment* relationship.





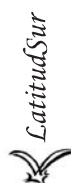
## THE SOUTHERN CONE OF LATIN AMERICA...

A self-criticism of the ecological-human thinking –mainly through D. Erpicun's works (1976) is very valuable especially because of the introduction of the *ego consciousness*, so that the environment can be seen as an *interiorized milieu*. This self-criticism allows links to be established with an existential Sociology (Acebo Ibáñez & Brie, 2006) as a fresh sociological reading of the existentialist thinking (M. Heidegger, J.-P. Sartre, K. Jaspers, etc.). Precisely, the human being, as a *homo conditor*, not only develops strategies aimed at the biological survival during his/her stay in the world but also the human being *founds* space or territories that could be called *realms for meaning*. So, the human being *inhabits* in the existentialist meaning Heidegger (1954) gives to this concept.

It is our contention that we have just found out the founding key for any integral, and integrated analysis of the environment: natural and built up environment, significance and *signifié* of the environment. In a sense, the Ecological School of Chicago has laid the foundation stone for what could be called the *Environmental Sociology* nowadays, even though this branch of Sociology arose amidst an *ecological crisis* the magnitude of which is simply planet-wide: reduction of the ozone layer, atmosphere heating process, industrial pollution, etc., a crisis which is infinitely more aimed at demanding urgent solutions for the environmental problems than at discussing calmly on frames of reference and theoretical postulates. Obviously, however, such an ecological crisis is not free from strong ethic and existential connotations with reference to either its causes or its consequences and the possible ways for the solution and prevention thereof.

This ecological-environmental crisis has lead to immediate, conflict-like approaches in terms of setting out opposing elements: First and Third World, North-South, developed countries and not fully industrialized countries, the global-the local; depredation-sustainability.

The fact of inhabiting is a *proprium*, i.e. a characteristic which defines the human being as such –as Heidegger (1954) put it most aptly in his well known essay *Bauen, Whonen, Denken*, the humans build and construct because they inhabit previously –and not the other way around. Hence, the importance of to dwell, representing not only a human need but also a necessary consequence of his/her *being-in-the-world*. Actually, Heidegger performs a kind of derivation





ENRIQUE DEL ACEBO IBÁÑEZ

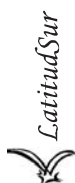
to the physical space, starting from the existential space. So, why not performing a derivation to the ecological-environmental crisis, starting from an existential crisis? Heidegger understands that inhabiting means dwelling, residing but, also, implies contentment, feeling that you are at peace and free, *protected from any harm or threat whatsoever*. Precisely, the basic trait of the fact of inhabiting is *the care for the land of the mortals*. Hence, we realize that any predation, any action likely to contribute to the ecological-environmental crisis is demonstrating that humans have relinquished their very existential vocation. It is quite clear that to *inhabit* should mean to *save the land*.

Consequently, we have developed a theoretical approach to *rootedness* (Acebo Ibáñez, 2006, 2000, 1996), which emerges as a total phenomenon, multidimensional and interdependent, namely: a) *rootedness-space* level (territorial bonding); b) *social rootedness* (sense of pertaining to groups -especially primary groups- as well as real and potential participation in community affairs); and c) *cultural rootedness* (low level of *anomie*). Community attachment and rootedness are phenomena dialectically connected with the ways of living, attitudes, behaviors and representations of reality, in sum -as Max Weber (1977, 1922) would say: with the subjective meanings the social actors are attaching to their social actions.

## 2. *Research and methodology thereof*

On the basis of the above mentioned considerations and theoretical discussions, it has been decided to carry on a study on the representations young people aged 15 to 25, from the cities of Buenos Aires and Bariloche have with regard to the *environmental problems* related to the Southern Cone of Latin America (with a special reference to Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay). So the comparative study is done between one metropolis (Buenos Aires), with almost 3 million inhabitants in its Federal District and almost 14 million in the whole metropolitan area, and the Patagonian city of San Carlos de Bariloche (located in the Province of Rio Negro, Argentina), with almost 120,000 inhabitants.

To design the sample (N = 500 for each city) some sample points have been randomly selected in the city. At each point analysis units have been selected on the basis of age, gender, and socioeconomic level (SEL) quotas. A questionnaire with both opened and closed questions have been administered.





