

## Resilience

International Policies, Practices and Discourses

ISSN: 2169-3293 (Print) 2169-3307 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/resi20>

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To cite this article: Sara Keene (2015): Marijuana and the limits of knowledge: implications for economic vulnerability and resilience in Northern California, Resilience, DOI: 10.1080/21693293.2015.1094169

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21693293.2015.1094169>



Published online: 20 Oct 2015.



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# Marijuana and the limits of knowledge: implications for economic vulnerability and resilience in Northern California

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how subjective meanings of well-being condition the realm of options in defining, assessing and responding to economic vulnerabilities in a region of Northern California I call 'Claytown'. Economic restructuring has left many Claytown residents with inadequate employment opportunities. Marijuana production, in this context, has filled an important economic gap, bolstering livelihoods and local businesses. However, despite its economic significance, public officials have adamantly avoided public discussion, assessment and planning around the industry. I argue that this construction of marijuana production as a 'public secret' not only has implications for socio-economic security in Claytown, but also provides critical insights into the potentials and pitfalls of resilience thinking. To this end, I call for greater attention to the ways in which subjective meanings and discourses condition understandings of socio-economic vulnerability and resilience, treating both terms not as predetermined concepts, but as objects of analysis in and of themselves.

## KEYWORDS

Resilience; vulnerability; subjective meanings; marijuana production; northern California

## Introduction

Resilience – as a concept, discourse and form of governance – pervades contemporary development literature and practice. The term can as readily be found in ecology and economics literature as it can in United Nations Environment Programme and World Bank reports. Resilience is hailed by proponents as the solution to ecological, social and economic crises (Hopkins, 2009; Rose, 2014; UNEP Finance Initiative [UNEP FI], 2014; World Bank Group, 2014), while others have critiqued the term and its application for naturalising inequality (Aradau, 2014; Reid, 2012), reproducing neoliberal ideologies (Walker & Cooper, 2011) and de-politicising development practices (Grove, 2014).

But what exactly is 'resilience'? Many academics have lamented the lack of consensus as to what 'resilience' actually means, calling for greater conceptual precision and clarity of the term (Aven, 2011; Brand & Jax, 2007; Myers-Smith, Trefry, & Swarbrick, 2012). Some of these debates have focused on the importance of differentiating between normative and descriptive definitions of the term (Strunz, 2012), or between the use of resilience as a descriptive

versus boundary concept (Brand & Jax, 2007). Others have called for the development of a 'general theory' of resilience that emerges from comparative case studies (Walker et al., 2006).

More recently, debates have shifted from what resilience 'is' to the effects of resilience thinking. Recent literature has done much to illuminate the shortcomings of resilience thinking, particularly with regard to how it has been employed to further a neoliberal agenda without addressing questions of power or politics (Cretney, 2014; Hornborg, 2013; MacKinnon & Derickson, 2012; Reid, 2012; Walker & Cooper, 2011; Walsh-Dilley, Wolford, & McCarthy, 2013). Resilience thinking often obscures the structural conditions under which vulnerability is produced and treats disasters and crises – and, by implication, conditions of poverty, inequality and insecurity – as inevitable. Through this logic, the 'burden of security' is shifted 'from states to people' (Reid, 2012, p. 67) and communities and individuals become responsible for 'adapting' to disasters and crisis (Aradau, 2014; Evans & Reid, 2013). The implication of this form of resilience thinking is an abdication of politics; rather than offering a 'promise of security', resilience thinking normalises disasters and inequalities and 'disavows the transformative capacity of collective action' (Aradau, 2014, p. 87). By politicising a term that has from its inception been largely devoid of any conception of power, critical analysts have done much to reveal the potential political and physical dangers associated with 'resilience thinking'.

Yet despite these conceptual and political problems, some have argued that it is worthwhile to reappropriate the notion of resilience to understand agency, resistance and possibilities for transformation (Cretney, 2014; Cretney & Bond, 2014; Grove, 2013; Hornborg, 2013; Nelson, 2014; Walsh-Dilley et al., 2013). While the concept has often been implemented in ways that neglect the *production* of vulnerability – not as a 'surprise', but rather as a product of identifiable historical processes – resilience nonetheless embodies a notion of well-being, aspiration and sense of 'the good life' that is potentially transformative. Such a 'radical articulation of resilience', as Cretney describes, could go beyond focusing exclusively on adaptation to disasters and crises by seeking 'to address the root problems with the capitalist, consumerist society which has arguably resulted in many of the environmental and social issues we are dealing with today' (2014, pp. 636–637). This approach to resilience treats individual and community agency not in terms of being responsible for one's own security under conditions of crisis, but rather as a possibility for creating new forms of resistance and transformation (Grove, 2013; Nelson, 2014).

