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To cite this article: Laurence New-Moore & Gusti Agung Ayu Mas Pramitasari (2023): Coding in rural Balinese non-formal education: social reproduction theory and liberal empowerment, Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, DOI: 10.1080/03057925.2023.2212107

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2023.2212107

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Published online: 07 Jun 2023.

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Coding in rural Balinese non-formal education: social reproduction theory and liberal empowerment

Laurence New-Moore and Gusti Agung Ayu Mas Pramitasari

Faculty of Arts and Society, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Australia

ABSTRACT
Following the work of Tamatea and Pramitasari in the Bali Coding Class (2018), we ask if liberal empowerment can sit alongside Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory in framing a non-formal education coding class for rural Balinese youth. While a review of critical theory informed literature suggests not, we appropriate the work of Mills to read data obtained from coding class students, teachers, and industry representatives to suggest otherwise. Focusing upon four ‘problematics’ identified in the ‘critical’ literature, we argue that Mills’ non-ideal deracialised liberalism provide the conceptual space for working with liberal empowerment and social reproduction theory contiguously.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 8 October 2021
Accepted 28 March 2023

KEYWORDS
Liberalism; empowerment; social reproduction theory; non-formal education

Introduction

In recent years nation-states have introduced coding in schools for reasons including expanding employment opportunities (Tamatea 2019). This initiative has often been tied to the notion of ‘empowerment’, a framing deployed in education and development discourse more broadly (Gracia-Calandín and Tamarit-López 2021; Cook 2021; UNESCO 2022, 2016). Seeking similar opportunities for often socio-economically disadvantaged rural Balinese youth (Pramitasari and Tamatea 2018), Tamatea and Pramitasari (2018) reviewed literature around coding in non-formal education, finding an absence of sociological discussion that might guide their curriculum. In response, they argued the applicability of Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory to not only understanding how rural Balinese youth might be positioned relative to the field of coding but also the implications of this for curriculum and learning outcomes (Bourdieu 1997). Bourdieu’s work (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 1977), influential in education (Murphy and Costa 2016) is, however, aligned with critical theory, focused upon recognising macro-level structuring of groups, group relations, dispositions, and implications of such for change (Alexander 2018; Munck 2010, 34); a focus seemingly at odds with liberal framed empowerment as often represented in ‘critical’ discussion (Weidenstedt 2016).
Hence, while supportive of the notion of empowerment, but also recognising the value of social reproduction theory, we found ourselves located between seemingly incompatible framings. Seeking to resolve the tension, we asked: Could liberal empowerment sit alongside social reproduction theory as an overarching curriculum goal? In responding, we were presented with choices: 1. accept the ‘critical’ representation of empowerment as flawed and incompatible with social reproduction theory, and abandon empowerment, or 2. test critical argument’s claims about empowerment. We chose the latter, as reported here.

In this response, we draw upon the work of Black philosopher Charles Mills in *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (2017) as the primary voice of liberalism. While Mills may not have had rural Balinese youth or coding in mind when drafting this text, we contend – drawing upon Mills – that much of what is highlighted as a weakness in liberalism, and therefore (liberal) empowerment, is neither a defining characteristic nor a core tenet of liberalism, or therefore liberal framed empowerment. To the contrary, we draw upon Mills and empirical data to argue that liberal empowerment and social reproduction theory are not as incompatible as may initially be thought. In this, our discussion comprises a contrapuntal response to four key arguments (problematics) deployed in critical discussion of liberal empowerment. These include the claim that liberal empowerment: 1. is ill-defined, 2. is focused solely upon the individual, 3. ignores social relations and group power, and 4. cannot bring about change. We use Mills (2017) for two purposes. First, to respond to the often ‘straw man’-like representations of liberal empowerment in the literature framed by critical theory, and second, after establishing the correct tenets underpinning liberal empowerment, to read data drawn from the Bali Coding research project.

In arguing for contiguity between these two framings, we are not blind to the range of groups marginalised by ‘various exclusion clauses of liberalism’s most celebrated manifestos, treatises, and declarations of human rights’ (Mills 2017, xxi). Nor are we anti-theoretical to the critical project. Rather, like Mills, we ‘challenge the radical shibboleth that radical responses are incompatible with liberalism’, and therefore liberal empowerment (2017, 11).

