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# What Money Can't Buy

By Sebastian Hacher

Benetton's corporate PR campaign against the Mapuche people in Argentina has broken up on the wave of independent media activism. Sebastian Hacher reports

The region called Patagonia reaches from the center of Argentina to where the continent touches the South Pole, and from the Atlantic Ocean to the Andes mountain range. Patagonia is 30 percent of the territory of Argentina, about 780,000 km<sup>2</sup> where 80 percent of the oil reserves of the country are concentrated, as well as great water resources and some surviving areas of virgin land.

Mapuche means people of the land. They have been living in Patagonia for the last 13,000 years on both sides of the Andes (Argentina and Chile). The Mapuche considered themselves part of nature, with their own traditions, social and political organisations and language.

From 1872, the Argentine State tried to conquer their territory by all means possible. Julio A. Roca, Minister of War and later the country's president, finally achieved this goal annexing that great portion of land to Argentina using the tools of war: concentration camps and Remington machine guns.

As a result of the conquest, during the year 1885, the government made a one-off gift of 4,750,471 hectares of land to 541 people. Among them, one of the most important groups was the CTSA (Compañía Tierras del Sur Argentino, which means Lands of the Argentine South Company), formed in 1889, with offices in London and Buenos Aires.

## BENETTON, THE NEW KING

A century later, during the 1990s, Argentina was going through a time of privatisation, the closing down of various industries and financial speculation. The land underwent the same fate and many foreign businessmen took advantage of the opportunity to buy wire-fenced paradises. All of them became owners of thousands of hectares, but nobody managed to reach the same level as Benetton. In 1991, the Italian group bought the CTSA and other lands which altogether added 900,000 hectares, about 9,000 km<sup>2</sup>.

From those lands, Benetton obtained 10-20 percent of the wool used in more than 100 million garments produced by the corporation every year. The group has 280,000 sheep and 16,000 cattle on its land. Benetton has also begun to diversify its activities over the last few years. One of the new businesses is logging. In 5,200 hectares of land they have planted a total of 5,500,000 pines of North American origin. 'As time goes by, the forest industry will gain in importance and perhaps equal or surpass the others', says Diego Perazzo, vice-president of the CTSA.

## A NEW CONQUEST

From their arrival, the Benetton group became a symbol of the new colonisation of Patagonia. This became more evident in October 2002, when the Mapuche Curiñanco-Nahuelquir family were evicted from 500 hectares of land in Santa Rosa, an area located in Cerdón de Leleque within the boundaries of Benetton's property. On 30 August, 2002 the local Benetton office declared that the Santa Rosa ranch was owned by the company, issued a report claiming that the property was not to be used for cattle rearing and stated their intention to take control of it. After two months, the police dismantled and seized the Curiñanco's belongings and the family returned to the city of Esquel. The same piece of land remains unoccupied today.

In May 2004, the provincial courts restored definitively that piece of land to the CTSA company, stating at the same time that the Mapuche family was innocent of any usurpation crime.

#### PUBLIC RELATIONS AND COMMERCIAL IMAGE

Ever since the conflict with the Mapuche people began, all the press strategy of the Benetton group has been in the hands of Burson Marsteller (BM)<sup>1</sup>, one of the world's greatest public relations corporations.

Although it's an almost unknown entity for the Argentine public, BM has a long tradition of working in the country. Its debut was during 1978, when it was contracted to white-wash the image of dictatorial president Jorge Rafael Videla and his government. The soccer World Championship was about to begin, and meanwhile 30,000 people had been kidnapped, tortured and assassinated; events which formed the backdrop to BM's famous campaign which ran the slogan 'Argentines are right and human'. One of its objectives was to try to deflect the denunciations of human rights violations by the survivors, people in exile and the relatives of the disappeared.

BM present themselves as a consultancy firm 'managing relations between organisations and their different publics: clients, shareholders, mass media, government, community or employees'. They also sell themselves as experts in handling crisis, neutralising groups of activists and, above all, as capable of 'orientating the perception' of the great public.

#### HIDE THE MAPUCHE

Regarding the conflict with the Mapuche people, the strategy of BM and Benetton changed over time, but they always had a clear goal: to try to hide the real conflict. In the beginning, their activity was centered on denying that it was a political conflict, trying to demonstrate that this was a case of 'common delinquency'.