My own work builds on these approaches to resilience, cognizant of both the limitations and possibilities of resilience thinking. Specifically, I explore how subjective understandings of well-being<sup>1</sup> shape economic vulnerabilities and prospects for long-term economic resilience. Through an analysis of the marijuana industry in a rural region of Northern California I call 'Claytown',<sup>2</sup> I show how contested meanings of marijuana – as related to community well-being – condition the realm of options in defining, assessing and responding to economic vulnerabilities. While I do not suggest that there is any one path to achieving socio-economic security, my analysis demonstrates the ways in which potential economic vulnerabilities can be obscured by subjective representations of well-being.

This article draws on two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Claytown. The demise of the timber and mining industries, coupled with the rise of low-wage, service sector jobs, has left many Claytown residents with inadequate and/or insufficient employment opportunities. Marijuana production, in these contexts, has emerged to serve an important economic function, bolstering livelihoods in a time of economic restructuring and contributing to the

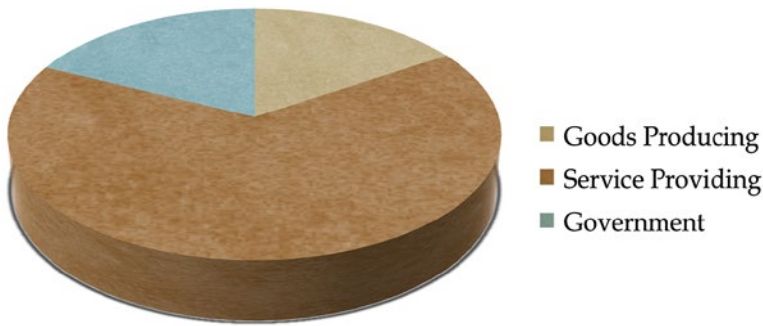
viability of local businesses. However, despite the economic significance of the marijuana industry, public officials and economic analysts have adamantly avoided public discussion, assessment and planning regarding its impacts, constituting a condition in which marijuana production has become a 'public secret'. The vulnerability of an economy largely influenced by an informal industry thus remains unexamined as a result of how contestations over what constitutes a 'healthy' community have been framed.

I focus my analysis on the recent passage of a contentious ordinance that highly restricted marijuana production in Claytown. The enactment of this so-called 'urgent' ordinance serves as a flash point around which divergent visions of 'healthy' and 'resilient' communities are articulated. On the one hand, opponents of marijuana production argue that the substance compromises residents' quality of life and threatens their security. In contrast, proponents emphasise the medicinal benefits of marijuana, and the contributions cultivators make to their community. The specific content and form of contestations over the meanings of resilience and community health have had important implications for local policies. Ironically, neither of these discursive framings of marijuana – either as a 'dangerous drug' or a 'medicine' – address the economic impacts of marijuana production on the local economy.

This work emerges from a multidisciplinary project on rural resilience sponsored by Cornell University's Atkinson Center for a Sustainable Future and Oxfam America. The article draws on 24 months of ethnographic research in Claytown conducted between 2012 and 2014 and relies on a range of research methods including participant observation; a local business survey and a survey of marijuana cultivators in Claytown; content analyses of local blogs and newspaper stories; Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) data; and primary and secondary semi-structured interviews<sup>3</sup> with a range of local residents, including medical marijuana activists, business owners, individuals directly involved in the marijuana industry (cultivators, labourers, doctors and technical specialists), non-profit employees and executives, and local law enforcement officials.

I begin by placing Claytown's marijuana industry in historical context. Here I examine economic changes in the region over time, as well as residents' conceptions of Claytown's economic vulnerabilities and prospects for 'resilience'. I show how vulnerabilities associated with rural economic restructuring and demographic shifts played a central role in the development and expansion of Claytown's marijuana industry, as did the legalisation of medical marijuana at the state level. This section also provides evidence for the size of the marijuana industry in Claytown, and its effects on the local economy.

Next, I discuss how the passage of an 'urgent' ordinance restricting medical marijuana production revealed conflicting conceptions of community well-being and resilience. The articulation of these disparate meanings suppressed any discussion of the economic impacts of the industry, and thus foreclosed the possibility of analysis and/or debate around how the Ordinance might affect the future economic health of the region. I conclude with a methodological reflection on contemporary approaches to resilience, calling for greater attention to how resilience is subjectively understood by those most often subject to its governance. Rather than treating resilience as a universal concept, I call for examination of how meanings of the concept change when embedded in different social, cultural and political contexts. To this end, I suggest that a more useful way to address questions of resilience may be to treat the term not as a predetermined concept, but rather as an object of analysis in and of itself.