**Methodology**

**Data collection**

The Bali Coding Class research project from which data below are drawn is conducted at the Hati Berani Learning Center (HBLC) in Bali, Indonesia (Tamatea and Pramitasari 2018). HBLC is a non-formal community learning centre located in Rahayu village (*Desa Rahayu*) in Gianyar District (*Kapubaten Gianyar*). It was established to provide rural youth with a range of socio-cultural, and economic skills, not always attainable in formal school education, which remains somewhat inscribed by concerns around participation, quality, and outcomes (Sukmayadi and Yahya 2020). To supplement formal schooling, the HBLC vision is the:

creation of rural youth with character and environmental insight who are able to compete in the global job market and education and are trusted to become leaders. (HBLC 2022)
This vision is implemented through five foci, which reflect aspects of UNESCO’s empowerment framed *Education for Sustained Development* agenda (2022): 1. Globalisation, 2. Digital Development, 3. Character Development and Saving Environment, 4. Leadership, and 5. Local Wisdom, variously introduced since 2007. Student enrolment at HBLC is free. The Bali Coding Class is located within Digital Development, commencing in 2018, the significance of which emerges against much ‘hype’ around the importance of digital literacy in Indonesian education, but a lack of capacity to deliver such (Sukmayadi and Yahya 2020). The class aimed to facilitate student acquisition of capitals supporting empowerment, through emphasis upon job market opportunities.

Project participants comprised self-selected HBLC student alumni and coding class students. Additionally, three Indonesian software industry professionals (executives) known to the Balinese author of this paper participated: a Balinese male (Pak Trisna), a Javanese female (Ibu Putri), and a Chinese Sundanese male (Pak Hartono). Their significance is two-fold. First, they comprise field gatekeepers with the power to influence access to resources in their field. Second, because of this, they exist as a corrective to a view of student holding unlimited agency (Collyer, Willis, and Lewis 2017). These executives were approached directly and interviewed about their field in 2018, in Balinese, Indonesian, and English. Participation in the project followed the participant’s review of project-related information available in hardcopy and online, a subsequent review of a formal Project Information Sheet, and signing a consent form. A parent or legal guardian provided informed consent for participants under 18.³ Prior to the first coding class lesson, students completed an online Google Forms questionnaire focused upon demographics and current coding related knowledge. A follow-up questionnaire was completed after their second lesson, testing knowledge acquisition. The student cohort also participated in a focus group discussion convened after several lessons. Approximately 25 students joined the initial class.

Beyond those data identified above, is that drawn from ‘critical theory’ framed critique of liberal empowerment in the literature. This critical framed literature was generated primarily through searches in online academic literature databases available at the authors’ university. Having exhausted the results returned from this method, a subsequent online ‘google’ search was conducted using similar terms: ‘liberal + empowerment’. This returned similar results, and instances of ‘grey’ literature provided a broader scope of the literature and a more comprehensive view of the available arguments (Mahood, Van Eerd, and Irvin 2014, 230).

**Data analysis and interpretation**

Reflecting the dialogical relationship between theory and data (Hofman 2020), coding was informed by awareness of Mill’s discussion of liberalism (Mills 2017) and Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory (1977). Data from the literature critical of ‘empowerment’ and from the research participants were coded to identify related phenomena; an inductive process generating several categories (Lodico et al. 2006, 305) against which individual instances of textual data from the focus groups and interviews could be further aligned. The analysis of the questionnaire data used simple statistics available within Google forms. For example, data indicating individual agency relative to structural constraints, or that pertaining to goals and qualifications. Analysis of these categories revealed themes
broadly aligned with some of the responses in Mill’s discussion of liberalism (2017), allowing for presentation of these data in discussion of the four ‘problematics’ below. Notwithstanding Lodico et al.’s (2006) observation that ‘it is often difficult to distinguish between the reporting of findings in a qualitative study and the interpretation of the finding’ (p. 313), the data-driven analysis informs an interpretative discussion asking: What does this mean? (p. 313).

