

# Up in smoke?

## The making and unmaking of a rural moral economy

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*Abstract:* This paper draws on the work of E. P. Thompson to understand anti-capitalist resistance in northern California in the 1960s and 1970s. Through an analysis of the back-to-the-land movement in a region I call “Claytown,” I show how the making of a rural moral economy was in part enabled by the presence of a nascent marijuana industry. However, whereas a relatively small-scale marijuana industry helped forge anticapitalist resistance in the 1960s and 1970s, this industry has become a form through which values of capitalist political economy are being instantiated and reasserted. I situate my ethnographic analysis within a broader historical and legal framework to show how a contemporary moral economy is made and increasingly unmade in the context of late capitalism.

*Keywords:* back-to-the-land, marijuana, moral economy, northern California, situated resistances

In the late 1960s and 1970s, northern California witnessed an influx of exurban migrants who saw rural life and “the land” as an alternative to the alienating effects of capitalist society (Jacob 1997). Back-to-the-land narratives embodied the tension between the urban and the rural in the social imagination and emphasized self-sufficiency and self-organization as key strategies in creating new forms of social and economic relations (Halfacree 2007). These movements drew on a long history of “returning” to the land, dating back to the late nineteenth century. Early movements arose primarily as a response to economic crisis and served as an ideological and practical alternative to the booms and busts of capitalist society (Brown 2011). While

urban-rural migration in the 1960s and 1970s was similarly shaped by economic concerns, these movements also differed from those of their predecessors in important ways. As Brown notes, back-to-the-landers of the 1960s and 1970s “saw the act of homesteading not simply as a means of protecting their independence, *but as a political act in itself*” (2011: 212, emphasis added). What gave life to this “political act” of going back-to-the-land, I contend, was the construction of a rural moral economy.

My use of “moral economy” in the context of northern California’s back-to-the-land movement owes much to the work of E. P. Thompson. Since being coined by Thompson in 1963,<sup>1</sup> “moral economy” has generated a burgeoning



literature within the social sciences, often with tremendous variation in the term's use. The concept has been employed in studies of peasant resistance, state formation, gender relations, migration, food studies, and many more.<sup>2</sup> It has been applied across a range of disciplines and, not surprisingly, is employed with substantial variation; there are even those who have used moral economy, ironically enough, to advocate free-market capitalist expansion.<sup>3</sup> While I do not have the space to elaborate on the variability in the term's use here, it is worth noting that the concept is undeniably elastic, sometimes generating contradictory interpretations. In my own analysis of the back-to-the-land movement, however, I continue to find Thompson's original formulation of moral economy particularly compelling for its historical method and emphasis on anticapitalist resistance.

Building on E. P. Thompson's (1971, 1993) notion of moral economy and James Scott's (1985) concept of everyday resistance, this article examines how a rural moral economy was made and partially unmade in a region of northern California I call "Claytown."<sup>4</sup> Central to this story is the changing role of marijuana production in a context of capitalist restructuring. With few economic opportunities in their new rural context, many back-to-the-landers established small-scale marijuana operations to facilitate experiments in community building and alternative economies. With the legalization of medical marijuana in 1996, the marijuana industry expanded considerably in California. And though the industry provides a buffer against the negative effects of economic restructuring in rural California, it has also taken on new meanings that reflect (and reinforce) the hegemony of capitalist logics and practices.

I begin with a discussion of the distinguishing features of Thompson's notion of moral economy. His emphasis on anticapitalist resistance and the underlying values that shape social protest are central to my own analysis of the back-to-the-land movement in Claytown. I then describe how a rural moral economy was

made through back-to-the-landers' everyday forms of situated resistance and enabled by small-scale marijuana production. The third section explores economic and legal changes in California in the 1990s, and how these coalesced into a new assemblage of marijuana practices. This historical conjuncture represents a partial unraveling of the back-to-the-landers' moral economy, and a (re-)assertion of capitalist hegemony, albeit fragile and tenuous.

### Moral economy and everyday resistance

Thompson used the notion of "moral economy" to explain how a *mentalité* of working people in eighteenth-century England shaped their collective protests against an emergent capitalist economy (1971, 1993). He employed the term with an explicit emphasis on historical and cultural specificity, and as a result, Thompson's use of the concept cannot be separated from his historical method of analysis. Methodologically, moral economy provides a way of examining resistance that attends to specific conflicts over economic relations *and* the historical conditions through which those conflicts are constituted. Echoing some of the key concerns of anthropologists, Thompson placed the political culture, values, customs, and expectations of working people at the center of his analysis (1993: 260). His conception of moral economy illuminates how long-standing social and economic relations were not only reconfigured during capitalist transformation but were rendered visible by and took on new meanings during capitalist transition (Thompson 1963, 1971, 1993; see Wolford 2006: 243).