**Figure 1.** Percent of population employed by industry (2011). Source: US Census Bureau, 2013.

### **Situating the marijuana industry: economic change and vulnerability in a boom-bust region**

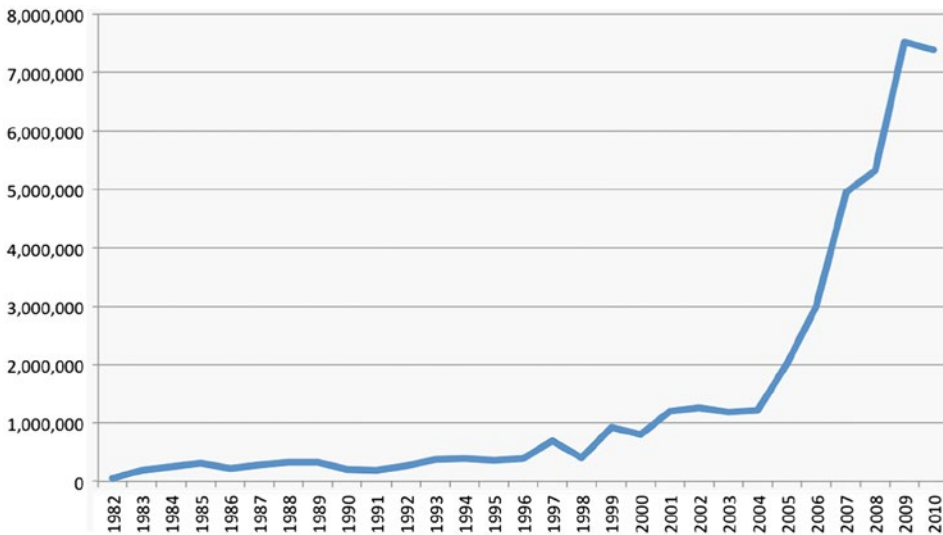
While political contestations over marijuana are relatively new in Claytown, marijuana production is part and parcel of a longer socio-economic history in the region. Historically, the American West has been characterised by boom-bust economies, and Claytown is no exception. The gold rush of 1848 brought hundreds of thousands of (settler) Americans and immigrants to Claytown in search for gold. The mining industry brought forth other industries in Northern California, including an expansive timber economy that facilitated the construction of mines and railroads, as well as ranching operations that provided the mines with livestock for transportation (Momsen, 1996). Yet these industries ended just as quickly as they had begun. Claytown vacillated from being one of the most economically vibrant regions in California during the Gold Rush era, to being socially, economically and ecologically devastated in the 1940s and 1950s on account of the demise of the mining industry, followed by the virtual collapse of the timber industry in the mid-1980s.

By and large, the most significant vulnerabilities identified by Claytown residents are economic. Livelihoods once dependent on primary commodity production have been replaced by those of recreation and tourism, consumer services and high-tech. The service sector has grown to be the most significant source of employment in Claytown, accounting for more than two-thirds of the formal economy (see Figure 1). While some jobs located in the service sector pay relatively well and may include benefits, the majority of these jobs are characterised by low wages, seasonal or temporary employment, and no benefits (regional reports; interviews with local officials, 2013).

Residents and local leaders repeatedly noted that the predominance of low-wage service jobs has made it difficult to attract (or retain) young professionals to the region. As one business owner noted, 'the single greatest threat to our local economy is a lack of economic diversity'. He continued:

In an economy, diversity creates resilience, and resilience increases your ability to adapt and thrive in new conditions. Dependence on traditional sectors ... and industrial scale tourism, lead to an unhealthy boom and bust cycle in our local economy, and leaves us poorly prepared to weather national business cycles. These sectors have an important place, but they cannot be the only game in town. (interview, 2013)

In addition to dependence on a low-wage service sector industry, residents and local leaders repeatedly noted the challenges associated with reliance on wealth that is generated



**Figure 2.** Total plants eradicated in California, 1982–2010. Source: US Drug Enforcement Administration.

outside of, rather than internal to, the local economy. This has much to do with changing demographics in Claytown. The proportion of individuals 65 years and older in Claytown exceeds both state and national averages: more than 20% of Claytown's population is above 65 years of age, compared to a statewide average of 12% and a national average of nearly 14% (US Census Bureau, 2013). As of 2010, transfer payments in the form of retirement comprised almost one-fifth of all personal income in Claytown, and income from dividends, interest and rent accounted for more than a quarter; together these comprise more than 40% of personal income in Claytown (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2012). What economic 'resilience' there is in the region is thus tenuous, at best. As the director of a business-oriented non-profit organisation in Claytown described to me:

[There is] the ability to flex and change and adapt [in Claytown], but it's really because wealth is pouring in from outside the region. We're not actually creating any of that wealth or prosperity here ... And, you know, that's a problem. That's really a problem. What we have is a lot of transfer payments, a lot of older people, we have an underground economy that we can't really track, we have a tourism-dependent economy, which is low-wage ... So, I'm not so sure that we're really that much better off than we were 30 years ago. We might be temporarily a little wealthier. (interview, 2013)

Another tenuous, yet arguably significant, source of income is generated through the quasi-legal marijuana industry in Claytown, to which the interviewee alluded above. The development and vibrancy of this industry is both a result of regional economic restructuring – the decline of the mining and timber industries, a long period of economic stagnation in the region, the rise of low-wage, service sector jobs – as well as the passage of State policies that legalised medical marijuana.