It should be noted that only problematics two, three and four are explored specifically through the use of participant data, as problematic one concerns a ‘difficulty’ (the problem of definition) located within the scholarly community and not the participant cohort. Nonetheless, while the problematic one is discussed in relation to the literature only, its discussion generates data upon which our conclusion rests. With this, discussion below is structured thus. The discussion addresses each problematic individually, within which argument from critical literature is introduced as the ‘prosecution’s’ case against liberal empowerment. Following this, the ‘defence’ case drawing on Mills (2017) and empirical data is introduced. This is followed by an interpretive discussion.

Problematic one: definition

Prosecution

Arguably, the notion of empowerment initially becomes problematic, when as critical literature asserts, empowerment comprises little more than amorphous jargon, cliché, or buzzword (Woodall, Warwick-Booth, and Cross 2012; Archibald and Wilson 2011). Or when differing conceptions are used without clarification (Lincoln et al. 2002). Ward, for example, notes ‘discrepancies between Islamist, liberal, and western conceptions of empowerment, and what they imply for the women’s movement as a whole’ (Ward 2014), such that failing to define empowerment more precisely arguably results in deployment of a local construct masquerading as a universal. This asserts a taken-for-granted-ness precluding discussion of implications for praxis in different contexts by different actors (Ward 2014; Jupp and Ibn Ali 2010). Perhaps, as Woodall, Warwick-Booth, and Cross (2012, 744) contend, there is no universally accepted definition of empowerment.

From a semantic perspective Sardenberg (2008) notes that seldom is the notion of ‘power’ - the root word of empowerment – defined, such that some argue for a more explicit focus upon the relationship between power and empowerment (Archibald and Wilson 2011, 23). This argument often highlights the movement in the notion away from a once ‘radical’ to a conservative agenda (Hickel 2014; Sardenberg 2008; Buckley 2000). Liberalism framed empowerment is that, however, often identified with the latter such that Sardenberg argues for a liberating as opposed to liberalism-framed empowerment (2008). Cornwall goes so far as to represent liberalism-framed empowerment as ‘empowerment lite’ (2018).

Defence

While Mills (2017) does not treat the topic of liberal empowerment from an education and development perspective, he acknowledges argument around the lack of precision
when referencing liberalism and the necessity of defining the kind of liberalism invoked (p. 11). The significance of this to the critique above is that we might expect arguments critical of liberal empowerment to be more precise about the liberalism it critiques, though this is often not so. Instead, the reader is presented with a generic universalist ‘strawman’-like liberalism in relation to which the ‘problematics’ reviewed here are elaborated (Cornwall 2018). And where more explicit references to liberalism are made, seldom are they accompanied by identification of the type; an absence Sardenberg’s (2008) discussion exemplifies.

Liberal empowerment has its origins in liberalism, but also in liberal feminism’s claim for equality and equal opportunities for women. While we may all agree with this claim for equality, it must be remembered that liberalism is not only associated with a political theory centred on notions of individual liberty, individual rights, and equal opportunity but also with neoclassical economics. (p. 20)

Though Sardenberg explicates some of liberalism’s core tenets, discussion does not name the type despite deploying the term ‘liberal’ on over 20 occasions (2008). Similarly, although Hickel’s discussion of liberal empowerment’s ‘problem’ with kinship (2014, 1359) recognises some key tenets, exponents, and deployments along a political spectrum, description does not fully reference a type of liberalism. By contrast, Mills establishes that liberalism includes numerous types beyond the simplistic Left Vs Right schematic (2017, 12).

Consequently, in relation to critique of empowerment grounded upon untyped ‘generic’ liberalism, we also ask of the critical literature: ‘What particular variety of liberalism do you mean?’ (Mills, 12), and: ‘Are your generalisations [about liberal empowerment] really about all the possible kinds of liberal . . . ’ empowerment? (p. 12).