Moral economies, for Thompson, did not serve as shorthand for values pertaining to the economy; rather, he used the concept to explain anticapitalist resistance in a specific historical and geographic context (Thompson 1993: 339–342). As a result, his use of the term depends on an analytical distinction between political economy and moral economy. Derived from Adam Smith's *Wealth of nations*, political econ-

omy is premised on the assumption that markets naturally respond to fluctuations in supply and demand and that goods (including food) will automatically flow from areas of abundance to those of scarcity. This economic system presumes that the social good is fostered through an autonomous “free” market—a dramatic contrast to paternalistic models of provisioning that emphasized a moral obligation between members of society, rather than a moral obligation to the functioning of the market.<sup>5</sup> When the English working class became unable to meet its subsistence needs as a result of capitalist transition, it protested. Such actions coalesced around a shared sense of fairness and justice vis-à-vis the emergence of a new political economy—what Thompson described as a “moral economy” (1971: 76). Analytically, this distinction between moral economy and political economy allows Thompson to focus on the *conflicts*—the “confrontations and negotiations” (1993: 342)—constitutive of capitalist transformation. Politically, this framing insinuates a utopian vision or an alternative to capitalism; the moral economy of the English working class was oriented toward the future, even as poor people drew on older customs and practices to inform their actions (Thompson 1963: 551–552; Edelman 2012: 55–57).

Although I focus on Thompson’s conceptualization of moral economy, I buttress this analysis with James Scott’s notion of everyday resistance (1985, 1986). Dissatisfied with scholarly work that attended only to peasant rebellions and revolutions, which as Scott notes, “are few and far between” (1986: 5), Scott sought to understand “ordinary” ways in which subordinates resisted dominant groups—through tax evasion, footdragging, squatting, and so on (1985; 1986: 6, 31). Like Thompson, Scott examines how experience and meaning become the vehicles through which hegemonic relations are contested. As I discuss below, I find Scott’s conception of everyday resistance—as opposed to his general theory of moral economy—a more compelling analytical tool to understand the moral economy of back-to-the-landers in the

1970s, and instructive with regard to my own conception of situated resistances.<sup>6</sup>

While I draw specifically on Thompson’s conception of moral economy, my own use of the term differs from his in several ways. First, social and political resistance in the 1960s and 1970s was not a defense of an older system of social provisioning and economic organization but a response to the social, economic, and environmental failures of capitalist political economy.<sup>7</sup> The second difference is related to the form of resistance employed by the back-to-the-landers. Workers in eighteenth-century England engaged in overt and confrontational forms of protest. In contrast, back-to-the-landers’ resistance took the form of situated, everyday struggles to produce economic and social alternatives to capitalism. Finally, I use Thompson’s framework to examine not only the making of a back-to-the-land moral economy but also its partial unmaking. As I demonstrate below, the counterhegemonic values and practices of Claytown’s back-to-the-landers have been partially eroded as marijuana production becomes increasingly embedded in capitalist logics and values.

### **Back-to-the-land: Situated resistances and the making of a moral economy**

As Helen and Scott Nearing note in *Living the good life*: “our sense of responsibility as teachers, and as members of the human race, compelled us to do what we could ... have a part in formulating the principles and practices of an alternative social system ... We were against the accumulation of profit and unearned income by non-producers, and we wanted to make our living with our own hands, yet with time and leisure for avocational pursuits. We wanted to replace regimentation and coercion with respect for life. Instead of exploitation, we wanted a use economy” (1970: xvi).

The Nearings’ approach to life had a long history. The practice of going back to the land dates back to the late 1800s and was largely a response

to “the boom-bust cycle of industrial capitalism” (Brown 2011: 27). High prices of rent, food, and other basic needs in the cities were exacerbated by cyclical financial crises, provoking many (low) wage laborers to seek refuge in the countryside (Brown 2011; White 1980). “The land,” in this sense, provided a strategic alternative to the uncertainties and dependencies associated with capitalist organization, predicated on a notion of security rooted in subsistence rather than accumulation. This framing was embodied in popular writings of the time as a desire to live a “simple life” premised on self-sufficiency, low consumption, and limited dependence on the capitalist market.

Although the back-to-the-land movement of the 1960s and 1970s drew on narratives harking back to the 1800s—including those of Philip Hubert in *Liberty and a living* (1889), Henry David Thoreau in *Walden* (1854), and Charles Wagner’s *Simple life* (1904)—participants were strongly influenced by contemporary events, including the Vietnam War and movements for civil rights, gender and sexual equality, and the environment (Brown 2011; Boal et al. 2012). Their notions of the “simple life” were thus intertwined with, and informed by, a new environmentalism premised on concerns with resource management, environmental degradation, energy use, and “sustainability.” Experiments in subsistence and communalism were enacted as a critique of contemporary conditions, as well as a way to demonstrate that alternative kinds of social and economic life were possible (Hofberg 2012; see also Pagis 2006).

The notion of a “good” or “simple” life came up continually in my conversations with back-to-the-landers in Claytown. Many referenced Helen and Scott Nearing’s book about how to live “sanely and simply in a troubled world” (1970), citing the reasons articulated in the quotation above as driving factors in their own exodus from the city to “the land.” The back-to-the-landers interviewed were predominantly white, and most moved to Claytown in their twenties and thirties. They arrived from a range of locations across the United States, but many

migrated from the San Francisco Bay Area to Claytown between 1963 and 1981. Some had been actively engaged in political projects in the Bay Area, and a number of interviewees had participated in various forms of experiments in communal living.