### **Making a living in a stagnant rural economy: the origins and development of the marijuana industry in Claytown**

In the late 1950s, Claytown was in the midst of crisis. The last mine in the region had just closed, the timber industry was all but absent, population growth had stagnated and in

some years declined, and despite the aesthetic beauty of the region and potential for recreational activities, there was neither the infrastructure nor the income base to support a vibrant tourist industry. Although characterised largely by economic stagnation, Claytown became a popular destination for ‘back to the landers’ who sought refuge from the cities and saw the region as a place where they could create new practices of place-making and community-building based on principles of communalism, self-sufficiency and ecological stewardship. Although back-to-the-landers – in their quest for simplicity and self-sufficiency – sought minimal involvement in the mainstream economy, many of them also struggled to survive economically. Economic options in Claytown were limited in the 1960s and 1970s, and establishing homesteads proved to be more difficult than many back-to-the-landers initially expected, as described by a man who moved to the region with his family when he was a child:

... it was pretty rustic when I was little. [My parents] had bought a piece of raw land and ... we lived in this school bus for a few years while they built a house ... [T]hey built a log cabin with logs cut from the land. The chainsaw was the only power tool, so it was all hand tools ... No generator. There was running water ... when we moved into the [log cabin] ... [That was a] big step up from the school bus. But we still didn't have any hot running water until I went to high school, so that would've been 1980 or something like that. We didn't have telephone for a very long time either ... [we went] to our neighbor's to use their CB radio ... I think my family was particularly rustic ... because I came to realize afterwards that other people did have hot, running water. These things were available ... [but] I think [my parents] were particularly poor. (interview, 2012)

With few local economic opportunities, many back-to-the-landers experimented with marijuana production as a means of financing their homesteading efforts and establishing an economic foundation upon which to build alternative economies. At this time, marijuana cultivation was relatively minimal (interviews and field notes, 2013). However, the scale and scope of production increased substantially in the 1990s and 2000s, both in response to the effects of economic restructuring in the region, as well as policy changes in California.

In 1996, California voters approved Proposition 215, thus legalising the use, cultivation and possession of marijuana for medicinal use. Legal provisions were expanded in 2003 with the passage of Senate Bill (SB) 420, which allowed for the formation of patient ‘collectives’ and the establishment of medical marijuana dispensaries (NORML, 2013). These policy changes facilitated an unprecedented expansion of the marijuana industry in California. Rates of marijuana plant seizures by the federal government<sup>4</sup> demonstrate a rise in production in California following the implementation of Proposition 215 in 1996. However, the most significant expansion of the industry occurs after the passage of SB 420, at which point the number of marijuana seizures increases exponentially from just over 1 million plants seized in 2004 to 7,519,580 plants seized in 2009 (DEA, 2012; see Figure 2).<sup>5</sup>

While State policy changes were widely cited among Claytown residents as contributing to the growth of the local marijuana industry, many people attributed increased production of marijuana to insufficient economic opportunities in the region. Upon asking a man in his 40s who grew up in Claytown about the development and expansion of the industry, he replied,

the number of people who are growing [in Claytown] has increased a lot ... People who didn't think about going into growing initially became growers [after the passage of Proposition 215] ... not to make a lot of money, but [just] to stay here. (2013)

A medical marijuana doctor in the region echoed these sentiments, describing how marijuana production has enabled low-income people to remain in a region where costs of living have increased at the same time as wages have declined:



Many people here don't have living wage jobs – they have a real [i.e. legal/legitimate] job, but they grow cannabis on the side to stay here. They're not engaging in large-scale operations – if they were, they wouldn't need their minimum wage jobs! (interview, 2013)

The absolute size of the marijuana economy is incredibly difficult to measure. However, based on annual marijuana plant seizure data from the Claytown Sheriff's Office between 2008 and 2013 as well as a marijuana cultivator survey I conducted in 2014,<sup>6</sup> the size of the marijuana industry in Claytown is substantial, generating anywhere from \$415 million to nearly \$2.5 billion annually, with \$500 million serving as a reasonable estimate of the amount of annual revenue that remains within the local economy.

The estimated size of the marijuana industry is further supported by a local business survey<sup>7</sup> I conducted in Claytown in 2014. One of the aims of the business survey was to gauge the size of the local cash economy – an indicator, albeit imperfect, of the size of the informal sector – by asking business owners what proportion of their sales were made in cash and then comparing those figures to the average percentage of sales paid in cash nationally.<sup>8</sup> The marketing firm Javelin Strategy and Research<sup>9</sup> estimates that in 2012, approximately 27% of all point-of-sale purchases were paid in cash across the nation, with expectations that this figure will drop to 23% by 2017. According to the business survey conducted in Claytown, in 2013, one-third of all businesses surveyed received 40% or more of their sales in cash, 28% received more than 50% of all sales in cash and for 20% – or one-fifth of businesses surveyed – more than 60% of all sales were paid in cash. Such figures are clearly greater than the national average, and in some cases significantly so. While this survey is admittedly not representative of the entire business community in Claytown, and although it is impossible to determine what proportion of these cash sales can be attributed to the marijuana industry, the combination of survey data and estimates of the size of the local marijuana industry suggest that marijuana production does contribute significantly to the overall health of local businesses.