Fortunately, Mills provides clarity, in his words, then borrowing from Gray (2017, 13). Liberalism comprises:

the anti-feudal ideology of individualism, equal right, and moral egalitarianism that arises in Western Europe in the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries to challenge the ideas and values inherited from the older medieval order. (p. 12)

And:

Common to all variants of the liberal tradition . . . it is individualist, in that it asserts the moral primacy of the person against the claim of any social collectivity; egalitarianism, in as much as it confers on all men the same moral status and denies the relevance to legal or political order of differences in moral worth among human beings; universalist, affirming the moral unit of the human species and according a secondary importance to specific historic associations and cultural forms; and meliorist in its affirmation of the corrigibility and improvability of all social institutions and political arrangements. (p. 13)

Here, however, drawing upon Mills (2017), we work from a position of deracialised liberalism. We propose that where empowerment is grounded in this type of liberalism, it offers a curriculum goal not as incompatible with Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory as perhaps initially thought. Although contextual macro-level dynamics in our project are not so much grounded in race as class, it is significant to note that framed by the social democratic tradition, deracialised liberalism is not to be restricted to issues of race alone. It acknowledges the interconnectedness of group dynamics (2017, 8). This then, is
our starting point, and response to the first problematic; a notion of empowerment that while indeed individualist, egalitarian and meliorist - does not exclude broader dynamics.

**Problematic two: the individual**

**Prosecution**

The notion of empowerment can have a strong focus upon the individual, particularly in more psychologistic orientations, unsurprising given psychology’s origin in Western commitments to individualism (Torregrosa 2004, 23). In healthcare, this emerges through notions of ‘self’ empowerment and its relationship to well-being, self-confidence, self-efficacy, and esteem (Woodall, Warwick-Booth, and Cross 2012, 743), reflecting mainstream psychology’s holding the individual as the locus of change (Agner and Baun 2018); a position appropriated by the ‘feel good’ or happiness industry, positive psychology, and cognitive capitalism, with footholds in the corporate sector and education (Huggins 2019; Reveley 2013; Ferguson 2007). In this radically individualist form, empowerment has indeed lost its transformative Freireian intent (Mohajer and Earnest 2009). More specifically, in education and development, the critical response to liberal empowerment is equally focused on reification of the individual, asserting inattentiveness to broader macro-level structuring (Cornwall 2018, 52; Sardenberg 2008). Yet Mills acknowledges this argument and the assertion that liberalism has an asocial atomic individualist ontology, labelling it as ‘one of the oldest critiques’ (2017, 14).

**Defence**

Mills offers counterarguments to this particular critique of liberal empowerment. His first response is to the Marxist critique of individualist contractarian liberalism, which holds contrary to the notion of individuals entering mutual social contract, that the social precedes the individual such that the individual emerges ‘only in society’ (Marx, cited in Mills, 15). While Mills concedes the truth of this argument, he notes that not all liberalisms are contractual including utilitarian, the ‘British’ liberalism of Green and colleagues, and John Dewey’s liberalism (p. 15). Moreover, not only has contractarian liberal individualism often been rethought, but it offers space for ‘hegemonic norms to be critically evaluated through the epistemic and moral distances from Sittlichkeit that the contract as an intellectual device, provides’ (p. 15). Furthermore, as Mills asserts, hegemonic norms seem to have existed in pre-liberal capitalist settings (p. xix & p. 6).

Second, but within the contract tradition, Mills contends that despite Marx failing to acknowledge it, there are resources ‘for contesting the assumptions of the Hobbesian/Lockean version of the contract’ (p. 15). Mills cites Rousseau’s Discourse on the Origins of Inequality (p. 15), wherein the contract is ‘entered into after the formation of society, and thus the creation of socialised human beings’ (p. 15) as opposed to atomistic individuals. Hence, it seems that liberal empowerment can be grounded upon a social ontology (p.15), allowing for consideration of hegemonic social norms. Third, Mills highlights a more recent scholarly understanding of the contract, the work of Rawls (1971), and developments within communitarianism, a position explicitly recognising the connection between the individual and the collective.
Regarding Rawls and his ‘thought-experiment’, Mills reminds us that this was just a thought-experiment and not a “literal or even metaphorical anthropological account of reality (Mills 2017, 15), such that we should not assume its actors are ‘real human beings’ (p. 15). And, regarding communitarianism, which might be inferred from critique of liberal empowerment to comprise an antidote to liberal individualism (Etzioni 2014), Mills cautions against extolling the good of its explicitly social ontology on the grounds that relations within social groups, as opposed to those between individuals, can equally be inscribed by domination and subordination (Mills 2017, 15). Considering this, Balinese society for example, which remains community oriented, arguably places individuals within group relationships, which might not satisfy the kinds of ‘freedoms’ critical western dispositions would support (Creese 2019; Veszeg and Narhetali 2010).

