Objectivity, Subjectivity, and Intersubjectivity in Economic Geography: Evidence from the Internet and Blogosphere

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Prevailing attempts to reconcile paradigmatic differences in human and economic geography have tended to occur at the methodological level. Methodological concerns, however, do not adequately address the chasm that divides constructivist and positivist geographers in their understanding of the first-person subject and third-person object. Separability of the first- and third-person positions perpetuates a Cartesian world of subjects and objects. A relational economic geography coordinates subjective and objective relations intersubjectively through the second-person position. This intersubjective approach highlights knowledge construction as an interrelated phenomenon arising from the social interactions and communication of economic agents. Subjects and objects change positions while interacting, so that objective facts and judgment become subjectivized, and subjective experiences also become objectivized. We illustrate the role of interpersonal and reciprocal knowledge construction using the case example of computer vendor Dell, which recently launched a business Weblog to interact directly with its customers. Weblog discourses reveal communicative behavior directed both at seeking objective information and at locating subjective experiences, transforming objects and subjects in the context of socially situated intersubjective relationships. *Key Words: Dell, intersubjectivity, objectivity, subjectivity, Weblog.*

在方法论的层次，一直存在一种试图调和人文地理学和经济地理学范式差异的努力。建构地理学者和实证地理学者对于第一人称和第三人称主题对象的理解存在分歧，地理学界在方法学上对此表示关心，但是，并没有充分解决这一裂痕。可分的第一和第三人称的立场使得笛卡尔世界的主体和客体永远存在。关联经济地理通过第二人称的立场，建立了主观和客观关系以及主体间性的坐标体系。这种主体间性的方法突出了知识建设，作为一个相互关联的现象产生于经济代理人的社会交往和沟通。主体和客体在相互作用中改变立场，因此，客观的事实和判断变得主观化，主观的经验也变得客观化。我们以电脑供应商戴尔公司为个例，说明人际之间和交互的知识构建的角色作用，戴尔公司最近推出了企业博客，直接与它的客户进行沟通。博客文章揭示了沟通行为的双重性，即同时追求客观信息和主观经验，在主体间性这一社会背景上转化了主体和客体。*关键词：戴尔，主体间性，客观性，主观性，博客。*

Los intentos más importantes por conciliar las diferencias paradigmáticas entre la geografía humana y la económica ocurren de preferencia a nivel metodológico. No obstante, el simple interés metodológico no es suficiente para salvar el abismo que separa los geógrafos constructivistas y positivistas sobre su modo de ver sujeto y objeto en primera y tercera persona, respectivamente. La separabilidad de las posiciones de la primera y tercera personas perpetúa un escenario cartesiano de sujetos y objetos. Una geografía económica relacional coordina intersubjetivamente las relaciones subjetivas y objetivas mediante la posición de segunda persona. Tal enfoque intersubjetivo destaca la construcción de conocimiento como un fenómeno interrelacionado que surge de las interacciones sociales y la comunicación de agentes económicos. Los sujetos y objetos cambian de posición mientras interactúan, de tal suerte que los hechos objetivos y el juicio se subjetivizan, y las experiencias subjetivas a su turno se objetivizan. Ilustramos el papel de la construcción de conocimiento interpersonal y recíproco utilizando como ejemplo el caso del vendedor de computadores Dell, que hace poco lanzó una Weblog comercial para interactuar directamente con sus clientes. Los discursos de las Weblogs ponen de manifiesto un comportamiento comunicativo a la vez orientado a buscar información objetiva y a localizar experiencias subjetivas, transformando objetos y sujetos en el contexto de relaciones intersubjetivas socialmente ubicadas. *Palabras clave: Dell, intersubjetividad, objetividad, subjetividad, Weblog.*

The question of appropriate methodology has been a subject of debate and tension in human and economic geography over the past two decades. Methodological concerns can be traced to paradigmatic distinctions that are frequently expressed in terms of dualistic characterizations not only at the methodological but also ontological and epistemological levels. There is, however, increased interest in the discipline in moving toward some reconciliation of mutually exclusive research domains, in the form of mixed and multimethods (Phillip 1998) and triangulation of methods (Yeung 1998). Methodological pluralism, however, does not necessarily lead to ontological or epistemological pluralism. Indeed, the nature of the latter remains largely unclarified, and objectivist- and subjectivist-oriented epistemologies continue to divide human geographers.

Concerns regarding paradigmatic dualism are not new. Structuration theory (Giddens 1981) as well as actor-network theory (Latour 1993), for instance, have contributed to metatriangulation by highlighting the need for diverse data, both quantitative and qualitative (Cohen 1989). In this article, however, we are interested in reconciling paradigmatic differences at the level of positionality. We suggest that an economic geography that takes into account some level of interdependency between first-person (subject) and third-person (object) relations might contribute to a narrowing of the debate. We outline the problems associated with a first-person–third-person dualism in knowledge production, and suggest a rethinking of positionality as traditionally conceived in the field of economic geography, which has seen an increased commitment to empirical diversity (Clark 1998). Such diversity is best manifested in grounded fieldwork that involves some level of interaction between the researcher and the researched or among the researched. We argue that knowledge enters into economic geography scholarship by way of the intersubjective realm—a second-person position—that is maintained by social interactions. These interactions can be captured in communicative situations between the researcher and researched (e.g., interviews with firms, organizations, and other relevant economic actors) or, in the context of this article, among relevant economic actors that constitute the researched. To do so, we focus on Weblog discourses initiated by computer vendor Dell and show how the discourses are maintained by social interactions online. In redirecting the debate to interactivity–driven intersubjectivity, we highlight the social organization of economic systems that produces different discourses, including rational discourses that are oriented toward objective information describing Dell's technology and production and practical discourses that seek to understand both an object and subject in terms of socially situated interactions.