Although racially and generationally homogenous, back-to-the-landers had variable class backgrounds. Some were solidly middle class, having received a university education in everything from philosophy to mechanical engineering. Barry, a man in his mid-sixties with a bachelor’s degree in theater, saved enough money to “pretty much live for a couple of years [on the land] without having to worry about working” (interview, February 2012). Others came with virtually nothing. Trudy, a petite but strong and outspoken woman in her late fifties described arriving in a remote area of Claytown when she was 18 years old, with “two children and the clothes on her back” (interview, March 2012). When asked if she had any previous job training or college experience, she replied, “I went to the school of hard knocks ... No, I didn’t even finish [high school]. I think I went to nine different schools in 10 years,” before taking up residence in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park—at the age of 14 (interview, March 2012).

Although popular representations of back-to-the-landers presume financial security and thus the privilege to choose an alternative lifestyle, many of the stories I heard described coming to Claytown with little money and no assets but with aspirations for community and self-sufficiency.<sup>8</sup> These back-to-the-landers “chose” to relocate to the land, but this choice carried considerably more risk and challenge for some than for others.<sup>9</sup> Yet despite their experiential and class-based differences, back-to-the-landers shared a common desire to escape urbanity and create more community-centered lives and livelihoods on the land—and they crossed class divides to do so. A key dimension of homesteading was to build one’s own home with locally sourced materials and labor.<sup>10</sup> People reused as many materials as possible—including those from a local landfill and aban-

doned cabins from Claytown's mining heyday (interview, March 2012)—and members of the “community,” composed predominantly (but not exclusively) of other back-to-the-landers, donated their craftsmanship and labor to such endeavors.<sup>11</sup> Building one another's homes was repeatedly invoked as central to “community building,” alongside regular social events such as potlucks, small-scale theater productions, and biannual celebrations (field notes, 2012–2013). As Kenneth, who moved to the region in 1972 with his family, described: “[Community building] was revolutionary in that sense ... I think most people came out of the '60s with the idea that revolution was important and that revolutions were possible. And whether you associated yourself with actual revolutionary movements ... or felt there was another way of doing it through countercultural developments, it certainly was an attempt to revolutionize and change the world ... And it contrasted with what was going on in the general society” (interview, September 2012).

This conceptualization of the ongoing production of “community” as a revolutionary practice stands in stark contrast with many scholarly interpretations of the counterculture movement. Immanuel Wallerstein, for instance, argues that the counterculture movement “was part of revolutionary euphoria” but for all practical purposes was politically insignificant ([1968] 1989: 436). Such a framing necessarily emphasizes the concrete outcomes of collective action, without understanding the more nuanced effects of the visions, processes, and practices that constitute social struggles. An alternative framing of the counterculture movement, as Stuart Hall reminds us, attends to the significance of utopian aspirations, not only in terms of their material accomplishments, but in their articulation of political possibilities ([1967] 2007). Hall notes, “it is in Utopia that future possibilities are rehearsed ... [and in] such dreams that the revolutionary project is made” ([1967] 2007: 166–167; see also Wilbur 2013: 157). Indeed, Thompson's own conception

of moral economy as a vision or utopian aspiration embodies similar sentiments; the everyday acts of resistance by working-class people in eighteenth-century England both revealed the devastating effects of capitalist transformation and attempted to resist, if not transform, capitalist relations (1963: 551–552).

Living off the land was simultaneously a critique of the alienating effects of urban consumer culture and capitalist relations *and* an alternative to dominant ideologies and practices. That is, the daily enactment of countercultural visions and practices had more than just revolutionary *potential*. It served as everyday forms of resistance to capitalist hegemony—or what I refer to here as “situated resistances”—in terms of both back-to-the-landers' intentions and the symbolic and ideological content of their actions (see Scott 1986: 22). While some back-to-the-landers drew on previous experience in political activism at the state and national levels, all believed that the most powerful way to create meaningful social change was through ongoing practices of community building. Activities such as communal forms of child care, collective workdays and social provisioning, renewable energy consumption, and communal living, home building, and property ownership were all enacted against what George Katsiaficas (1997) calls the “colonization of everyday life.” In contrast to a logic of accumulation whereby such basic human activities are “made into arenas of financial gain” (Katsiaficas 1997: 362), back-to-the-landers reappropriated these activities through the discursive and material revaluing of noncommodified social relations and ecological processes.

These forms of resistance were situated both literally and figuratively on the land.<sup>12</sup> On one hand, the land provided the ecological foundation for cultural change—rural parcels served as the basis of homesteading practices and subsistence agriculture. The land also served as a metaphorical form of resistance: the imaginary of “the land” provided a framework through which noncapitalist social relations could be

formed. Cultivating a sense of place on the land provided a shared sense of identity and social cohesion that was reproduced and ritualized in annual events, community gatherings, and published documents (field notes, 2013–2014). I thus use the notion of “situated resistance” to encapsulate (1) the specific daily activities of back-to-the-landers enacted as a rejection of/alternative to dominant capitalist ideologies and relations; (2) the means by which these forms of resistance were shaped by the specific place (Claytown) and space (the land) where they were enacted; and (3) the historical context through which back-to-the-landers’ visions were imagined and practiced.