We have measured attitudes and behaviors in relation to the environmental problems in the Southern Cone of Latin America, considering the hypothesis that rootedness, *anomie*, participation, consumerism life and inner life, can be explanatory variables, as well as age, gender and socioeconomic level (SEL). The respective indexes were constructed.

### **3. The Southern Cone of Latin America: Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay**

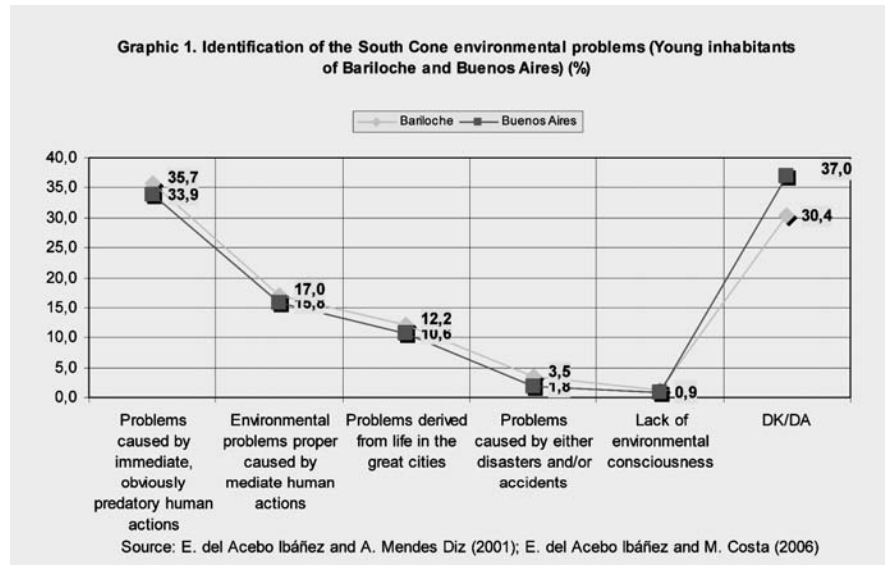
#### *3.1. Common environmental problems: an identification process*

Once the sample populations were consulted with regard to the common environmental problems in the South Cone, it could be assessed that around one third of the interviewees in both cities "is unaware of" or "does not know" the topic (DK/DA). This percentage is in the increase whenever a given subject's *individual anomie level* is greater and his/her *rootedness grade* is reduced.

The answers from the remaining population have been grouped as follows, with similar percentages for both cities:

- a) *Problems caused by immediate, obviously predatory human actions.* (Deforestation, tree cutting, indiscriminate animal hunting, lack of cleanliness, filth, toxic waste, contamination, "couldn't-care-less" attitude of industrialists, drainage system to rivers directly): 33.9 % in BA and 35.7 % in Bariloche.
- b) *Environmental problems proper caused by mediate human actions* (i.e. "reduction of the ozone layer", "greenhouse effect", "El Niño current", "climate changes"): 15.8 % in BA and 17 % in Bariloche.
- c) *Problems derived from life in the great cities* (i.e. "noisy cities", "overcrowding", "air pollution", "smog"): 10.6 % in BA and 12.2 % in Bariloche.
- d) *Problems caused by either disasters and/or accidents* (i.e. "floods", "fires", "oil spillage", "nuclear power plants"): 1.8 % in BA and 3.5 % in Bariloche.
- e) *Lack of environmental consciousness* (i.e. "lack of awareness", "insufficient environmental education", "unawareness that recycling is a need and a must"): 0.9 % in BA and 1.2 % in Bariloche.





The awareness of human beings' immediate responsibility as far as environmental problems are concerned increase a) as subject's individual *anomie* grade decreases on the one hand, and b) as subject's *rootedness* grade / *inner life* grade increase on the other hand. Precisely, interviewees evidencing a "lesser" inner life tend, in a greater ratio, to place the cause of problems "out of the subject".

As can be seen, a great majority acknowledges the human being's "capacity for neglect" as the very first cause for the South Cone environmental problems –that is, problems caused by either the immediate, or mediate human action even though such percentages decrease as interviewees' SEL are also on the decrease. We have detected an interesting fact: subjects with the lesser SEL mention problems caused by catastrophes and/or accidents in a greater percentage: this may be so because their marginality conditions cause them to be more vulnerable or exposed to such situations.

The same date can be perceived in the young inhabitants of both cities, perhaps due to the fact that all them know the environmental problems through the same socialization agent: the mass media. In fact, 3/4 of the young inhabitants of both cities recognize the mass media as the main socialization agent in terms of environmental problems.