The focus on Dell's Weblog (or blog) is particularly relevant in light of economic geography's increased attention to relational ontology (Boggs and Rantisi 2003). The relational turn highlights the role of associational life and social exchanges in the geography of economic activities (Amin and Thrift 2000). Economic productivity is facilitated when exchanges are more socialized, and social exchanges are enhanced when geographic relations assume the form of industrial clusters (Dicken and Malmberg 2001), agglomeration economies (Scott and Storper 2003), learning regions (Cooke, Uranga, and Etxebarria 1997), and creative cities (Florida 2003). A common denominator in the relational literature is that tacit knowledge is intersubjectively coproduced, and the spatial transmission of intersubjective knowledge is negatively affected by distance. Social interactions between economic agents that reflect the ease of communication have been found to be influential in these geographic relations, yet the nature of interactions and communication has not been adequately unpacked. The notion for an instance of "being there" is central in producer–customer interactions (Gertler 2003), but firm relations are often researched as a third-person object; however, economic efficiency and productivity have much to gain when firms are not experienced just as a remote object but when they establish immediate and familiar spatial relations with their customers or suppliers—a story that Asian economic geographers have reminded us in the literature on guanxi-mediated social exchanges among Chinese, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese firms (Yeung 1997). The relational turn thus presents the field with an opportunity to pursue an intersubjective approach that focuses on the object–subject relation, which we argue later is relevant to the unpacking of the "relational" in economic geography.

In the next section, we describe prevailing dualisms that underscore economic geographic practice and propose the second-person intersubjective position as a way of bridging the subjective first-person and objective third-person positions. The latter, for instance, is largely responsible for differences in disciplinary methodologies; that is, qualitative and quantitative methods. This is followed by a discussion of the communicative basis for an intersubjective approach that collapses the object–subject dissonance. To illustrate the usefulness

of an intersubjective approach, we analyze a case study of Dell's Weblog. The article concludes with a discussion of the role of an interactivity–based approach toward empirically grounded research that involves interacting economic and social agents.

Dualism and Intersubjectivity in Geographic Research

Human and economic geographers today generally work with two notions of how knowledge is produced: an objectivist epistemology where economic agents operate largely in a subjectless context shaped by external forces and a subjectivist epistemology that is derived from the primacy of human intention, beliefs, and values in geographic explanations. Such paradigmatic dualism can be realized at several levels, from the ontological to the methodological. For instance, a paradigm that is associated with realist ontology and an objectivist epistemology would yield different methodological responses than a paradigm that is premised on relativist (constructivist) ontology and a subjectivist epistemology. These differences are perhaps best manifested in divided research practices between positivists and postpositivists. In this article, however, we are interested in reconciling differences in terms of positionality; that is, the first- versus third-person research situation where the former highlights the role of introspection and insights speaking in the first-person position and the latter emphasizes the third-person analytic use of theory and impersonal accounting of facts.

There are several reasons for our focus on positionality. First, scholars who have attempted to collapse methodological dualism through mixed methods have been criticized for privileging positivist conditions of internal validity, justification, and hypothetico-deductive testing and relegating qualitative methods to a secondary exploratory status (Deetz 1996). Alternatively, quantitative methods are used to establish context and qualitative methods are seen to be primary for discovering new insights (e.g., Yeung 1998). In both cases, there is a presumption of the supremacy of one methodology. Second, critiques indicate that realism and objectivism, as well as relativism and subjectivism, constitute incommensurable paradigms with different ontological assumptions, making it difficult to integrate foundationalist and antifoundationalist knowledge forms (Jackson and Carter 1991; Weaver and Gioia 1994).

Ontological incommensurability can be manifested in the nature of discourses in economic geography. Latour (1993) notes that foundationalist ontology that

underscores the positivist epistemology is concerned with the preservation of commensurability, including conditions of logical and internal consistency, so that instruments of measurability are assigned an important function. On the other hand, constructivists and interpretavists support a relativist ontology that describes reality in terms of individual meaning making. In the context of economic geography, the aforementioned incommensurability dilemma is manifested in positivists' views that material economic reality cannot be reduced to the social dimension because it is not possible to ignore the objects that are used to construct the social dimension and criticisms raised by constructivists and interpretavists that economically derived spatial realities are hardly asocial. Interestingly, ontological dissonance does not seem to be accompanied by a similar divide at the methodological level, as pluralist methodologies are deployed within a single ontology and used to highlight or explain both the (apparently) objective and subjective aspects of economic reality. In other words, although incommensurability might exist ontologically, accommodation is possible methodologically and, for the purpose of this article, through positionality. To deny the possibility of the latter is potentially to commit what Mingers (2001) has termed "epistemic fallacy"; that is, limiting what we know to current knowledge so that no other form of knowledge is possible.

Indeed, practicing epistemology predominantly in the context of objectivist–subjectivist differences is an increasingly difficult task as economic geographers grapple with the intersubjective dimensions of spatially oriented social interactions among economic actors. By focusing on positionality, we seek to address the criticism by critical geographers that the positivist geographer overly depends on a single source of knowledge through appeals to objective world realities and truth. Rather, we propose a triangular structure of inquiry in economic geography, more specifically relational economic geography, that coordinates subjective, intersubjective, and objective relations. This reflects the reality of doing research in a social world for economic geographers. To understand why positionality is relevant for a critical quantitative economic geography, we turn to the relationship between first and third persons and their interaction through a second person through whom intersubjectivity is introduced and developed.

Tension between critical and positivist geography can largely be attributed to a perceived inverse relationship between subjectivity and objectivity; that is, if an individual including the researcher is trying to be objective, then he or she is not trying to be subjective.

Objectivity and subjectivity are thus often treated in opposition to one another (Nater, Schatzki, and Jones 1995). A linear view of the relation between the subjective and objective can nonetheless be challenged. To see why this might be the case, objectivity is first discussed as follows.