The importance of the marijuana industry to rural livelihoods, both directly and indirectly, was repeatedly noted during interviews and informal conversations. Five of the six vegetable farmers I interviewed emphasised the significance of the marijuana industry for the sustainability of their small-scale farming operations. As the latter requires considerable labour, often with meager financial returns, seasonal employment in the medical marijuana industry<sup>10</sup> provides many farmers with supplementary income to support themselves through non-farming seasons (focus group, 2013). In addition, a significant proportion of the farmers' customers are medical marijuana growers themselves, providing an indirect link between the viability and sustainability of small-scale farming and the marijuana industry.

Two women – one in her 50s and another in her 70s – also described the economic importance of the medical marijuana industry. Both were diagnosed with cancer and after their treatment found themselves with exorbitantly high medical bills. Both of these women decided to produce medical marijuana as a way to supplement their incomes and pay for their medical expenses (field notes, 2013). Another woman I met at a small farm in the area said that her husband had been laid off and was being retrained for a job in the health professions. 'My grow is paying for his nursing school,' she said. 'If it wasn't for that, my husband wouldn't be in the program.' (field notes, 2013) Stories such as these abound and, when placed in conjunction with the economic analyses and surveys I conducted, indicate the importance of the marijuana industry to the current economic health of Claytown, however fragile and tenuous this relationship may be.



## The difference marijuana makes: conflicts around marijuana production as contestations over 'Resilience'

In 2012, a Board of Supervisors implemented an 'emergency' Ordinance that considerably restricted the cultivation of medical marijuana in Claytown. As noted above, marijuana production has a 50-year history in the region and has contributed significantly to the local economy. Yet, on the basis of purported complaints<sup>11</sup> by local residents, the Sheriff, District Attorney and County Counsel argued that marijuana was suddenly a 'nuisance' that necessitated 'urgent' action. On the day in which the proposed Ordinance was to be discussed publicly, the boardroom was packed, with the vast majority of the attendees opposed to the measure. The County building could barely contain those in attendance – residents and concerned citizens filled the boardroom and hallways, and the public comment period lasted more than five hours before the Chairman of the Board restricted any further comments and closed the session. Despite widespread opposition, the Ordinance was adopted by the Board 15 days later in a 4-1 vote and made effective immediately. The Board's decision provoked a heated debate around conceptions of community well-being that centred squarely on the appropriate place of marijuana in Claytown.

On one side of the spectrum, some Claytown residents and the majority of law enforcement and government officials believe that marijuana has no place in a 'healthy' society and economy. For them, marijuana producers are 'only in it for the money' (Board meeting, 2012) – which they argue does not stay in the local community (field notes, 2012–2014) – and that marijuana production brings 'guns, violence, and other kinds of unwanted criminal activity' to the region (interview with the local Sheriff, 2014). Furthermore, even if marijuana proved to be an important feature of the local economy, opponents maintain that the social costs are not worth the economic benefits. As a County Supervisor described to me:

There's no question that there's a lot of money in marijuana, but I don't think it's a healthy thing for us ... I don't think it's healthy money. You can't compare it to timber or mining – they were all legal, healthy businesses. (interview, 2014)<sup>12</sup>

A local resident and advocate for neighbourhood property rights echoed this sentiment, stating: 'Everyone needs to ask themselves what kind of a community we want to live in ... Do we want the marijuana growers flocking into our neighborhoods? Do we want the negative connotation?' (field notes, 2014) These claims reflect a common representation of marijuana cultivators as dangerous criminals who bring risks to children, property owners and 'law-abiding' citizens (field notes, 2013).

In contrast, growers, patients, and many residents and business owners emphasise the medicinal aspects of marijuana and the economic benefits from the industry (Board meeting, 2012; field notes, 2012–14). As one local resident described at the Board meeting in which the Ordinance was being considered:

I just want to state that medical marijuana is a real medicine ... What we're talking about here is medical cannabis that deals with pain with no side effects. That's the deal. [It's about] people looking to get healed, to be pain free. I'm a respectful neighbor, my neighbors respect me. I'm a good community member. Being stigmatized as a criminal really upsets me.' (Board meeting, 2012)

This statement raises two important issues with regard to overall community health. The first pertains to the medicinal qualities of marijuana and the need for environmentally and socially responsible growing practices. Many growers in Claytown are committed to organic,

sustainable production of marijuana, both to limit negative environmental impacts of marijuana cultivation and to ensure that the marijuana produced is healthy for human consumption. This was evident in my visits to numerous marijuana gardens in the region and reinforced by the local medical marijuana advocacy organisation, which provided free testing of medical marijuana to ensure that, when sold as medicine, it was free of any chemicals associated with production (field notes, 2014).