The meaning and significance of “community” was invoked frequently in interviews with back-to-the-landers, highlighting a shift from the individualism of capitalist relations to an understanding of economies as being embedded in social practices (Polanyi 1944). Community, in this sense, is a political space governed by social relationships as opposed to the atomizing relations of the formal economy and/or the state (Gibson-Graham 2006: 79). Situated resistances were generated through class struggles, in so far as they were struggles “over the appropriation of work, production, [and] property” (Scott 1986: 27). But—building on Thompson’s own conceptualization of customs, consciousness, and class struggle—they were also struggles over meanings and values.

Enacting new forms of social relations was central to back-to-the-landers’ construction of a rural moral economy, as was a redefinition of economic practices themselves. Self-provisioning and the establishment of local, land-based economies figured prominently in such transformation. However, economic self-sufficiency proved to be much more challenging for the rural newcomers than they initially anticipated—particularly those of modest economic means. The virtual collapse of the mining sector in the 1950s and steady decline of the timber industry in the 1960s and 1970s left people in the region with few employment opportunities.

As Ray, a back-to-the-lander in his seventies describes, “I bought land [just outside of Claytown] in ’73 ... we really felt that Nature would correct all the ills [associated with urban life]. We left a lot out, though! Like how to make a living—we didn’t really talk a lot about that ... We had to do a little of everything [to get by]” (interview, July 2013).

Although land was relatively inexpensive at the time due to the remoteness of the region and the dearth of economic opportunities, many back-to-the-landers struggled to make ends meet. Limited economic options, combined with the difficulties of establishing homesteads in regions with inclement weather and minimal infrastructure, characterized many back-to-the-landers’ experiences. Tim, a man in his late forties who moved to Claytown with his family when he was a child, described the challenges of homesteading with minimal economic resources:

It was pretty rustic when I was little. [We lived in] a school bus ... for several years while [my parents] built a ... log cabin with logs cut from the land. The chainsaw was the only power tool, so it was all hand tools—hand-crank drills they got in the thrift store and handsaws. No generator. Living in a log cabin 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 a telephone for a very long time either, so everybody had CB radios—we went to our neighbor’s to use their CB radio. (interview, May 2012)

While families developed a broad range of strategies to cope with economic uncertainty, growing marijuana to supplement their modest incomes became an important source of revenue for some residents.<sup>13</sup> As Ed, a back-to-the-lander now in his mid-sixties who arrived in Claytown in 1973 said, “it’s the only way

that we could have survived” (interview, February 2012).<sup>14</sup> But beyond individual survival, marijuana production contributed to economic development in the region more broadly. From art and food cooperatives to solar companies (interview, April 2012), many residents were able to establish businesses in Claytown through seed money generated from marijuana production. These “alternative” businesses were congruent with the values espoused by the back-to-the-landers—for example, businesses that took the form of worker-owned cooperatives and livelihoods that emphasized individual, social, and ecological health. As Ray noted: “in the ’70s, there were all these [marijuana] operations ... but on a small scale. We took our small fortunes and invested it in businesses—solar businesses, food businesses. Many of the businesses around here got their start from seed money from growing pot that was then invested [locally]” (interview, July 2013).

Although back-to-the-landers’ limited engagement in the mainstream economy was partly informed by a critique of capitalism and the logic of consumption, they also wanted to spend more time engaged in community-driven activities than in “the system,” as many interviewees referred to the mainstream, capitalist economy. Marijuana production allowed them the autonomy, time, and economic security to direct their efforts to the work of community building (field notes, August 2013). Indeed, homesteading took a considerable amount of time and social investment; common narratives in the interviews emphasized regular communal meals, community workdays, community-based forest management and trail-building projects, and communal child care and education.<sup>15</sup> Although marijuana production did not “make” the moral economy, it provided a degree of economic stability necessary for back-to-the-landers to engage in its making. However, economic and legal shifts in California instigated a new configuration of social relations in Claytown. In doing so, a novel assemblage of marijuana production coalesced as it began to take on new meanings and significance in Claytown.

### **From growing to live to living to grow**

Informality, as a social and economic relation, has long been a “persistent and prominent feature of rural life” in the United States (Nelson 1999: 18)—particularly in light of the impact of economic restructuring on rural areas over the last four decades. As described above, subsisting in the region during this period of time was difficult, and reliance on a small-scale marijuana industry both subsidized efforts in self-sufficiency and homesteading and provided an economic foundation on which to build and strengthen alternative economies. However, in the 1960s and 1970s marijuana cultivation in Claytown was still relatively minimal (interviews and field notes, 2013). The scale and scope of production increased substantially in the 1980s and 1990s, in part due to the effects of economic restructuring and policy changes in California.