Objectivity, at its simplest, indicates a value-free analysis (Ferber 2006). In the Popperian sense, objective knowledge is independent of a person's claim to knowledge; hence an objective scholar also observes and analyzes from a distance (that is, from third-person positionality). Indeed the tension between objectivity and subjectivity lies in the perception that being rational and reasoned belongs to the realm of objectivism because of the benefit of distance, in contrast to being emotional and irrational in the realm of subjectivism. In Rescher's (1997) philosophical defense of objectivity, he notes that objectivity does not mean a point-of-view-less-ness, nor need it be dehumanizing, as might be implied by its proponents' emphasis on reason and rationality. Rather it is a judgment that abstracts from personal idiosyncrasy or group parochialism. To him, objectivity must be highly accessible because good judgment (and reason) lies in the public domain. Good judgment, as implied by Schneider (2001) in his exchange in this journal with Demeritt (2001) on the scientific rigor of objective climatic research, would mean not jumping off a tall building irrespective of personal beliefs. Such a judgment will also tend to be more standardized with nomothetic implications. That knowledge is contextual in the sense that place and location are not invariant does not imply that objectivity should dissolve into relativism. Rather, for Rescher, geographic contextuality can be an objective fact; for instance, snow is unlikely to occur in the tropical city of Singapore.

Even Rescher (1997) recognizes that factual knowledge is relational. In a social world, the third person interacts with other subject(s) so that intersubjective communication through interviews, discussions, engagements, or what Clark (1998) has called "close dialogue" in the context of economic geographic practice, is central. A useful example of the importance of intersubjectivity in interpersonal knowledge is provided in Lerman (1996), where a teacher learns in interactions with a young student that an objective fact like the number one is an odd number to the extent it is not composed of two even halves. Shared knowledge in this case through intersubjective constructions permits subjective positioning brought on by the situation. Objects in mathematics, Lerman concludes, are objective in the intersubjective sense.

In other words, the object–subject relation is far more intertwined than separate.[1] A subject, for instance, is often the object of discourse and realization of the subject requires its other, the object, that allows the subject to distinguish itself (Lazar 2001). Attention to the subject and his or her subjectivity underpins much critical work in geography and the social sciences. Because subjectivity belongs to the realm of experience, it is articulated in the first-person position.

Subscribing to a wholly first-person viewpoint, however, raises considerable challenges for the scientifically or analytically oriented economic geographer. First, in the more radical sense, a paradigm that assumes that subjectivity is ontologically primary perpetuates a Cartesian world of objects and subjects. Second, if individual economic actors construct their own subjectivities, this makes it difficult to pursue an intersubjective construction of knowledge. Third, to the extent that practitioners of positivist economic geography would like to see a more public view of knowledge, there are considerable difficulties in accessing the idiographic interiorities of personal experiences without compromising the public domain. Put another way and paraphrasing Latour (1993), economic systems and practices can become too social and narrated to render any object populating them meaningful. It seems far more reasonable, instead, to access subjectivity in the intersubjective sense, as intersubjective knowledge includes the development of a language, and thereby meaning, and this language is anchored in the public. This point implies that subject and subjectivity are not necessarily synonymous (Lazar 2001) because, as argued later, subjectivity can be constructed through social interactions and communication with other economic actors. Indeed, a popular theme in economic geography today relates to the socialization of learning among relevant actors in the creation and reproduction of knowledge and the importance of face-to-face interactions or other social and community relations (Storper and Venables 2004). In the paragraphs that follow, we elaborate how sensitivity to intersubjectivity—the second-person mediator—is relevant for bridging critical and positivist economic geography.

To see how intersubjectivity can be introduced into economic geography, it is necessary to unpack intersubjectivity itself. One of the first scholars to write extensively on the subject matter was Habermas (1970, 1979), who, in outlining a theory of communication competence, suggests that a prerequisite for communication is that a community of meanings be identical for members of a community. Efficacious communication

takes place when intersubjectivity develops and is maintained in the relations of the community members or participants. For Habermas, social meanings that lead to social actions are primarily intersubjective meanings that are constituted within a sociocultural context. Although it is possible to understand and directly access an object, it is only when we are engaged in speaking or discourses that subjectivity emerges. He writes:

> On the one hand, the analytic use of language allows the identification of the matters in point (thus the categorization of particular items, the subordination of elements under classes, and the inclusion of sets). On the other hand, the reflexive use of language assures a relationship between the speaking subject and the language community, which cannot be sufficiently presented by the analytical operations mentioned. (Habermas 1970, 122)

Intersubjectivity does not reject an objective world: The analytic dialogues of the health insurance community, for instance, involve the construction of subjects' (clients) insurability through facts and life histories (age, income, history of health, etc.). For Habermas, however, analytical construction of language is necessarily embedded in the intersubjectivity of reciprocal and mutual understanding, in this case, between the insurance agent and the client.

As Mitchell (2003) notes, intersubjective argumentation and dialogues are central to scientific knowledge production. That Pluto is no longer considered a planet is the result of a consensus arrived at among members of the International Astronomical Union in August 2006, who subsequently reclassified Pluto to dwarf or minor planet status. Yet this "fact" is by no means objectively accepted, as many astronomers have participated in a Web petition against the reclassification of Pluto (see the petition at "Nature Newsblog," http://blogs.nature.com/news/blog/conference_reports/international_astronomical_union, last accessed 10 January 2007). Scientific knowledge is therefore not necessarily uniformly constituted, but when a critical number of members reach a consensus that confidently reflects a shared world, variation in viewpoints (and therefore subjectivities) converges to Kuhnian normal science (see also Barnes 2001). The notion of intersubjectivity is therefore important if positivist economic geography is not to be criticized for its reflexive and discursive deficit.