### 3.2. Possible solutions to such environmental problems

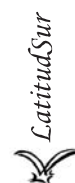
As regards the possible solutions to the above mentioned environmental problems, more than a half of interviewees in the city of Buenos Aires (57.7 %) "is unaware of" or "does not know" –this is most especially noted among subjects evidencing a *lesser participation level*. On the contrary, only the 30 % of the inhabitants of the Patagonian city of Bariloche is unaware about those problems.

From the subpopulation who did answer to this question we have been in a position to assess the following categories:

- a) *Information/ socialization* ("people should be made aware of these problems", "more information is needed"; "there is a need for a worldwide campaign aimed at taking care of the environment", "educating people is very important"): 16.0 % in BA and 10.1 % in Bariloche.
- b) *Control / punishment* (i.e. "stronger controls, regulations", "there is a need for punishment", "fines", "disciplinary measures", "creation of an international police corps"): 10.6 % in BA and 24.4 % in Bariloche.
- c) *Prevention* (i.e. "refraining from using aerosols", "refraining from using leaded gas", "recycling waste and refuse", "creating more green areas", "creating more national parks"): 8.2 % in BA and 14.3 % in Bariloche.
- d) *Administration action proper* (i.e. "government must act", "there must be a political will for action", "a greater economic development must be generated"): 6 % in BA and 10.9 % in Bariloche.
- e) *International cooperation* (i.e. "interdisciplinary tasks performed among countries", "cooperation among nations"): 0.9 % in BA and 2.5 % in Bariloche.
- f) *No solution at hand* (i.e. "there exist no solutions at all", "any solution is Utopian"): 0.6 % in BA and 32.8 % in Bariloche.

After we crossed these results with potential explanatory variables, we have been in a position to observe the following facts:

1. The importance of *Information / Socialization* (Educational Subsystem) is more recognized by the inhabitants with a higher SEL in both cities.
2. The importance of *Control / Punishment* (Normative Subsystem) is mainly mentioned, in both cities, by young men.

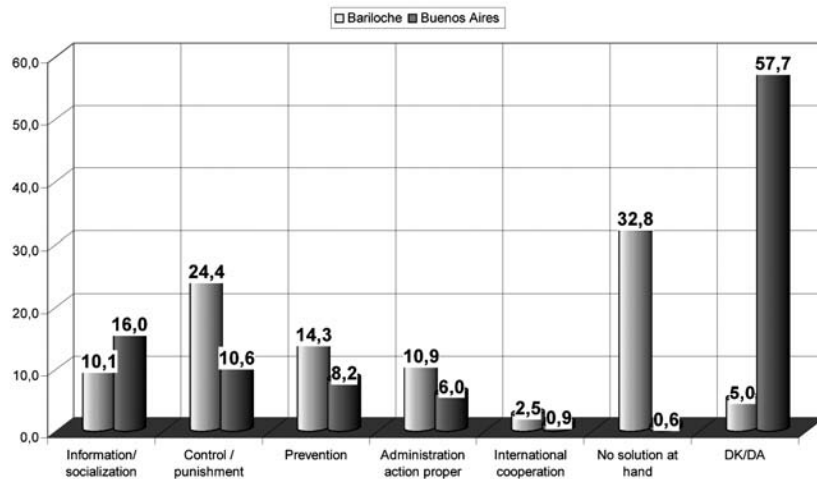




ENRIQUE DEL ACEBO IBÁÑEZ

The young inhabitants of BA consider that the Educational System (information plus socialization) is a transforming axis to solve the environmental problems. But we observed that for the young inhabitants of the city of Bariloche the consciousness is not enough, it must be helped by real controls, prevention and punishment.

Graphic 2. Possible solutions for the South Cone environmental problems (Young inhabitants of Bariloche and Buenos Aires) (%)



Source: E. del Acebo Ibáñez and A. Mendes Diz (2001/2); E. del Acebo Ibáñez and M. Costa (2005/6)

### 3.3. Looking for a possible link between the environmental problems of the Southern Hemisphere and the Northern Hemisphere

When subjects have been asked whether they considered that there existed any link between the environmental problems the countries of the Southern Hemisphere, and the Northern Hemisphere were facing, while the 40.0 % of the young inhabitants of BA replied that there was *no link whatsoever* –particularly among *females*: 45.7% vs. 35.0% males–, only the 27.5% of the inhabitants of Bariloche answered in that way.