Of significance in Mill’s response is not only the identification of spaces for recognising macro-level structuring of individuals but also for individuals to exercise choice or agency. For Mills, the issue of agency is captured in Cudd’s ‘compatibilist position’, asserting that ‘while all action is intentionally guided, many of the constraints within which people interact are socially determined and beyond the control of the currently acting individual’ (2017, 17). Cudd views this position as being in alignment with Pettit’s ‘holistic individualism:

Social regularities associated with nonvoluntary social groups supervene on intentional states, and at the same time, group membership in these and voluntary social groups partly constitutes the intentional states of individuals. (2017, 17)

This compatibilist framing not only concerns agency but also power, suggesting individuals can - contrary to social regularities like involuntary groupings - act intentionally; a discussion engaged below.

Indeed, responses from students and industry representatives support aspects of the compatibilist view, acknowledging both structure(–ing) and agency. This emerged in comments regarding soft skills and attitudes, particularly through references to the ‘Balinese mentality’, which one representative cited as a socially shared characteristic limiting economic progress. Yet industry representatives also recognised instances where individuals from similarly marginalised backgrounds achieved success.

Regarding the so-called ‘mentality’, there was a view that Balinese youth were content having ‘enough’ (kadung nyaman), such that striving was not worthwhile. This disposition was compounded by the pursuit of short-term financial gain from tourism work, such as being a driver, over investment in longer term career possibilities like becoming a software developer. Industry representative Pak Trisna explained that there are those:

who went into tourism and obtained a lot of money without having to worry about study. You can even learn to be a bartender (in tourism) while being happy, but if you enter software development its difficult. Tourism is easy money without the effort.

Trisna further explained that Balinese youth show “lack of insight (Kurang wawasan) in focusing ‘just on tourism (pariwisata aja terus’). Youth could work on international cruise liners and obtain millions of rupiah ‘(langsung dapat sekian juta) as opposed to studying for a few years. While indeed not all tourism jobs are easy money or effortless, Trisna’s comments identify a strategy prioritising short-term gain, not uncommon among those in poverty (Sheehy-Skeffington and Rea 2017, 2; Yirka 2012). Trisna’s
comments also signal the importance of tourism to the Bali economy, such that when tourism flourishes the economy flourishes (Antara and Sumarniarsih 2017, 42); notwithstanding capital repatriation (Claire 2018; Colorni 2018). Despite the positive link between tourism and economy, the dilemma which Trisna reveals is low numbers of youth persevering with studies to enter non-tourism employment available in a burgeoning economy (Antara and Sumarniarsih 2017).

Also referencing attitude, industry representative Pak Hatono, asserted that while hard coding skills were important, so too were soft skills:

It’s about the character and attitude … Coding skill content can and should be able to be learned readily but the soft skills and attitudes such as, character, architecture solution and concepts remain intact regardless of which one programming language is used.

Hartono’s claim resonates with views in the field more broadly, expressed in formal (Ahmed et al. 2013) and popular literature (Paruch 2019).

A third industry representative, Ibu Putri, further clarified what comprises soft skills, highlighting that her company valued those ‘hungry to learn’, with good teamwork skills, and comfortable with criticism, above those thinking they were invincible. Because ‘that’s not going to cut it’. Trisna also addressed the possibility of students thinking they ‘knew it all’, arguing the importance of not having a sense of privilege; a concern he would return to in relation to socio-economic backgrounds. Here, however, the elaboration of privilege is in the context of attitudes. For Trisna, successful students were independent (bisanya mandiri), hardworking (kerja keras) and willing to put in extra time (berusaha masuk dalam kesitu udah lembur), from night through to the morning (kerja sampe malam sampe pagi).