Intersubjectivity itself can be approached at three levels, and de Quincey (1998, 2005) suggests that there are weak and strong forms of intersubjectivity. In the weak form, subjectivity is primary and

intersubjectivity through communication and relating is secondary, in the sense that interactions are not a necessary prerequisite to arrive at an agreement, consensus, or conclusion. Intersubjectivity here might involve agreements between subjects or within a group about objective facts. A strong form of intersubjectivity, on the other hand, would imply that intersubjectivity is primary and it ontologically precedes subjectivity. Here the object–subject positionality is cocreated, and subjectivity coemerges as a result of the social or community interactions and relationships. Between the weak and strong forms lies an intermediate level of intersubjectivity, where individual experience is shaped by mutual interactions and relationships. Herein lies the role of shared experiences of the subjects as they communicate and interact, as opposed to the weaker form of intersubjectivity that is characteristic either of the positivist world of agreements about objective facts, or the radical constructivist world, where realities are only subjectively constituted. De Quincey (1998, 2005) refers to the weaker forms of intersubjectivity as intersubjectivity–1 (which tends to be dominated by third-person agreements) or intersubjectivity–2 (where first-person subjectivity is still primary to second-person intersubjectivity). Only in intersubjectivity–3, which is a strong form of intersubjectivity, can we expect relationships and therefore interactions to be ontologically primary (see also Fullbrook 2004).

The question of a more critical approach in positivist economic geography then lies in the deployment of intersubjective methodologies at some level when the research situation calls for primary data that require some form of a relationship between the researcher and researched (Schoenberger 1991; Clark 1998). Alternatively, the influence of relationships might be reflected in those of the researched, as illustrated in the Dell example that follows. To the extent that language is public, subjectivity requires a mediator—an object—for its development. Communication thereby encompasses a trinity of relations, namely, the object, subject, and mediator. Examples of intersubjective methodologies might be argumentative consensual intersubjectivity that leads to agreements between participants arising from observations or speech exchanges between individuals, dialogical intersubjectivity that includes argumentation marked initially by disagreement or differences in underlying motivations, or double hermeneutics where the interpretative process of texts involves the emergence of awareness of the researcher's bias or prejudice (Smaling 1992). In addition, an increasingly popular form of intersubjectivity

relates to virtual intersubjectivity, where face-to-face interactions and interpersonal relationships are substituted, or even replaced, by interactions and relationships online (Cheong and Poon 2008). Here the nature of association might be nonphysical, but it is nevertheless maintained by social interactions that hold significant meaning for the participants.

In general, economic inquiry lends itself considerably to objectivity-based scholarship, in large part because economists are predisposed to explaining social behavior in terms of utility, preferences, and rationality. Social interactions comprise economic agents drawing up contracts and making decisions that facilitate spaces of calculability (Callon 1999). Absent are more humanistic notions of (irrational) desires even though firm marketing strategies suggest that creating and fulfilling consumer desires, or more recently consumer passions, are part of marketing practices (Oropesa 1995; Chang, Lai, and Chang 2006). Perhaps because human communication and interactions are limited to economic transactions and exchanges, an intersubjective school has emerged that challenges the primacy of third person objective research in economics. Driven by the French School of intersubjective economics (Dupuy 2004), intersubjective economists link traditional objective economic enquiries like technological diffusion or financial market behavior to reciprocal and interpersonal processes. Economic behavior related to learning in research and development knowledge and innovation systems or financial speculation, for example, are understood in terms of intersubjective imitation between economic agents and collective social experience rather than independent rational economic agent action.

In sum, introducing intersubjectivity to object–subject relations implies that economic realities are not simply a result of some objective external correlates but also an inclusive social experience that incorporates the object, subject, and mediator through interactions that potentially shape one another. We focus on the aforementioned virtual interactions that are associated with dialogical intersubjectivity to illustrate how economic geography might become more sensitive to social experiences, using positionality described in this section as the principal conceptual motivation.

Intersubjectivity and Economic Geography

Although the notion of intersubjectivity was originally conceived by Habermas to criticize positivism and scientism for monopolizing the production of

knowledge, he does, on the other hand, propose that knowledge is intersubjectively realized through rational discourses. Through a discursive space for discussion, reason and rationality arise and make social consensus possible. Such a consensus is achieved through communicative competence (Habermas 1979) that is characterized by a number of prerequisites or "ideal speech conditions," including the condition that the listener understands the speaker's intention, and the speaker, in turn, adapts to the worldview of the listener. This process establishes the mechanism for a shared understanding of the utterances. Participants should also be able to engage in the discussions or conversations freely and equally. Such communicative competence operates through a system of self-reflection that lowers the barriers to meaningful social relations. Through the process of exchanges, disagreements, or questioning, participants are able to arrive at a mutual understanding.[2] In short, an ideal communicative situation involves some form of a relationship and it is through relationships that individuals access information and facts that enable a rational course of action. Implicit in communicative competence then, is that objectivity is intersubjectively constituted from individual subjectivities. The act of interacting in the form of debate, discussion, disagreement, and coexperiencing all result in a social organization of language that produces both literary novels and technical or scientific reports.

Our goal is not to privilege one language over another through methodological unfolding but to suggest that both are relevant and even necessary in the intersubjective production and communication of knowledge. As literary scholar Burke (1966, 46) had observed, many terminologies in language are borrowed from the physical and material because "nature exists to provide us with terms for the physical realm that are transferable to the moral realm." Rather than completely abandon the "clean, uncluttered analyses" of scientism in favor of "rich, multifaceted, but messy and ambiguous narratives" (Code 1991, 169), we suggest that one advantage of the intersubjective approach is that it potentially corrects the excess of one language over another, through reconstitution between scientists' tendencies to simplify and condense language on the one hand and interpretavists' tendencies to expand language through complex narratives, on the other hand.[3]

Habermas's interpersonal interactions typically involve at least two persons, and the social organization of communication presumes a communicative behavior that seeks to reduce a perceived distance between the participants. Interactions are said to occur

when the interacting objects mutually influence each other through communicative acts (Wagner 1994). The relevance of interactions in economic geographic inquiry is that they manifest perceptions of immediate spatial relations. Places of immediacy in turn create places of familiarity. It is in places of familiarity that dialogues, scientific exchanges, shared experiences, and thereby mutually constitutive knowledge are forged. In this article, we are concerned with interactions in the virtual context, particularly those associated with Weblogs. Although discourses in blogs are transmitted through virtual texts, bloggers and some researchers have nonetheless come to regard such computer-mediated interactions as a new form of conversation, dialogue, and social networking (Herring et al. 2004).