We have also found in both populations that the lesser the SEL the higher the percentage of young inhabitants that affirm that there is not link at all between the environmental problems of both hemispheres (i.e. this is said by the 60 % of the individuals of low SEL from both samples).







## THE SOUTHERN CONE OF LATIN AMERICA...

While one third of the BA inhabitants consider that “there is *some link* (this percentage arises to the 44.4 % in the case of the Bariloche inhabitants), only the 17.7 % of the BA sample said that there was a *high link* North/South (the percentage arises to the 28.1 % for the Bariloche inhabitants).

It is shown that in both cities the higher the SEL the higher the relationship found between the North/South environmental problems. Perhaps the more access to information in general and to higher education in particular is one of the reasons for this tendency.

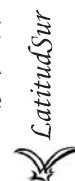
When the subject population was asked about “what sort of links” are present we found that:

- a) The 81.4 % of those BA inhabitants who have said that “*there was some type of link*”, answered that there were *either common or similar problems* (i.e. “these are global phenomena”, “the world is an only world”, “this is a worldwide phenomenon”). The percentage decreases significantly when dealing with subjects whose SEL is at the *lesser level* (this percentage of answers decreased to 22 % in the case of the Bariloche inhabitants).
- b) Among the subjects who answered that “there is a great deal of relationship between the environmental problems of the North and the South”, the 53.8% of the BA sample (and the 68.8 % of the Bariloche sample) privileged *the power the North exerts on the South* (“Southern countries depend on the North”, “both prevention and the economic resources are greater in the North”, “the problems the North is facing have an impact on the South”, “the North throws more waste on us”). This perception is more present in males than females, and it increases with the SEL, in both cities.

### **3.4. Representations about the future in the Southern Cone countries...**

#### *3.4.1 ...in connection with the environment*

Young people from the cities of Buenos Aires and Bariloche were asked about “the future of the SC countries as far as the environment is concerned”, 10 years from now. More than two thirds (68.3 % in BA sample and 64.3 % in Bariloche) was *evidently pessimistic* (the percentage increases in the case of subjects with a *high SEL level* in both cities).



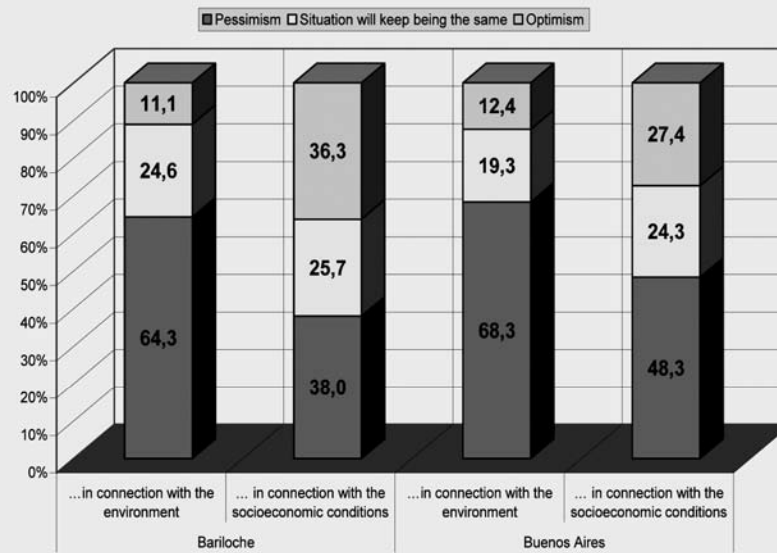


ENRIQUE DEL ACEBO IBÁÑEZ

As far as 19.2 % of the young inhabitants of BA and 24.6 % of Bariloche are concerned, the situation of these countries will be *the same in the future* (a percentage that increases significantly to 33 % within subjects with the *lesser SEL level* in both cities)

Only 12.4 % of the subjects in BA and 11.1 % in Bariloche evidences *optimism*. However, the optimistic subjects at a higher percentage are those young people with the *lesser SEL level* in both cities.