Emphasis upon soft skills was nonetheless articulated alongside the construction of the significance of hard coding skills and intellectual abilities to succeed in software development, such as logical thinking and mathematical reasoning. Trisna highlighted the value of the ability to design architectural solutions and understand programming concepts, while Putri stated that ‘problem solving is number one’. More specifically Hartono added:

analytical capability, being able to breakdown abstract problems, a capability to visualise and conceptualise an idea for design purposes, meticulousness when programming, and an ability to think from A to Z.

While collectively these statements recognise macro-level factors and the necessity of hard and soft skills, they also indicate some students will demonstrate these skills, and some will not. This representation of individual (micro-level) difference further reproduces views in the software development field asserting the significance of personality and ability to success. (Paruch 2019, 171)

Notwithstanding the risk-adverse behavior exhibited by some youth, student responses revealed a capacity to act contrary to macro-level pressures. Komang, for example, explained that although his parents “saluted” his decision to pursue coding, he knew they didn’t particularly agree, hoping he might follow an older sibling into international cruise ship employment. Moreover, his parents “continued to compare his decision with his older brother’s”. Students like Komang viewed the coding class as an opportunity providing additional employment options. When asked why they joined the
class, students explained they wanted a career “highly in demand nowadays”, because “coding will [be] important for [the] future”. One student explained that they wanted to be a “game developer”. With coding skills, another explained, we “can get work more easily”. No students expressed a desire to engage in ‘traditional’ manual labour.

These positive student responses align with industry representative discourse, indicating that not only was software development a competitive industry, but an industry characterised by demand outstripping developer supply, and a burgeoning start-up environment with developers ‘jumping’ between start-ups. Nonetheless, as described by the local Balinese coding class teacher, there were a range of responses and engagements among the student cohort. There were those who were enthusiastic, committed, and fast learners. Those enthusiastic, committed, and slow learners and fast learners not committed due to school priorities.

**Problematic three: power relations and groups**

**Prosecution**

The critique of liberal empowerment and its association with individualism is often elaborated through argument citing silencing of macro-level dynamics and relations of power around such (Buckley 2000); an argument broadly aligned with assertion that liberalism ‘cannot recognise groups and group oppression in its ontology’ (Mills 2017, 15–17). Representative of this, Woodall, Warwick-Booth, and Cross (2012), claim that:

> individual empowerment does not consider or challenge the social determinants of people's health [23] and in our view does not constitute full empowerment in the sense of transforming the relations of power. (p. 743)

There are two arguments here. One concerning change, which we take up in the discussion of the fourth problematic, the other concerns relations of power.

**Defence**

Mills’ response to criticism around relations of power is structured in two parts: one taking a macro-level focus, the other, a micro-level (2017, 15–19). At the macro, Mills first acknowledges that all societies have been characterised by oppression, not only those inscribed by liberalism (p. 16). Hence, regarding Bali, we note aspects of the pre-modern, pre-liberal capitalist caste system that may now be viewed as oppressive, such as widow immolation or sati (masatyā), continuing among the elite until the early 1900s (Pondok 2015; Creese 2004). More substantively, Mills’ draws attention to the difference between voluntary and non-voluntary groups, an important distinction, as participant responses revealed student inscription by both.

Regarding voluntary groups, some students explained that with coding skills they belonged to a new group, coders – otherwise a voluntary group. Moreover, a focus group student reported that when with friends who did not understand coding, they made fun of him ‘(meraka mengolok-ngolok saya)’. Consequently, HBLC provided a safe space to share conversations about coding with his voluntary group. But there are two sides to this coder’s grouping. While this student experienced peer exclusion based upon coding
knowledge, the student also constructs a (non-voluntary) group comprising former peers, based on their (lack) of knowledge. Those not understanding coding constructed as a group not ‘know anything’, classified as ‘lay people’ (‘orang-orang awam yang tidak tahu apa’) – this reflecting the interplay between structuring and intention recognised in the compatibilist position.