The focus on the blogosphere on the Internet requires some defense. With the rapid emergence of computer-mediated communication, examining the "relational" in economic geography begs the question of what might constitute social and economic interactions on the Internet. In particular, critical geographers might be concerned that Web-enabled technologies distort the human condition (Kitchen 1998). Communication scholars, however, have argued for some time that although the electronics and digital revolution has transformed the relationship between information flows and real places, social interactions are not necessarily diminished (Meyrowitz 1985). The physical environment might have a more significant influence on the quality of social spaces in face-to-face interactions (e.g., holding an executive meeting at an office is more effective than a meeting held at a supermarket). On the other hand, in the digital age, the nature of interactions is much less determined by the physical location, because an individual can be spatially isolated and alone and yet by engaging in online chats not be socially alone. Weblogs enable interactions once limited to real and live encounters, by changing the social quality of information flows spatially. The blogosphere can therefore be regarded as a "parasocial" space (see Meyrowitz 1985), where new forms of conversations and dialogues are being fostered that facilitate the development of shared worlds. In parasocial worlds, Meyrowitz has noted that people can experience intimate feelings (for example, the loss of a "media friend" such as Princess Diana through the mass media) despite the absence of real, physical relationships. By offering access to parasocial encounters through the expansion of dialogical spaces on the Internet, Dell's blog might be seen less as a technological medium and more as an improvement in communication.

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project's study on "Content Creation Online," more than 53 million (44 percent) adult American users have contributed material online. Eleven percent of Internet users have read or visited the blogs of other Internet users and about one third of online visitors have posted material to a blog (Lenhart, Horrigan, and Fallows 2004). Technorati, a popular blog search engine, reports that it is currently tracking nearly 112.8 million blogs, with more than 175,000 new blogs and 1.6 million new posts daily (http://www.technorati.com, last accessed 10 January 2008).

Intersubjectivity and Weblogs

Blogs are updated Web pages that consist of short posts. Walker (2005, 50) defines a blog to be "a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first. Typically, weblogs are published by individuals and their style is personal and informal." Winer (2003) notes that the distinctive nature of the blog is its personal diary-like qualities, with spontaneous narratives through an "unedited voice of a person." Most blogs connect with other blogs via hyperlinks to form a larger "blogosphere." A typical blog is primarily textual and might combine text, images, and other forms of communication. Blogs range from personal "bloggeral" diaries that document subjective and intimate thoughts to long, focused essays and more objective information journals. Although blogs cannot be categorized distinctly, several types of blogs have emerged as more popular forms, including those dedicated to alternative commentary on contemporary politics, current events (Matheson 2003), and religion-related news and discussions. Other examples of blogs dedicated to specific topics are blawgs, which cover legal matters or are written by lawyers; blegs that are used to beg for money; pundit blogs that examine news or punditry; war blogs that tackle war issues; and tech blogs that focus on information technology, such as the Dell blog.

Questions might be raised as to whether blogs constitute real-time physical and social interactions. Some researchers contend, however, that reality is also constituted by socioeconomic actors (Jones 1995). Text-based interactivity on the Internet has become an increasingly popular form of social interaction with bloggers and readers offering opinions, articulating ideas, encouraging critical debates, facilitating wider participation

and reflection, and establishing a sphere for cultivating human relationships (Kitchen 1998; Mortensen and Walker 2002; Barton 2005). Indeed, some have suggested that the Internet offers through blogs an important public space for realizing communicative competence, by creating places of familiarity that enable discourses from the periphery without institutional or corporate domination (Heng and Moor 2003; Barton 2005).

Habermas's notion of the public sphere is associated with the interactions and discussions of individuals in public affairs that in turn contribute to civil society development. To the extent that publicness is facilitated by geographical accessibility, the Internet, through its function as a more decentralized communication medium, can be said to be a relevant public space for constituting this "sphere" (Papacharissi 2002). This is despite concerns that economic spaces online are being populated by corporations, the aim of which is arguably to commodify the technology that potentially replaces rational communication with more utilitarian ends. Such concerns, although acknowledged, should be balanced by observations that a global culture of resistance to corporate and market control is growing. A noteworthy example relates to the online interactions that have contributed to the partial paralysis of recent World Trade Organization and International Monetary Fund meetings involving transnational corporations. As Dahlberg (2001) has noted, full autonomy, in this case from the market, is not necessary for interactions online to contribute to the development of rational discourses.

Moreover, Graham (1998) has observed that Internet spaces can be appropriated by marginal groups, for transformation to personal and intimate worlds that traditional media cannot provide within the precincts of corporate control. Because we encounter both objective technological information and Dupuy's (2004) subjective expressions of consumer desire on blogs, business blogs in particular are useful for demonstrating interactivity-based intersubjectivity.