On the contrary, for the Mapuche it is a political and even an historic problem. In February 2003, the '11 de Octubre' organisation of the Mapuche community declared that 'Benetton's racism had become clear when they sued the Mapuche Curiñanco-Nahuelquir family for damages.' While circulating on the internet, the mainstream media didn't pay any attention to these Mapuche statements. It was only in September 2003 that some independent journalists made and showed a TV documentary about the conflict. At the same time, the circulation of information and pictures about the Benetton-Mapuche conflict grew across independent sites such as [<http://argentina.indymedia.org/features/pueblos/>] and [<http://www.nodo50.org/azkintuwe>].

On November 2003, an article dealing with this problem was published for the first time in English on [<http://www.metamute.org>] and another on [[www.corpwatch.org](http://www.corpwatch.org)]. Since then, the spontaneous translations, the screenings and the republishing of articles has become a near daily event on a huge scale.

In an official presentation, BM made a statement that would become unwittingly prophetic: 'A Company's reputation and the internet can be a dangerous combination (...) Once information is issued, it stays in cyberspace forever, it is impossible to erase it and, as such, it is necessary to deal with it.'

#### TO INVADE THE INTERNET

Since the net became 'Mapuche territory', Benetton's PR strategy has changed, and become increasingly desperate. 'We are dealing with a group of activists', said Federico Sartor, head of Benetton's press office, when talking about the Curiñanco-Nahuelquir family. At the same time, Sartor said that Company Lands of the Argentine South 'were independent of the Benetton group'. He also stated that their 900,000 hectares in Patagonia represented 'no more than 10 times the size of the

nation's capital city'; when every school kid knows that the city of Buenos Aires is only 20,000 hectares.

But a new phenomenon was in the making. The international mainstream media, which had in the last year scarcely mentioned the conflict, was now catching on and had to use journalistic material produced by the alternative media as its main resource.

Two months before the trial in May 2004, a new website was launched [<http://benetton.linefeed.org/>] with dozens of translations reviewing the conflict with the Mapuche people. Other websites such as [<http://www.mapuche-nation.org/>] and [<http://www.mapuche.nl/>] had whole sections dedicated to the conflict. It also started to circulate a video internationally made by the group Gente de la Tierra (People of the Earth). As the trial came nearer, it became clear that activists' plan to 'overwhelm the public with alternative information' had paid off.

#### THE LAST ROUND

Things were difficult for Benetton. Seeing their PR strategy failing, when the trial date was at hand, BM and Benetton radically changed their approach stating that they had always wanted to dialogue with the Curiñanco family and that they did not consider them delinquents. In addition, Benetton claimed that they were preparing investments to employ more people in Argentina.

But it was already too late. On 26 May, the day of the trial, local TV channels transmitted live the legal discussion between the Curiñanco-Nahuelquir Mapuche family and the multinational Benetton. People could talk of nothing else.

In the court room, representatives of the Mapuche filed in, especially many female elders. At the end of the first trial day, after the judge ruled that the Mapuche could not be accused of delinquency, these same women improvised a traditional dance in the streets which was transmitted live to the rest of the country. Inside, while trying to get a journalist to listen to their version, one of Benetton's press officers wept with frustration.

Mauro Millán, the spokesman of the 'Organización Mapuche-Tehuelche 11 de Octubre', explained that 'We have managed to strike a big blow to Benetton, without even 1 percent of their resources'. On the failure of the corporate PR campaign he added 'there are things that money can't buy.'

#### FOOTNOTES

1 In English, a list of BM's activities: <http://www.corporatewatch.org.uk/profiles/burson/burson4.htm>. For information on Burson Marsteller's work during the dictatorship, see 'Why, What' by Susana Kaiser, Department of Media Studies/ Latin American Studies Program, University of San Francisco, 'Argentina's Dapper State-Terrorist' by Marta Gurvich, The Consortium Magazine, 19/08/1998. In Spanish, for a large list of academic and historic sources on Argentina's dictatorship and BM see: [http://www.hum.gu.se/ibero/publikationer/anales3.4/pdf\\_artiklar/fuster.pdf](http://www.hum.gu.se/ibero/publikationer/anales3.4/pdf_artiklar/fuster.pdf)

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