Other groups present in the data were more significantly non-voluntary. Like students in the coding class, Trisna shared a history of disadvantage, explaining that he too was from a disadvantaged background (‘ibu sendirikan tau saya orang disadvantage seperti itu’). Perhaps because of this, his apprenticeship program recruited disadvantaged students. Consequently, criteria for access to his organisation’s apprenticeships were less demanding in terms of qualifications than those reported by the other representatives, being completion of high school in addition to motivation. By contrast, other industry representatives attached significance to tertiary qualifications as field access criteria, indicating that coding class students might be excluded because of a non-voluntary group membership arising from their socio-economic class and lack of tertiary education access (Susanti 2011). Ibu Putri’s field entry requirements, for example, included holding a university degree; revealing that her own background was in computer science and that developers typically come from ‘Computer Science or IT or Engineering’.

Some students now also knew that further study would be required for field progression. While initial classes introduced basic web development, students came to appreciate that software development required additional programming knowledge:

> At first when I studied coding I was focused on the front end. I made one website, which made me very happy and I wanted to continue making websites. But as I continued it became obvious that there were other programming languages like JavaScript and C++ which were very challenging.

While barriers established by non-voluntary group membership are not to be ignored, Mills’ response is to assert, as he does in relation to other ‘critical’ argument, that non-recognition of non-voluntary groups is not ‘a definitional characteristic of liberalism’ (Mills 2017, 16); a position supported through reference to historic events. He cites, for example, evidence of liberalism’s response to group oppression in the form of opposition to absolutism in the 17th to 19th centuries, and opposition to the Nazism and Stalinism of the 20th century (p. 16). Nonetheless, Mills also acknowledges that it might be asked: Why has liberalism failed to appropriately respond to structural oppression in liberal democratic settings? In answering, he asserts it is because those structures have served the interests of the already advantaged who held power to both erect and reproduce such in the name of liberalism, which were in themselves ‘not an intrinsic feature of liberalism’s conceptual apparatus’ (p. 16). Moreover, the defence of such structures could be guided by dominant thinkers in political philosophy, the majority of who were ‘from the hegemonic group of the liberal social order (bourgeois white males)’ (p. 16).

Mills’ response further draws both upon Cudd’s Analyzing Oppression, and as an exemplar of liberalism’s conceptual ‘blind spots, Rawls Theory of Justice, to highlight the extent to which injustice has been “virtually untheorised” in liberal discourse (Mills 2017, 16), a consequence of the starting position from which Rawls’ elaborates his theory of justice, which is the presumption of an ‘ideal theory’ (p. 16).
If your focus from the start is principles of distributive justice for a “well ordered society”, then social oppression cannot be part of the picture, since by definition an oppressive society is not a well-ordered one. (p. 16)

Further, drawing upon Cudd’s call to acknowledge casually efficacious non-voluntary groups as ‘central to any adequate account of social oppression’ (p. 17), Mills maintains it is the ignoring of the ‘ontology of group domination that is the real betrayal of the liberal project’ (p. 17). Mills cites Cudd not only in recognition of this ontology but because Cudd maintains ‘contra the conventional wisdom in radical circles’ (p. 17), that such recognition can indeed occur within the ‘Anglo-American tradition of liberal Political philosophy’ (p. 17). Hence, following Mills, not only is privileging one group over another not a central tenet of liberalism, but liberalism does not preclude acknowledging such.