Graphic 3. Representations in connection with the environmental and socioeconomic future of the South Cone (Young inhabitants of Bariloche and Buenos Aires) (%)



Source: E. del Acebo Ibáñez and A. Mendes Diz (2001/2); E. del Acebo Ibáñez and M. Costa (2005/6)

### 3.4.2 ... in connection with the socioeconomic conditions

As regards the socioeconomic future of the Southern Cone countries 10 years from now, the subjects from BA evidence a *marked pessimism* (although lower than the percentage referred to the environment): 48.3 % (the percentage decreases to the 38 % in the case of the Bariloche sample. It should be noted that the percentage of subjects from both cities answering "worse o much worse" increases significantly among young people with a *higher grade of individual anomie*, and a *lesser grade of rootedness*.

Only around the 25 % of the young inhabitants of both cities consider the socioeconomic situation of those countries "will keep being the same".





*Optimism* with regard to the socioeconomic situation is more present among Bariloche sample (36.3 %) than among BA sample (27.4 %).

#### 4. Some conclusions

In this study it could be noted that there exist a great deal of young subjects from the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area and the Patagonian city of San Carlos de Bariloche that lack any knowledge about the environmental problems the Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay) are facing. Percentages climbed to higher figures when subjects were asked about the possible problem solving process. This is likely to mean that the environmental problems are a topic reference is made to in general instead of being a problem the magnitude and consequences of which people should be keenly aware of.

We have been in a position to check up that individuals with a high rootedness level, and a low *anomie* level tend to identify environmental problems of the Southern Cone, with problems dealing with the *immediate human action* in terms of *depredation and/or direct pollution*. This can be envisioned as an explicit acknowledgment of the individual responsibility as far as the etiology of the contemporary environmental problems is concerned. At the same time, this type of social actor (*rooted and not anomic*) tends to give priority as a solution to the *socialization and information processes*. In this case, too, subjects are resorting to the capacity and responsibility of individuals –in that sense that individuals are likely to modify their behaviors through an adequate information and formation process. This also implies a certain hope with respect to the possibility of modifying the human behavior– hence, solving environmental problems.

Perhaps a clear visualization, coupled to a clear experience, of the normative-axiological web of a given society could anchor individuals from which they could be in a better position to identify the environmental problems, their possible causes and solutions.

Conversely, a low grade of *inner life* causes subjects to put environmental problems “away from one’s responsibility” (and mainly “due to natural disasters, to floods”).

A *high grade of anomie* causes subjects to envision the future in a most *pessimistic way*. Representation is both immediate and mediate with





ENRIQUE DEL ACEBO IBÁÑEZ

respect to the environmental problems affecting the Southern Cone of Latin America.

It has also been observed that, as subjects' SEL decreases, their pessimism increases with regard to the environmental problems the Southern Cone is suffering. They also tend to identify the main environmental problem in the Southern Cone to "*the immediate, predatory human action*" while looking for a solution in the *socialization and information processes*.

Conversely, as the subjects' SEL increases, a solution to the environmental problems of the Southern Cone tends to be found in the *control / punishment* procedure.

*Control and punishment* as a way to put a remedy to the environmental problems tend to be emphasized predominantly for subjects within the 20-25 age range and within a higher percentage of female subjects. The same solution is also suggested by individuals suffering from a low actual as well as potential *participation level*.

Young people within the 20-25 age range tend to be more optimistic than subjects within the 15-19 age range as regards *the future of the Southern Cone*, both from an environmental and a socio-economic approach.

Resuming: this study tries to show how the different ways of *being-in-the-world*, the different modes of the urban fact of dwelling ring a bell among the different forms and types of behavior and representations of reality in relation to the present and future environmental problems proper and their probable and desirable solutions.

Indeed, this is an ecological crisis: in order for it to receive both an adequate diagnosis and prognosis –beyond easy, shallow statements and *clichés à la mode*, the following factors must be taken into account: the preexisting social and anthropological crisis, the ways humans have had to dwell onto the face of the planet, humans ways of being and ways of dwelling *hic et nunc*. So, the emerging planet-wide crisis will be demanding more and more *quotas* of existential authenticity and strength, heavy factors making the *light and fast attitude* more and more difficult since this attitude has been fostered by a consumerism as well as utilitarian culture.

We do need existential authenticity and rootedness, i.e. dwelling modes that are indispensable to maintain an adequate course and –which is more difficult, when it comes to modify courses that had





been set quite long ago. If the planet Earth is to become a dwelling, this implies the highest degree of existential commitment between Earth and the humans –for themselves and the others.

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ENRIQUE DEL ACEBO IBÁÑEZ

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THE SOUTHERN CONE OF LATIN AMERICA...

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