By the 1990s, livelihoods in Claytown once dependent on extractive industries and primary commodity production had been replaced by those of recreation and tourism, consumer services, and high-tech. Over the last 20 years, the service sector has grown to be the most significant source of employment in Claytown, accounting for more than two-thirds of the local economy (U.S. Census Bureau 2013). Government jobs provide the second largest source of employment, followed by the goods-producing sector. While some jobs located in the service sector pay relatively well and may include benefits, the majority of service jobs in Claytown are characterized by low wages, seasonal or temporary employment, and no benefits (regional reports; interviews with local officials, 2013). As noted by Ralph Weisheit, economic recessions in the 1990s and 2000s provided a context in which engagement in the informal marijuana industry served as a buffer against “job loss, unexpected medical expenses, or the pending foreclosure on ... [properties] (2011: 150; see also Weisheit 1992). Sam, a medical marijuana doctor in Claytown, illustrated the ways in which 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., 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, March 2013).

I met numerous people who saw the marijuana industry as one of the only ways to meet their financial needs. Two women diagnosed with cancer—one in her fifties and another in her seventies—found themselves with exorbitantly high medical bills following their treatment programs. Both of these women decided to produce medical marijuana as a way to supplement their incomes and pay for their medical expenses (field notes, September 2013, January 2014). Another woman I met at a small farm in the area said that her husband had been laid off several months earlier 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, and I don’t know where we would be then” (field notes, September 2013). These are not exceptional stories but rather reflect a range of experiences associated with the economic conditions of rural life in Claytown.

The economic climate in Claytown was certainly conducive to the expansion of informal economic activities, but state policies also facilitated the unprecedented expansion of the marijuana industry in California. The passage of California’s Proposition 215 in 1996 legalized the use, cultivation, and possession of marijuana for medicinal purposes, upon recommendation by a state-licensed physician. Although precise figures are impossible to determine, data on federal seizures provide some indication of the increase in California’s marijuana production in the wake of policy changes. Following the implementation of Proposition 215, California witnessed an observable increase in the total number of marijuana plants seized by the federal government. Seizures increased exponentially in the early 2000s from just over

1 million plants seized in 2004 to 7,519,580 plants seized in 2009 (DEA 2012), following the passage of Senate Bill 420. This legislative statute broadened Proposition 215 to include measures of protection for patients transporting medical marijuana, allowed for the formation of patient “collectives” or “cooperatives” (including dispensaries), and established state guidelines on the number of plants to which each patient is entitled (NORML 2013). Although cultivators were by no means protected from prosecution by federal law enforcement agencies, they received some degree of sanction from the state of California through Proposition 215 and SB 420.

Although the increase in marijuana seizures by federal law enforcement may have more to do with national opposition to state legislation that blatantly violates federal law than actual increases in marijuana production, interviewees described a substantial increase in production in Claytown since the 1990s. As Derek, a man in his forties who grew up in Claytown, described: “The number of people who are growing has increased a lot ... Proposition 215 definitely instigated these changes [because] the risk was significantly reduced. A lot of people who didn’t think about going into growing initially became growers [after passage of Proposition 215]. And a lot of people did this—and still do—just to stay in [the region]. Not to make a lot of money, but to stay here” (interview, July 2013).

The expansion of marijuana production in the context of shifting economic and legal terrains in California has generated a new assemblage of marijuana practices.<sup>16</sup> On one hand, there has been an increase in growers who are long-term residents of Claytown and engage in the industry as a way to survive economic restructuring, afford increasingly expensive costs of living, and maintain their residences in the region. On the other hand, marijuana has spawned a new wave of profit-seeking migrants who come to Claytown for the sole purpose of growing marijuana. Whereas marijuana production in Claytown was born out of a desire to establish noncapitalist socioeconomic and eco-



logical relations—what I describe here as a rural moral economy—it has outgrown its original functions. Although this rural moral economy has not disappeared entirely, it has been significantly transformed by the rise of profit-oriented marijuana production.

### **Marijuana and the unmaking of a moral economy**

Claytown has become a well-known destination for marijuana production, with people coming from across the country to set up growing operations and seasonal migrants traveling the world over to work on marijuana farms during harvest season. Whereas the majority of international migrants tend to engage in marijuana processing (trimming), growers are predominantly white Americans, 60–70% of whose permanent residence is outside Claytown (Claytown Sheriff's Office 2014, personal communication).<sup>17</sup>

Numerous residents commented on changes in land use and the “feel of the community” as a result of people moving to the area just to grow marijuana. Interviewees expressed discontent, for instance, that they no longer know all of their neighbors, as many people who have bought or rent land in the area come and go on a seasonal basis for the sole purpose of marijuana production; these individuals often have no interest in building relationships with the community, or even their immediate neighbors. Annette, a back-to-the-lander who moved to Claytown in the late 1960s (and a marijuana grower herself) lamented changes she has seen in the community over the last 15 years as it has become increasingly well known for its marijuana industry. “There are people in [Claytown] who are not here to grow but grow in order to stay in the region,” she described, “then there are people who are in the business of growing and have moved to [Claytown] specifically for the business ... Many, many people are moving here just to grow” (field notes, June 2013).