DIRECT2DELL

Personal computer (PC) vendor Dell set up its DIRECT2DELL blog on 11 July 2006 with the aim of addressing customers' needs for more immediate spatial relations with the company. Dell's rise has largely depended on the use of the Internet to coordinate its suppliers, producers, and customers. The company requires suppliers to access its networks of partners, collaborators, and customers via communication protocols on the Internet, leading Fields (2004, 106) to conclude that Dell's business model is "arguably the most innovative procurement, production and distribution organization ever built." Such a model also places a high premium on computer-mediated social interactions as might be seen in the following motivation for the development of DIRECT2DELL:

> DIRECT2DELL is all about conversations. You are encouraged to speak in an honest, informal voice and to foster productive, candid dialogue that can help us learn from each other. We'll listen, as well as post, and ensure we engage in two-way conversations. Our intent is to provide a timely and accessible alternative to more formal, one-way channels of communication. (http://direct2dell.com/about.aspx, last accessed 15 January 2007)

Social interactions are championed by Dell because it sells most of its PCs directly to customers (Angel and Engstrom 1995; Fields 2004, 2006). Dell's build-to-order (BTO) model bypasses the retail market and allows its customers to customize their PCs to meet their needs directly. In a published interview nearly a decade ago, the company's founder Michael Dell explained the success of its BTO model in the following manner: "Close customer relationships have allowed us to dramatically extend the value we deliver to our customers" (Magretta 1998, 5).

The BTO model is developed around virtual integration that involves a tightly coordinated supply chain between inventory control and customers. It maintains the appearance of a vertically integrated structure although Dell outsources most of its production both locally and globally, except for its final assembly. Michael Dell describes the company's relationship with its external suppliers as a partnership where they are "treated as if they're inside the company" (Magretta 1998, 2). Real-time information on customers is rapidly passed on to suppliers, who then manage their inventories based on the information they receive (Kraemer, Dedrick, and Yamashiro 2000; Kapuscinski et al. 2004). Augmenting its just-in-time system are suppliers' logistics centers that are located within a few miles of the assembly plants. Geographical proximity between the inventory centers and assembly plants, and virtual integration between the plants and customer orders, ensures minimum inventory stockade, or less than two weeks and in some cases only a few hours of inventory.

Virtual integration implies that the boundaries between Dell's suppliers and customers are blurred.

Michael Dell revealed that the company's customer service is largely outsourced to Asia through overseas call centers, but "the vast majority [of customers] think that person works for us" (Magretta 1998, 2). In other words, although much of Dell's upstream and downstream activities are not produced in-house, they are nonetheless "vertically integrated" through virtual relations, and hence virtual proximity is at the core of the company's BTO model.

Dell's virtual proximity model ran into trouble in recent years, particularly in its consumer market. Customers complained that the company's interactions with them were remote and distant. Particularly critical of Dell's remoteness was Jeff Jarvis, a journalist and currently a professor of journalism. In his series of "Dell Hell" commentaries on his popular BUZZMACHINE blog, Jarvis documented his frustrations regarding his experiences with Dell, charging that its BTO model "should have a different, direct, new and better relationship with its customers. Instead it's worse" (9 July 2005). Jarvis's blog drew many similar comments complaining about Dell's "look, don't touch" policy,[4] forcing the company to launch DIRECT2DELL in an attempt to reconnect with its customers. Virtual integration, for instance, objectivizes customers in the form of information and data flows. Customers, on the other hand, sought interpersonal exchanges, not just technical information and solutions. DIRECT2DELL was offered as a new communication medium that cultivates a Dell community, where mutual experiences can be shared across a deterritorialized market.

On the day that DIRECT2DELL was launched, some sixty-three comments were posted.[5] Over a span of about three months, more than 170 posts were received. Customers' reactions to the blog arrived within an hour of its launch, with some complaining that it was "just another great channel to sell more stuff" (11 July 2006, 4:46 p.m.). Many customers reacted favorably, however, encouraging Dell to "engage your critics early and often" (11 July 2006, 12:50 p.m.), to "have an open and honest exchange" (11 July 2006, 3:38 p.m.) and to "capture the conversation" (11 July 2006, 5:00 p.m.). Notwithstanding the technological medium of blog-based communication, customers perceived themselves to be having a dialogue with Dell, addressing its digital media manager Lionel Menchaca directly, for example, as "Lionel" and even "dude." Similarly, Menchaca addressed his blog customers informally, writing: "Thanks for the feedback guys" (11 July 2006, 10:28 a.m.).

Textual discourses suggest, as outlined in earlier sections, that although some bloggers sought information that was product or technology oriented, others were more interested in describing their individual experiences. Object-oriented discourses, for example, can be illustrated by questions that seek technical information such as "Why does my Dell keep hanging?" (12 July 2006, 10:03 a.m.), or, suggestions for technical improvement: "how about posting your video bits in a more mac- and share-friendly format like quicktime or an embedded player?" (11 July 2006, 1:17 p.m.). At least a half dozen of bloggers also related their experiences with distant call centers. A comment from one participant on his difficulties with Dell's customer service in India led to other participants revealing similar experiences. Indeed, some of the discussions were near instantaneous; that is, within twenty minutes of each other, approximating real-time conversations. In particular, the conversations focused on the social barriers to communicative competence, because of the perception that Asian call centers were culturally distant from customers' experiences with Dell's products. There appears to be a general consensus about the failure of Asian call centers to respond adequately to customers' technical problems. Several bloggers expressed the need for Dell to be more locally engaged with them, with one indicating that diminished intersubjective social access to Dell was causing him to switch to competitor Hewlett-Packard.

Besides sharing mutual experiences such as the example of foreign customer centers, blog participants view DIRECT2DELL as a means to subjectivize the company:

> I think the content needs to work hard at engaging a broader swath of people. Let a little more hang out; let your personalities, humanity and everyday life over there shine through a little. (11 July 2006, 1:17 p.m.)
> Instead of using this blog as an avenue to advertise your latest products, why not talk about Dell as a company, what it's like to work at Dell, why people choose to work at Dell as opposed to competitors . . . etcetera—stuff that people don't find out from the reviews at Tom's Hardware or in a Dell direct store. (11 July 2006, 2:09 p.m.)