The second issue raised in the quotation reproduced above speaks to representations of marijuana cultivators. In describing himself as a 'good community member', this resident intentionally challenged representations of marijuana cultivators as criminals or people who pose threats to the well-being of the community. Many Claytown growers have lived in the region for decades and participate substantially in the community. These cultivators emphasised the various ways in which they contribute to the local community by supporting local businesses, volunteering for local organisations and/or serving as board members for local non-profit organisations (field notes, 2013). The resident quoted above is a local musician who regularly performs for local fundraisers and is a highly active participant in the community. The rendering of such individuals as 'criminal' was regularly expressed by residents in interviews and informal conversations as one of the most offensive implications of the Ordinance.

However, these contested representations and counter-representations of marijuana growers as 'only in it for the money' or as 'good community members' obscure the broader economic significance of the industry. In a rare public statement of its kind, a local business owner described the importance of the marijuana industry to his ability to sustain his business in times of economic downturns and fluctuations:

I moved to [Claytown] 25 years ago when I ... formed [a civil engineering company]. During that time, I have experienced and survived a number of economic downturns. I'm not here to render my opinion about marijuana usage, but I'm here to state a fact that our business has endured because of services provided [to marijuana cultivators]. We estimate that approximately 30% of our 2011 business income came from cultivation – providing services to them [such as] surveying, preparation of grading, soils testing, and building plans. And as far as the criminal element goes, [I am not seeing that] – these people are hiring us because they're being responsible and want to do things correctly. If the proposed ordinance is passed in this economic climate, we may have to close our doors ... The economic impact would be devastating. (Board meeting, 2012)

Although medical marijuana activists, local business owners and leaders of non-profits frequently noted the positive impacts of the marijuana industry on the local economy in informal conversations, public statements such as that of the civil engineer cited above were rare occurrences. Marijuana production has largely been framed in dichotomous and polarising terms – either as a 'drug' that has detrimental social impacts on the community, or as 'medicine' to which caregivers and patients are guaranteed under California law. While several public comments at the County Board meeting described marijuana production as a 'profit-oriented activity [that accepts] any and all costs on the local community', on the one hand, and 'a critical aspect of the local economy', on the other (Board meeting, 2012), there has been no public – i.e. county- or city-level – analysis or discussion of *how* the marijuana industry impacts the local economy or the potential economic consequences of considerably restricting marijuana production in the region in the absence of viable economic alternatives. Indeed, such efforts are blatantly ignored or rejected by public officials and law enforcement (field notes 2014; discussed below).

Contestations over marijuana's place in a 'healthy' or 'resilient' society, coupled with a lack of official discussion and debate around the economic impacts of the marijuana industry constitute a condition in which marijuana production, to appropriate from Michael Taussig, has become a 'public secret' (1999): on the one hand, the presence of marijuana is ubiquitous and has been widely visible in newspapers, on the radio and in casual conversations for decades (field notes, 2012–2014). However, in official documents, reports and economic analyses, little is actually 'known' about marijuana production in the region, and public officials actively produce non-knowledge of the subject through their framings of the industry and their reluctance to examine or assess its regional impacts. The construction of marijuana production as a public secret ignores the historical context in which marijuana became an important source of rural income, and thus the structural conditions of economic vulnerability in Claytown. In doing so, it produces a climate in which social and economic choices are highly constrained.

### **Marijuana, economic resilience and the limits of knowledge**

The [marijuana] industry attracts a lot of campers [during harvest season] ... I'm always so surprised when I go to a city council meeting and some council member says, 'where are all these people coming from? What are they doing here?' And I'll spell it out for them. But really? They don't know? How's that possible? (Interview with an advocate for the homeless in Claytown, 2014)

[The marijuana industry] is *huge*. It is absolutely huge, and I don't understand the Board of Supervisors. [Why would they pass] this incredibly restrictive ordinance that is going to do this [strangling himself] to the local economy? How could they not know? (Interview with a local non-profit director, 2013)

The dearth of viable economic opportunities in Claytown is a key reason why the region has difficulty retaining and attracting young people. While service sector jobs are available, these offer little in the way of long-term economic security, particularly for those with families. Marijuana production has, to some degree, filled this gap. But the long-term benefits associated with the marijuana industry are hardly secure. Prices of marijuana have declined significantly over the last five years (Marijuana Cultivator Survey, 2014) and recent regulatory changes in Claytown render the viability of the industry – and the economic livelihoods of those who depend on it directly and indirectly – tenuous at best.