Another back-to-the-lander described the “new element” of growers as posing a direct

threat to the values cultivated in the back-to-the-land movement. Most obvious of these was an increase in violence associated with this new wave of migrants. Jimmy, a man in his late sixties describes the situation: “This whole new element showed up here ... to grow pot. And they didn't give a shit about [Claytown or the people who lived here] ... It got real ugly around here. [We started seeing] booby traps and barbed wire ... [The population] just shifted at one point and there were all these people who were not here to homestead—you never saw them at the community meetings, you never saw them at the [local cultural center]. They were [just] growing pot” (interview, March 2014). Frank, a medical marijuana activist who arrived in Claytown in the late 1970s, echoed this sentiment, stating: “a lot of people have moved here just to grow. Pot has really changed [the feel of Claytown] ... because that made the population double and it's brought in a transient crowd that comes in [seasonally] to find a place to grow, and then they take the money back to wherever they came from ... They're only here to grow pot” (interview, April 2012).

Long-time residents expressed concern over the ecological and social effects of an increase in marijuana production in the region. Several interviewees described the negative impact on local (often unpaved) roads due to the presence of tanker trucks carrying water for large grow operations. Others discussed how a privately owned spring that had been available to everyone in the community for years, free of charge, was recently closed off to the public on account of new residents “abusing the privilege” by filling up trucks full of water buckets for their marijuana grows (field notes, October 2013).<sup>18</sup> Barry, the back-to-the-lander introduced earlier, echoed such sentiments:

pot growing became such a business. And it ... it lost its innocence. It seemed like it became a major way that [Claytown] was bringing in income. And ... I don't think it was good ... People began to be afraid of each other ... and there were

many, many more people moving up here ... You can listen to [the roads] at trimming time, and there's a car going in and out every five minutes ... And it's changed the whole tenor of the neighborhood ... It became too populated with the kind of people that really don't give a shit about what the land had to offer, other than the fact that it could grow good weed (interview, February 2012).

Back-to-the-landers' concern over this new wave of "pot migrants" and the challenge they pose to the persistence of what I call a rural moral economy was repeated frequently in interviews and casual conversation. However, the back-to-the-land community has also experienced internal changes instigated by the expansion of the marijuana industry, as their children have increasingly become part of the new wave of growers. Although many in this second generation espouse similar values as their parents, their experiences and motivations for growing marijuana often differ. Most notably, rather than a means of facilitating a moral economy, marijuana production for the sake of profit became the primary goal for many of these growers. Furthermore, some in this second generation (particularly those whose parents came from middle class backgrounds) did not share their parents' educational aspirations, nor had they experienced employment in the formal economy. As Annette notes: "Many of the people in this second generation have contributed a lot to the community ... but they don't have much in the way of survival skills or labor skills, outside of carpentry and pot growing. If it wasn't for pot—if they didn't have an easy way to make a living—our kids would be at [college] or learning another language, or something like that. My son is a perfect example of that" (interview, June 2013).

A number of back-to-the-landers shared similar concerns. Frank highlights the changes in meanings and practices of marijuana over time, both for the children of the back-to-the-landers and for those who migrated to

the region specifically to grow marijuana: "[In the 1960s and 1970s] the pot scene ... allowed people to establish lives here and invest in the community ... I think the downside is it's made too many kids dependent on growing that they think that that's it—grow pot, make money so you can make it big. That's such a delusion ... But a lot of people have gotten dependent upon it" (interview, April 2012).

As demonstrated by new marijuana migrants and some of the back-to-the-landers' children, the disdain for profit-oriented production has waned in recent years. As a result, marijuana has taken on very different meanings from those it embodied in the 1960s and 1970s. There has been a growing emphasis in the region, particularly with the expansion of the marijuana economy, on profit and accumulation and less involvement in practices of place making and community building. Not unlike generational changes experienced in other communities formerly characterized by high levels of social participation and forms of community building (Small 2004), many of the back-to-the-landers' children have withdrawn their own children from the local public schools to enroll them in charter schools, participation in long-standing community organizations has declined, and the once widespread practice of co-building one another's houses has been replaced by more traditional forms of hiring contractors (field notes, 2013–2014). As one back-to-the-lander reflected, "I just wonder—who's going to take on these community projects when we're gone? Or is anybody going to take them on at all?" (field notes, August 2013).

To be sure, not all marijuana growers are out to "strike it rich." As noted above, increased participation in the marijuana economy is partly a response to rural economic restructuring. Indeed, growers in Claytown include a range of people, including cancer survivors with unruly medical bills, former ranchers and construction workers, college graduates unable to find work, and medical marijuana activists. However, changes in land use, social relations, and the meanings of marijuana also reflect a changing

ethos in the region that contrasts with that of the moral economy of the back-to-the-landers. While this new assemblage of marijuana practices has not completely dissolved the back-to-the-landers' moral economy, it reflects an instantiation of capitalist relations and norms that diverges from and complicates their earlier vision and practices.

