

Patagonia: A Diminishing Frontier

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This paper describes how Argentina's remote southern territory, Patagonia, is losing its frontier character, and is being drawn into the main body politic of the country.

Patagonia has long been the orphan among Argentina's regions; neglected, forgotten, and seldom regarded seriously by Buenos Aires. The national government's primary concern has been that it be more fully populated by Argentines in order to guard against Chilean claims to the region. Despite its relative neglect, Patagonia is a huge area of over 300,000 square miles (the size of two Paraguays or seventeen Dominican Republics), and it comprises twenty-eight percent of the Argentine territory. A vast upland desert that slopes gently down to the Atlantic from the Andes in the west, Patagonia includes the provinces of Neuquen, Rio Negro, Chubut, Santa Cruz, and the Territory of Tierra del Fuego.

No region of Argentina is more remote than Patagonia. The distance from Buenos Aires to San Carlos de Bariloche is more than 600 miles (1000 km), and to Ushuaia on the Beagle Channel it is more than 1600 miles (2600 km). These distances, along with its difficult climate, have kept Patagonia on the settlement frontier until the recent past.

Frontier zones are typically peripheral and remote from centers of dense population [end p. 62] education, culture, and government. They are underdeveloped, and usually characterized by some type of climatic handicap; for example, drought or cold. These characteristics of remoteness and physical difficulty give them a lower level of regional development and fewer amenities for the population.

In the last twenty-five years, Patagonia has made great progress overcoming its frontier character. The quality of life for the region's population, now approaching one million, closely approximates that of much of the rest of the country. The cities are growing rapidly. Comodoro Rivadavia has passed the 100,000 mark, and Neuquen is approaching that figure. Two closely related explanations may be suggested for Patagonia's growth out of "frontierdom" since about 1955. The first is strategic, relating to the presence of Chile along the region's western and southern margins. The second is economic, reflecting the growth of the non-sheep-farming sectors of the economy (agriculture, petroleum, manufacturing, tourism, and the service industries), whose expansion has required improved land and air linkages within the region and the rest of the country.

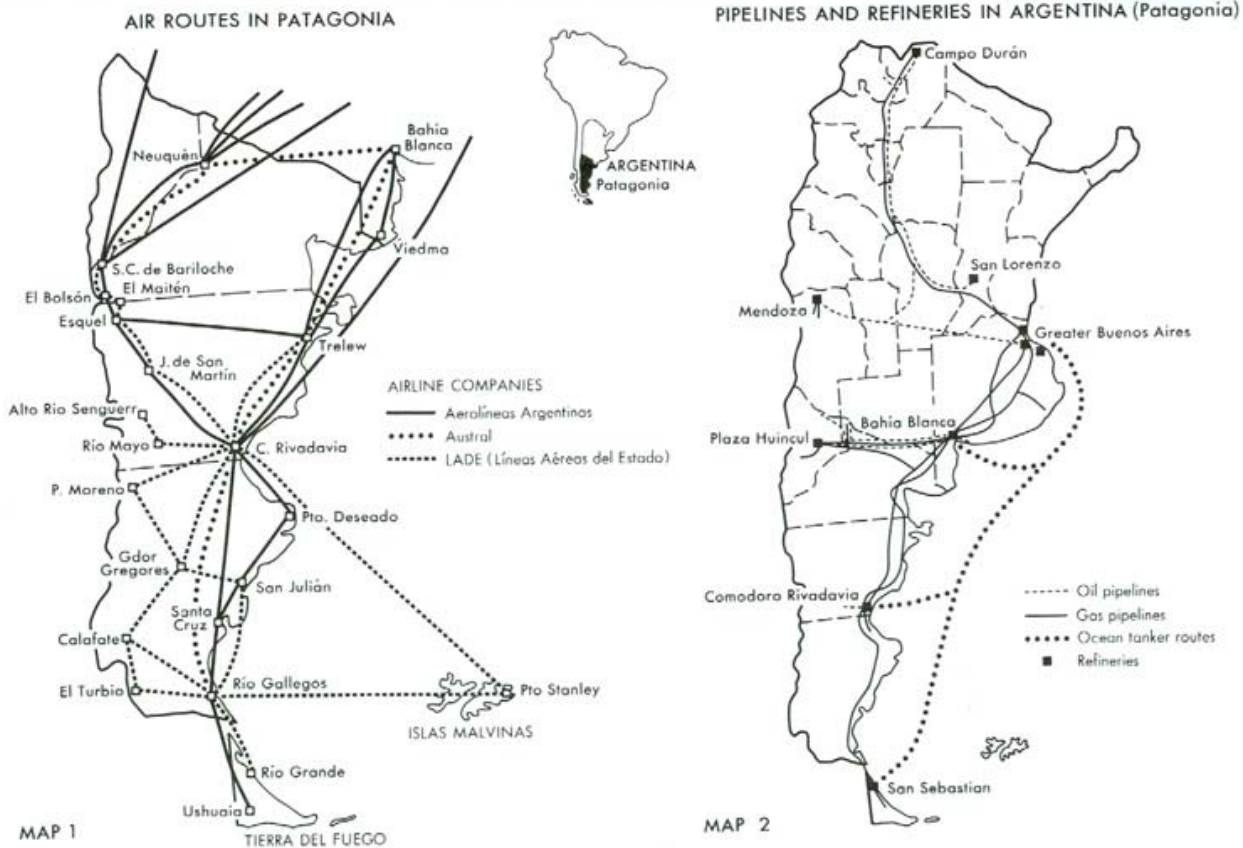
The presence of neighboring Chile has strongly influenced the Argentine government to encourage economic development and settlement in Patagonia. After 1881, when Chile relinquished its claims to Patagonia east of the Andes, and General Roca had defeated the region's hostile Indians for the last time, the Argentine government was confronted by the strong disinclination of its people to settle the lands of the south. As sheep farming began to prosper in Patagonia, and as farm land in the river floodplains expanded, a need for both seasonal and permanent labor developed. Much [end p. 63] of this need was filled, over the years, by Chilean workers. Chilean migration into Patagonia continues today as a result of two factors. First, population density on the Chilean side of the Andes is about double that of the Argentine side. Second, the per capita Gross National Product (GNP) on the Argentine side is two and one-half times higher than on the Chilean. Thus, migrating Chilean workers not only gain employment but also work for higher wages than they would in Chile (Imaz, 1971, 44-54). The seepage of Chilean migrants into Argentine Patagonia has continued for a century. The number of Chileans now in residence there is estimated between 200,000 and 300,000 persons, more than half of all Chileans living in Argentina (Comision Catblica Argentina de Inmigración, 1977, 53). The proportion of Chileans in the population varies from eight percent in Neuquen to twenty-eight percent in Santa Cruz.