In the preceding posts, participants expressed their desire for a more intimate form of interaction with Dell, seeking reciprocal accounts of the company's everyday activities, as the participants in turn related theirs in the blogosphere. It is also important to note that blog writers are aware of an invisible public to whom they are "speaking" their thoughts, although in the conversations analyzed here, bloggers also perceive that they are having a two-way conversation with Dell:

Mr. Menchaca, I have an idea. I think it may be appropriate for one of Ms. Bosworth's threads—but I have this feeling (see my other posts) that she isn't listening. On the other hand, I get the impression you are. (20 August 2006, 12:06 p.m.)

DIRECT2DELL, it would seem, cultivates a new place of comfort for Dell's customers in a space in which it might otherwise be difficult to build human ties. Milgram's (1977) notion of the familiar stranger is relevant here as familiarity is built around patterns of communicative norms through shared language. The social phenomenon of familiar strangers might imply loose connections among Dell's blog customers, yet as some researchers have argued, community solidarity can be cultivated in such hybrid spaces through perceptions of social inclusion and real relationships (Paulos and Goodman 2004).

Dell's BTO model regards its customers as virtual objects, but spatial behaviors also arise from the everyday lives of its customers. Hence, customers reject DIRECT2DELL as a space in which only objects and events can occur but also a familiar place that reflects the subjectivities of their experiences.

Don't worry about sounding stupid. Don't worry about showing your warts. If you want people to get involved in the conversation start talking to them like people you meet in the grocery store, not like you met them at a trade show. (12 July 2006, 9:19 a.m.)

Because DIRECT2DELL was developed to initiate dialogues with Dell's customers, the company's responses to criticisms, inquiries, and suggestions through Menchaca appear to be personal, contributing to blog customers' perception of immediate spatial relations with the company:

Thanks Dave for sharing your Earthling experience. Good stuff. Please stay tuned for MP4 video format that is Quicktime friendly. (11 July 2006, 10:13 p.m.)
Regarding the XPS700 shipping delay—wanted to first apologize for any frustration this has caused. (12 July 2006, 4:56 p.m.)

In one instance, Menchaca responded within ten minutes to a customer from New Zealand who had complained that the company had shipped her the wrong laptop:

Hi . . . apologizes for the frustration. Please send another comment with your email and order details (not to be published) and I'll alert my NZ colleagues. (9 August 2006, 8:39 p.m.)

Conversations were not limited to Menchaca and blog participants but occurred among the participants themselves as well. For example, in response to an earlier post that had invited Dell to write about its everyday life, one blog writer agreed:

Ditto. People buy Apple as much for its culture as they do the product. Apple builds its culture into its products, that's how they get away with it. . . . Make a blog about the culture of Dell. (11 July 2006, 11:24 p.m.)

Overall, the example of dialogues through conversations in DIRECT2DELL serves to demonstrate two main points. First, customers seek a resocialization of Dell's virtual relationships in favor of more immediate and familiar spatial relations. Although not a perfect analogue of Habermas's communicative competence, the blog provides the possibility for greater proximate social interactions both in time and space. To borrow from Bal's (1993) second-person narratives, the blog helps Dell to move its customers closer to "here" from "yonder" by redirecting them to "there." In other words, blog-based interactions appear to have blurred the social spaces of the unfamiliar, diminishing the distinction between customers who are here and those who are somewhere else in the yonder. This increases the company's spatial and communicative accessibility as its deterritorialized call center services in Asia could not. Second, DIRECT2DELL does not appear to be a place to develop consensus as conceived by Habermas. Although Dell does call its blog conversations a "debate," it approximates a practical discourse where members are engaged in communication that is largely free from coercion and where they share relatively similar worldviews that facilitate communicative competence. An intersubjective-motivated approach, however, also requires that we evaluate the outcome of the social interactions, in this case, the blog discourses, in terms of behavioral changes. Dell's virtual relation to its customers is not solely described in terms of a space for inventory (i.e., sales) or solely as autonomous subjects whose experiences are isolated but to understand customers as both objects and subjects. This object–subject relation is embedded in a second-person dialogical form as the blog narratives are repleted with the "you" pronoun and not simply "I" (first person) and "it" (third person). Such intersubjective interactions appear to have an effect on Dell's behavior. In the following post, which arrived some six months after DIRECT2DELL was launched, its digital media manager wrote:

we are listening and learning as we go. In fact, the blog is all about those conversations, and it's why I'm recognizing this debate that goes on about and around us. (3 January 2007, 6:15 p.m.)

Furthermore, following bloggers' criticisms about the lack of information regarding a Dell laptop that had caught fire in Osaka, Dell immediately tried to provide an explanation and subsequently recalled 4 million of its lithium-ion batteries.[6] Such perceived behavioral change to take on criticisms positively away from its previous third-person silence led one blog customer to write:

> Your willingness to acknowledge mistakes and failures is what allows me and others to believe in your efforts. No one can relate to any person or corporation that doesn't admit failure or say I'm sorry... you communicate authenticity, integrity and compassion. ... Listening to the customer and caring for the customer is much more about direction than it is about arrival. (3 January 2007, 7:44 p.m.)

Conclusion

We have attempted to reconcile paradigmatic dualism in economic geography at the level of positionality. Our focus on positionality is motivated by methodologists' silence on how subjectivist and objectivist epistemologies might be intertwined in pluralist methodologies to achieve hybrid geographies (Kwan 2004). We suggest that geographers attempt to tackle these concerns by reframing the third-person object and first-person subject's separability, that is, the intersubjective second personhood, where knowledge and understanding are mutually and reciprocally influenced. One advantage of proposing an approach based on intersubjectivity is to move us away from a Cartesian objective–subjective approach that presumes that dialogues of this sort, and even disagreements among economic geographers, constitute a democratic social process that contains the possibility of rational consensus and "mutual tolerance" (Scott 2004, 492).