Given the economic importance of the marijuana industry in Claytown, it is surprising how adamantly public officials and economic analysts have avoided public discussion, assessment and planning regarding the impacts of the industry. According to a long-time reporter in Claytown, prior to the Board meeting in which the Ordinance was initially discussed, there has never been any substantive debate around the economic impacts of marijuana production at the County or City levels (interview, 2014). Indeed, only two public meetings and two working group meetings preceded the drafting of the Ordinance and the three individuals selected to speak on behalf of medical marijuana patients and cultivators felt that none of their concerns or proposals were incorporated into the final document (field notes, 2012; interviews, 2013 and 2014).

The dearth of attention to the economic impacts of the marijuana industry on behalf of public officials and economic analysts in Claytown stands in stark contrast to the level of interest in these issues among local business owners and concerned residents. While conducting a local business survey, for instance, numerous business owners expressed frustration over

the lack of attention paid by public officials to the impacts of the marijuana industry on the local economy and welcomed my efforts to conduct an impact assessment. A manager of a local food co-op stated that on several occasions he had attempted to meet with the Executive Director of an organisation dedicated to assessing economic conditions and planning in Claytown – as well as the primary economic consultant to the Board of Supervisors – to discuss the impact of marijuana production in the County and was repeatedly turned down, and later simply ignored (field notes, 2014).

Some business owners expressed considerable interest in the economic impacts of the marijuana industry, but were wary of asking questions publicly, as they did not want to be associated as a supporter of or (in)directly involved in the industry. This was the case for a Chamber of Commerce organisation in the area, whose President of the Board asked me to share the data I received from my business survey, but told me the Board had voted against assisting me with distribution of the survey to their members because '[marijuana] is a very political "hot topic" issue which [the Board] would prefer to not have the Chamber's name attached to in any form' (email correspondence, 2014). While one local Chamber of Commerce, a local business organisation, and one Downtown Merchants' Association distributed an online version of my business survey to their members, the remaining business networks and organisations I contacted were unwilling to participate. Perhaps the most hostile response I received regarding my efforts to better understand the local marijuana industry came from government officials (most notably the County Sheriff and District Attorney) and the Executive Director of the aforementioned economic assessment and planning organisation.

The latter responded to my business survey in the following way: 'I'm not interested in this issue [of the economic impacts of the marijuana industry in Claytown] at all. This is something you should be working with the Chamber of Commerce on'. I explained that the various Chambers had suggested that his organisation was the most appropriate place to conduct the kind of research I had proposed and he countered, 'Like I said, I have absolutely no interest in this issue. We are in the process of proposing a long-term economic development plan and this [referring to my business survey] isn't something we're focusing on'. I tried to explain that the survey was intended to generate data that would broaden our understanding of the economic profile of the County and he insisted he wanted 'nothing to do with it' (field notes, 2014).

Many people in high-profile positions want 'nothing to do with' the marijuana industry, even if they privately acknowledge the significance of the industry to the local economy. For instance, in January 2014, a local entrepreneur and business consultant, whom I had interviewed the year prior, moderated a forum on 'building economic resiliency' in Claytown. The forum – intended to 'explore the role of entrepreneurship in building a more resilient community' (field notes, 2014) – was held in a region of Claytown that was widely known to be a hot spot of local marijuana production. However, the first 'ground rule' of this public forum was:

I just want everyone to know that this conversation is not about pot. Everyone recognizes that it's an important part of the economy here, or it's a significant cash crop here. But I don't want to get bogged down by that conversation. I'm sure we all recognize that things are changing, and moving forward. (field notes, 2014)

The parameters set on the discussion, ironically, neglected one critical fact: nearly all the business owners on the panel acquired the requisite capital for their businesses from the

marijuana industry, and in no small way benefit from the cash clientele it generates (personal communication 2014). Not only was this fact intentionally obscured in the 2-hour discussion that followed (though, in such a close knit community, this was knowledge that was widely shared), but the discussion of 'resilience' itself was compromised in its absence. How, for instance, can a community assess its economic potential (and vulnerabilities) without assessing its main source of capital? Given that capital generated from the marijuana industry has been so pivotal in the business health of the community, prohibiting its discussion provides a misconception of the history and structure of the local economy.

Contestations over marijuana's place in a 'healthy' community have created a condition in which the full impacts of the marijuana industry on the local economy are both unknowable and unspeakable. The foreclosure of any discussion of the industry's immediate and long-term impacts on the region may ultimately compromise the region's economic health, leading to increased vulnerability in an already economically vulnerable region.

### **Theory, knowledge and practice: methodological reflections for an alternative approach to resilience**

My analysis of marijuana production in Claytown highlights how subjective meanings and discursive framings condition the realm of available options in defining, assessing and responding to rural economic challenges and vulnerabilities. It further emphasises the importance of cultural, political and economic contexts in assessing economic vulnerability and the capacity for resilience: the historical development of the marijuana industry, the political climate in which it is regulated, and social and demographic changes in Claytown, all shape how residents conceive of a 'healthy' community, and how local officials respond to and plan for economic change. Building on these insights, I offer several reflections on conceptual understandings of 'resilience' and its implementation as a basis of intervention.