These shifts in values and practices, in the context of changing economic and legal conditions, reflect what I describe as an unmaking of a rural moral economy. By "unmaking," I do not mean to imply a kind of finality or immanent demise of a particular set of social relationships and practices. I use unmaking to signify a reassembling of cultural and political practices through which an older moral economy is reconfigured. It was not as if the meanings of marijuana suddenly shifted, in some historically linear sense, from association with a rural moral economy to a foundation for capital accumulation. Indeed, there were elements of the latter in Claytown in the 1960s and 1970s, and remnants of the former persist in the region today. There are still those committed to the values and practices associated with the back-to-the-landers' rural moral economy. However, this moral economy no longer experiences the kind of counter-hegemonic status in the region it once did; capitalist values and logics are being reasserted through the growth of the local marijuana industry.

### **Moral economy and the enduring relevance of E. P. Thompson**

Paradoxically, marijuana production contributed to both the making and a partial unmaking of back-to-the-landers' moral economy in Claytown, though it caused neither. To understand these processes, we must pay attention to the historical specificity of each moment, and the cultural and political contexts in which the moral economy emerged and declined. As explained above, the moral economy of the back-

to-the-land movement in Claytown was forged in a moment of widespread political and cultural discontent shaped by antiwar protests; civil rights, peace, and environmental movements; and critiques of consumer culture in the 1960s and 1970s. The fact that marijuana production helped back-to-the-landers enact a rural moral economy is no small matter. At the time, marijuana was illegal at both federal and state levels and was aggressively policed. As a result, their operations were small, marginal, and clandestine; only those dedicated to building a moral economy on the land would risk engaging in marijuana production.

By the mid-1990s, the cultural and political climate had changed significantly, as had the legal status of marijuana. With the fall of socialist countries, neoliberalism became deeply entrenched, and while people still struggled for alternatives, the extent and fervor of anti-capitalist discontent had arguably waned. The legalization of medical marijuana in California facilitated a booming industry (Geluardi 2010) and eased the entry of a new generation of growers in places such as Claytown. These changes, in conjunction with greater acceptance of a capitalist ethos among a new generation of growers (i.e., individualism, entrepreneurialism, profit seeking) initiated a slow and subtle change in the character of and values in Claytown. These changes did not completely dissolve the back-to-the-landers' moral economy, but they slowly and subtly remade meanings of land-based living.

A particular constellation of cultural, political, and economic factors shaped back-to-the-landers' moral economy; its unmaking was similarly constituted through a particular configuration of historical processes, including the rise and dominance of neoliberalism and the legalization of medical marijuana. Marijuana production, in this story, provides a lens onto two historical moments of social change. I have used the concepts of moral economy and situated resistance—informed by the work of E. P. Thompson and James Scott—to explore how

economic contestations are constructed in particular times and places and enacted in everyday lives. Thompson's framework, in particular, illuminates the centrality of values and meanings to anticapitalist resistance, and how such resistance is constitutive of and constituted through historical processes.

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### Notes

1. As Thompson acknowledges, however, the term "moral economy" does not originate with him (Thompson 1993). Furthermore, although Thompson does not cite Polanyi in any of his writings on moral economy, there is significant overlap in the two scholars' approaches (see Edelman 2012). Two sets of Polanyian concepts bear resemblance to Thompson's use of moral economy: economic (dis)embedding, and the dialectical relationship between movements and countermovements (Polanyi 1944). Notwithstanding these areas of conceptual overlap, Thompson's methodological and conceptual articulation of moral economy provides a unique lens through which to understand consciousness and resistance.
2. For uses of the notion in studies of peasant resistance, see Scott 1976, 1985; Watts 1983; Edelman 2005; Wolford 2006; and van der Ploeg 2008. For understandings of moral economy in the context of state formation, see Sivaramakrishnan 2005 and McCarthy 2002. For analyses of moral economy and gender relations, see Afshar 1989 and Perez 2007. On moral economy and migration, see Fassin 2005; Velayutham and Wise 2005; and Nare 2011. And for use of the concept in food studies, see Goodman 2004 and Jung and Newman 2014.
3. See Bruyn 1999. Bruyn employs a descriptive notion of moral economy whereby a "true" and moral free market can be established through consumer practices and collegial relations between the for-profit and the non-profit sectors.
4. Due to marijuana's ambiguous legal standing, all names have been changed to protect interviewees' anonymity. I use the pseudonym of "Claytown"—an amalgamation of several towns within one northern California county—to further protect my informants. This work draws on 18 months of ethnographic research between 2012 and 2014. In addition to my own interviews, I also draw on a collection of 21 interviews conducted by a local cultural center and 11 interviews conducted by a Claytown resident, historian-ecologist, and author I call "Ray."
5. None of this is to say, however, that Thompson presumed an amoral political economy, as some