Much of critical geographers' criticisms against positivist economic geography is associated with the absence of the subject and the omnipresence of the object. This criticism is reasonable if economic systems are to be studied as part of the social and cultural world. Increased attention to a more subject-permeated world in positivist economic geography, however, need not shift from "it" (third person) to "I" (first person), which submerges individuals completely to a self-centered first-personhood. Rather, a first- or third-person narrative

can be connected to a second person narrative when the researched's actions are dialogical and thereby interactive in kind.

In the example examined in this article, these interactions are captured in online blog discourses between Dell and its customers, but dialogues, conversations, and interrogations can also occur between the researcher and researched in real time, face-to-face interviews with firm executives or other economic actors. Through the act of interrelating, the phenomenon under scrutiny originates as a third-person narrative that progresses to a first–third person dialogue but which is understood in the second-person narrative. In other words, an intersubjective approach implies that social interactions are the principal narratives, embedded in the second person who at times operates in the first position, the knower, and at other times in the third position, the known. Because geographic relations underscore positive social interactions, an intersubjective approach is also necessarily spatial and is therefore central to the constitution of a relational economic geography.

The relevance of intersubjective positioning, as opposed to either an objective or subjective positioning, is illustrated through Dell's attempt to improve its BTO model. Dell's business model is based on exploiting the advantages of information technology by linking its customers and suppliers through virtual integration. Although virtual integration was originally constituted as a site for inventorying customers, consumers desired a more familiar place to locate both objective information and subjective experiences. This desire was partly met through the establishment of the DIRECT2DELL blog, which created a place for discussion, criticisms, and questions. In so doing, both Dell and its customers operated much less from a virtual distance that was designed to meet utilitarian ends and much more as intersubjects of a technological community.

We further observed all three levels of de Quincey's (1998, 2005) intersubjectivity in Dell's blog discourses. Some discourses contained third-personhood; for instance, the "it-ness" of distant call centers and technological fixes. Others reflected individuals whose viewpoints were uninfluenced despite the blog discussions and declared their intentions to switch to Dell's competitors. It would appear that intersubjectivity is not ontologically primary for these individuals. Perhaps the strongest indication that Dell has engaged in behavioral change following intersubjective interactions with its bloggers is its attempt to reinforce customers' sense of spatial and temporal immediacy by reacting relatively swiftly to blog criticisms. The

company's founder and current CEO, Michael Dell, further decided to engage his blog critics and customers by inviting some of them for a face-to-face forum in January 2007 (http://direct2dell.com/one2one/archive/2007/01/12/4938.aspx, last accessed 10 February 2007).

It is fair to say that our focus on Dell and its blog to illustrate intersubjective interactions is not without shortcomings. First, the selection of the company for scrutiny represents one case study of corporate participation in consumer life. Other corporate blogs also exist, but Dell's is relevant because its BTO model places the company at the center of its virtual networks of production and customer relationships. This in turn requires a communication model that facilitates navigation of the networks. Dell's communication model, however, raises questions of the generalizability of its model of interactions. Second, although the case points to relatively lively "conversations" between Dell and its consumers as well as among the consumers themselves, the interlocutions are rarely long, perhaps because of sociotechnical constraints associated with communication online. This arguably poses some barriers to the achievement of "true" communicative competence in the public sphere. Third, given that Habermas's ultimate goal is to enhance civil society through communicative competence, the example of Dell might be criticized for its potential role in colonizing rather than democratizing public space online. Habermas's original public sphere, however, was conceived for the bourgeoisie, so real and physical nonmarket spaces of interactions also face similar problems of social and political exclusion.

Notwithstanding the preceding shortcomings, the example of Dell points to a model that previously reduced its market to the transactions of information objects among economic agents. The relative success of DIRECT2DELL demonstrates the importance of embedding markets in an intersubjective context: In the face of a deterritorialized market where face-to-face exchanges are difficult, Weblogs provide a means to coconstruct the interpersonal and to relocalize relationships spatially. An intersubjective approach in economic geography would potentially imply that on the one hand objectivity is subjectifiable, and on the other hand subjectivity is also objectifiable, because objects and subjects change in the process of reciprocal knowledge construction (Bal 1993). Objectifiable subjectivity is revealed, for instance, when an individual's subjective experience like that of journalist Jeff Jarvis becomes a collective "fact" among many of Dell's customers. On the other hand, intersubjectivity requires that the object enter into a relationship and become subjectivized in the process as manifested in the online accounts of Dell's blog customers' personal experiences. Sensitivity to an intersubjective approach presumes that knowledge is interrelated, and interrelated knowledge may be best realized in a three-person relation that results in a spatial repositioning from here and yonder to there.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. This article is not the first to highlight the relevance of intersubjectivity in relational knowledge. In casting structuration theory along ontological lines, Cohen (1989) points out that Giddens to some extent acknowledges intersubjective exchanges in the negotiation of meaning in social practices. Giddens's approach to relationships, for instance, involves the role of interpretative exchanges that give rise to social and structural rules as well as resources in the constitution of social life in locales. Similarly, the role of intersubjectivity in social science research has been recognized by Sayer (1992). For him, the dualistic conception of subjects and objects poses a barrier to the development of knowledge because knowledge and its practice are interrelated rather than separated; however, Sayer also set out to outline a realist rather than an intersubjective approach in the practice of research.
2. Habermas (1996) indicates that communicative freedom also involves obligatory norms where participants are interested in reaching mutual understanding through an intersubjective relationship rather than engaging in social discord.
3. See, for example, the debate among Markusen (1999), Peck (2003), and Hudson (2003).
4. See Silverman (2005).
5. A post represents the basic unit of a blog conversation (de Moor and Efimova 2004).
6. Dell's vice president of engineering, for example, wrote a detailed commentary explaining the cause of its faulty lithium-ion batteries (see direct2dell.com/one2one/archive/category/1022.aspx, last accessed on 15 January 2007).

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