First, the concept of resilience itself often has multiple meanings amongst community members, as I discovered in my research. While community conceptions of resilience in Claytown all embodied a notion of well-being, the emphasis on what kind of well-being or what well-being meant varied depending on the positionality and experiences of the interviewee (see Keene, 2014). Resilience does not necessarily mean the same thing to everyone, and is, at least in part, contingent upon one's location in society, values and personal experiences. Thus, universal or standardised conceptions of 'resilience' run the risk of neglecting important sociocultural values and practices within communities, on the one hand, and/or promoting solutions that are untenable or socially and economically divisive, on the other.

Second, in the academic literature, resilience tends to be employed historically and apolitically, as discussed above. As a result, the implementation of resilience frameworks in development practice runs the risk of providing technical solutions to what are instead political problems. In other words, because resilience thinking often neglects historical processes and questions of power, the proposed solutions to challenges associated with climate change and livelihoods, for instance, do not necessarily address the much more deeply embedded issues of historically produced structural inequality, political marginalisation, and the often negative effects of market-oriented policies. As I've argued in this article, an understanding of the historical and political conditions through which risks, vulnerabilities and crises are constructed is essential to the formulation of informed and equitable responses or solutions to such conditions. To this end, I suggest that resilience-based frameworks pay much

greater attention to the role of discourses and meanings in the shaping of socio-economic and environmental problems, as these factors may have a considerable impact on how the problem emerged, how the problem is understood, and the realm of possible responses to the problem.

Instead of treating resilience as a predetermined concept, it may be more productive to treat resilience as an object of inquiry in and of itself. In other words, to analyse academic and community-based conceptions of 'resilience' (or 'well-being' or any other term salient in the community) to better understand the historical and political character of diverse meanings, as well as the contexts in which they are produced. Thus, a more equitable and effective approach to questions of resilience might be to analyse what different conceptions of resilience mean, rather than presupposing a universal definition.

## Notes

1. As others have noted, 'well-being' is an important concept for understanding subjective notions of 'the good life' as well as community capacity, health and vibrancy (Hall & Lamont, 2013; Krøvel, 2014; Walsh-Dilley et al., 2013). In this article, I take community conceptions of 'well-being' as integral to analyses of 'resilience'.
2. While medical marijuana use and production is legal in California, it is prohibited at the federal level. Such contradictions render the legal status of medical marijuana patients and producers ambiguous, at best; they are at once legal and illegal in the eyes of the state/State. As such, I have used a pseudonym for the specific location in which I conducted my research. 'Claytown' does not represent a single site or location, but rather a combination of contiguous sites within a Northern California county. In addition to concealing the specific geographic location of my research, pseudonyms are used for all of the individuals and organisations with whom I worked.
3. In addition to informal conversations conducted during my ethnographic fieldwork, this article draws on a total of 67 formal interviews, 36 of which I conducted myself; 20 that were conducted by a local cultural center; and 11 that were conducted by a long-time Claytown resident.
4. Although precise figures are impossible to accurately determine, data on federal seizures can provide some indication of the scale and scope of marijuana production in the state.
5. Arguably, the increase in marijuana seizures may have more to do with the expansion of federal opposition to State legislation that violates federal laws rather than actual increases in marijuana production. Nonetheless, in the interviews and informal conversations I conducted, Claytown residents described a substantial increase in production in the region, particularly after the passage of SB 420.
6. My survey and analysis is based on Gettman's (2006) model for estimating the value of marijuana production in the United States.
7. Between the months of February and May of 2014, I conducted an anonymous business survey to assess the impacts of the informal sector – primarily focused on the local impacts of the marijuana industry – on businesses in Claytown. My sample consisted of 75 surveys from business owners throughout Claytown.
8. This is, of course, an imperfect comparison. Available consumer behaviour research data aggregates rural and urban figures, thus making it difficult to know how Claytown compares to other rural counties, both in California and the nation at large. However, as I have been unable to find disaggregated data on the size of the cash economy in various regions, this national comparison is useful, in that it provides a coarse benchmark for understanding the relative size of the informal sector in Claytown.
9. <https://www.javelinstrategy.com/brochure/251>; accessed September 2013.
10. The most common form of seasonal employment is that of 'trimming'. This refers to the final stage of processing marijuana before it goes to market, which entails removing the stems and leaves from the flowers.



11. The local Sheriff claims that more than 300 'official' complaints were made to his office in 2011, with 'thousands' of additional calls 'from people who wanted to stay anonymous' (interview, 2014). However, the Sheriff could not provide any documentation of such complaints, claiming that they did not keep precise records.
12. The irony of this comment, of course, is that mining and timber industries are extraordinarily destructive to the natural environment and human lives.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Atkinson Center for a Sustainable Future and Oxfam America.

## Notes on contributor

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