- have claimed (see Booth 1994; Arnold 2001; Sayer 2000). Instead, Thompson argues that removing controls over the economy becomes a matter of moral significance (1971: 89–90).
6. I have deliberately chosen Scott's notion of everyday resistance, rather than his conceptualization of moral economy, because I believe the former has a greater affinity to Thompson's original use of moral economy. While Thompson insists on a historically specific notion of moral economy—focusing on the urban working class in eighteenth century England—Scott uses the concept to formulate a general theory of peasant resistance (1976). Although not initially integrated into his conception of moral economy, the role of experience and meaning came to be central to Scott's formulation of everyday resistance (1985).
  7. Including global economic stagnation, increased food and energy prices, decolonization in the Global South and desegregation in the United States, and a rebirth of environmentalism in the United States (Brown 2011; Jacob 1997).
  8. See Brown's discussion of this (2011: 202–209).
  9. Despite the diversity of back-to-the-landers' experiences with rural migration, their engagement in a moral economy out of choice rather than survival differs from that of the eighteenth-century English workers studied by Thompson. Whereas the moral economy of the latter was formed partially out of necessity, back-to-the-landers' moral economy was not. Both, however, are forms of political resistance—one forged under the dire conditions of the urban poor, the other voluntarily under the less pressing conditions of a more privileged class. This difference matters in terms of the animating impetus for resistance, yet the common struggle against capitalist development unites these two as moral economies.
  10. Back-to-the-landers erected a range of dwellings—on property that was both owned and rented—from domes and ten-foot square cabins to elegant Japanese-style structures. Class differences were undoubtedly visible in the kinds of dwellings one built, but the presence of a broad spectrum of the community in contributing labor to the construction was consistent in most people's experiences.
  11. The question of belonging, localness, and insider/outsider status requires more attention than I have space for here. While back-to-the-landers now think of themselves as “locals,” they were once thought of as outsiders, particularly by the logging, mining and ranching communities that preceded them. Likewise, the “new” values espoused by those coming to Claytown solely to grow marijuana must be understood in relation to back-to-the-landers' own conceptions of belonging and identity. The values associated with back-to-the-landers' moral economy not only reinforced a sense of inclusion and belonging but also worked to differentiate themselves from other social groups in the region. For a more in-depth discussion of how belonging is shaped by migration and movement, see Jansen and Löfving 2007. For a discussion of inclusion, identity and insider/outsider status, see Bhopal and Meyers 2008.
  12. Such visions and practices stand in stark contrast with the productivist orientation of capitalist agriculture in California. The agrarian political economy of California specifically, and the United States more generally, has been driven by a productivist ideology, an endless pursuit of increased output per unit of land. This ideology is the animating force behind agro-industrialization, wherein capitalist farms seek to appropriate and substitute ecological processes and human labor with machinery and industrial products (i.e., synthetic fertilizers and pesticides) (Goodman et al. 1987). Agro-industrialization has historically driven out small-scale farm operations, as farmers are financially squeezed by rising land values and declining commodity prices. Whether or to what extent small-scale (peasant or family) farms can persist under agrarian capitalism is at the crux of the agrarian question (see Bernstein 2010 and McMichael 2013). Although this paper does not engage the literature on agrarian political economy specifically, it is worth noting that the back-to-the-land movement could also be analyzed as a form of resistance and an alternative to this productivist impulse.
  13. Although I emphasize the economic dimension of marijuana to the production of a moral economy, marijuana also had social and symbolic value among back-to-the-landers. Trudy expressed this sentiment clearly: “We were all pot smokers [in those days] ... And [if you had a joint], everybody would come to the circle. And

I think that was a really important thing about pot that I don't think is talked about enough. The joint—that's what it was: it joined people" (interview, March 2012).

14. Although beyond the purview of this paper, it is worth noting the tremendous risk associated with cultivating marijuana in the 1970s—and even more so in the 1980s, when Campaign Against Marijuana Production (CAMP) raids were initiated. In addition to the risk of losing one's land, house, and other assets, CAMP raids were often violent. One back-to-the-lander recounted an incident in which CAMP troops stormed his neighbor's house and made everyone lie down on the floor at gunpoint—including the children—with their hands clasped behind their backs (interview, March 2014). Such violent raids on small-scale growers were not uncommon but rather part of a concerted strategy among CAMP officials (see Balko 2013).
15. Although I do not have the space to elaborate here, the community also collaborated to build and administer a local public school in the region.
16. The notion of "assemblage" illuminates how social relations are constituted not necessarily as direct or linear processes but as dynamic practices in which economic and social conditions continually change, embody different meanings in particular historical moments, and are subject to shifting configurations of power that are neither static nor self-evident (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; see also Li 2007).
17. According to an official in Claytown Sheriff's Office, foreign nationals from Canada, Mexico, Peru, Argentina, Germany, Sweden, France, Spain, Israel, England, and Italy were questioned in 2012 while processing ("trimming") marijuana (personal communication, March 2014).
18. This spring has been in the possession of the same cattle-ranching family for generations and was made available to everyone in the immediate locale in the 1960s and 1970s, including the back-to-the-landers. Although cross-cultural differences did exist between the "old timers" and the "newcomers," these were not insurmountable and did not change the family's willingness to provide full public access to the spring. Conditions changed considerably with the most recent wave of migrants coming

exclusively to grow marijuana. The primary reason provided for restricting access to the spring was that "strangers" were using the resources without contributing more broadly to the community (field notes, October 2013).

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