Chileans are culturally different from Argentines and strongly nationalistic; therefore, Argentine cultural values do not easily assimilate Argentine values, nor easily become Argentine nationals. Argentine authorities have thus been concerned about the internal security of Patagonia, and have taken steps to make settlement more attractive.

One measure has been to expand the road network; buses, trucks, and automobiles now move easily anywhere in Patagonia. Most of the roads are well maintained gravel surfaces, except for the paved arterial routes leading to Bariloche and Comodoro Rivadavia.

The highway system is supplemented by a dense network of air routes interconnecting the region's main cities through regular jet [end p. 64] service by Argentina's two major airlines. Smaller centers are serviced by light turbo prop Twin Otters and Fokkers operated by the Argentine Air Force as Líneas Areas del Estado, or LADE (Map 1). Patagonia's urban and small town population thus has air service to Buenos Aires either several times a day, or in the case of small and remote settlements, two or three times a week. Railroads are of less importance in Patagonia, although one rail line penetrates the

Rio Negro Valley and beyond to the oil fields near Plaza Huincul (Map 2), and another line reaches Bariloche.



In the industrial sector, the expansion and prosperity of agriculture in the Rio Negro Valley has made food packing, food processing, box making, wineries, and other industries related to agriculture the principal types of manufacturing in the valley. These represent the traditional industries of Patagonia. On the other hand, the textile industries represent a more recent manufacturing investment, particularly in Comodoro Rivadavia and Trelew, where wool is washed and carded, and where wool and nylon are combed into tops and spun into thread. At the cottage industry level, Bariloche manufactures sweaters and other textile goods for the tourist trade, and it has long been a center of chocolate candy manufacture. The light manufacturing industries of Patagonia provide an important source of employment for the region's new population.

Fuel for industry is abundant and inexpensive. Two of Argentina's major oil and gas fields are located in Patagonia at Comodoro Rivadavia and Plaza Huincul (Map 2). The petroleum industry has offered jobs in Patagonia since the discovery of oil at Comodoro in 1907. Hydroelectricity is [end p. 65] generated at several large, newly developed power sites. A recently operational aluminum refinery at Puerto Madryn uses power generated on the Futaleufu River in the Andes to refine alumina concentrate imported from Australia. Another heavy industrial establishment at Sierra Grande (Rio Negro) converts iron ore into pellets.

The growth of manufacturing, agriculture, and tourism in the national parks has led to the expansion of the service industries. Government payrolls, for example, are the largest single source of income in the five capital cities. Many government employees are recent arrivals from the North who have brought with them an appreciation of the arts and a desire for continuing and higher education. Patagonia's University of Comahue in Neuquén is one response to the demand for higher learning. Others are Don Bosco University in Comodoro and smaller institutions in Bariloche and Trelew.

Sheep farming has not contributed to the region's growth, for this traditional activity has not expanded for many years. However, it still serves as the economic mainstay of many Patagonians.

Rough frontier life in Patagonia is now largely a thing of the past. The improved quality of life has resulted from expanded urban economies, stimulated directly and indirectly by federal government policy to populate Patagonia more fully with Argentine nationals. Although Patagonia in a locational sense remains as distant as ever from the national hub at Buenos

Aires, improved communications and quality of life have largely erased the image of the frontier from the face of Patagonia.
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