Still, Mills anticipates the ‘critical’ reply to this response, which is that liberalism’s ‘foundational’ individualism precludes it from recognising the extent to which ‘at the micro-level individuals are shaped by structures of social oppression’, such as class, race, and gender (2017, 18). His reply, however, is that a distinction should be made between the ‘different senses of individualism’ (p. 18) and that the kind of individualism foundational to liberalism is ‘normative’. While normative individualism makes individuals the focus of value, as opposed to the collective, this ‘does not require any denial that individuals are shaped in their character’ by collective dynamics (p. 18). Concluding his response, Mills references the challenge from post-structuralism and in particular Foucault (p. 19), asserting the errancy of liberalism’s claims around the individual-as-subject. First in relation to the assumption that the subject exists as a unified whole, and second concerning the ‘assumption’ that the subject is self-creating (p. 19). Regarding the latter, Mills holds that (liberal) humanism does not deny the social shaping of the individual, noting Marx’s observation that while people make history, it is under circumstances not of their own choosing (p. 20). Consequently, Mills agrees – as we do – with Christman, conceding ‘the absurdity of the notion of people springing from their own brow’ (p. 19).

However, in relation to the assumption that the ‘subject’ exists (only) as the outcome of discursive structures with no inherent or enduring being, such that shifting discursive power elides the ‘individual’, Mills admits that liberalism cannot easily ‘meet such a challenge’ (2017, 19). He qualifies, however, highlighting the inconsistency between the claim and history, wherein individuals have “exercised resistance to systems which have supposedly ‘produced’ them as subjects (p. 20). Indeed, Bourdieu’s life trajectory from the working class to cultural and intellectual elite exemplifies this (Friedman 2018). Moreover, if individuals like coding class students are little more than ephemeral outcomes of interplay between power and discourse with no enduring being (p. 19), to which accord moral responsibilities and rights, then upon what grounds to establish a ‘normative basis for indicting structures of oppression’ of the kind, which critical and post-structuralist perspectives challenge (p. 20)?

**Problematic four: instrumentalism and transformation**

**Prosecution**

Aligned with an argument asserting liberal empowerment’s failure to acknowledge the social, is argument constructing it as instrumentalist and lacking capacity for
change and transformation. That is; liberal empowerment seeks to incorporate individuals into existing socio-economic structures (Buckley 2000, 24). According to Mason’s (2016) critique of neoliberal power in particular, ‘instrumental empowerment operates within the current status quo of power and has goals of improving worker-efficiency and subsequent cost-savings for the employer’ (p. 16). Like others (Weidenstedt 2016), Mason supports the contention that part of the attraction of (instrumental) empowerment is that it not only leaves unequal relations of power intact but it also functions to highlight the ‘false generosity’ of those who empower (p. 44). This generosity is argued to underpin development programs aiming for increased participation of the marginalised, identified by Mason as models attractive to funding bodies (p. 46). Likewise, drawing upon Mayo and Craig, Buckley’s discussion of the functionalist framed view of empowerment critiques the assumption that empowerment could be achieved within existing social orders “without any significant effects upon the power of the powerful (2000, 10–11). More provocatively, liberal empowerment is contiguous with the ‘structural violence’ or causes of disadvantage, particularly when aligned with neo-liberalism (Hickel 2014, 1356).

Mason argues that instrumental empowerment is often grounded in commodity exchange economics, which ‘assigns value based on the estimation of future profit to be gained’ (2016, 58), wherein the “benefits of participation and empowerment are appraised for their ‘exchange value’ within the hegemonic economic system (p. 58). With a focus upon income generation and entrepreneurialism – our project’s focus – Buckley likewise asserts liberal empowerment to be aligned to the ‘free market’ (2000, 23–24). Mason further adds that instrumental empowerment may be counterproductive as ‘it involves giving rural people greater choice within predetermined boundaries’ (p. 46). And choice (like tolerance), as Giroux argues, can be little more than a ruse deployed by those with the power to offer the choice to those whose choices are more limited (1997).

**Defence**

Beyond liberalism’s nominal commitment to ‘individualism, egalitarianism, universalism’, importantly it holds a commitment to change through meliorism. Liberalism comprises a set of ‘values [that] simply cannot be achieved unless the obstacles to their realisation [privileging of one group over another] are identified and theorised’ (Mills 2017, 17). Simply, meliorism ‘asserts that successive generations can improve their socio-political arrangements’ (Castagno 2017). Though meliorism is a stance now viewed as conservative (Castagno 2017), this was not always so, as Robinson’s (1924) review details:

> It succours the lamblike progressive and the lionlike radical and invites them to co-operate in the making of a new social order. In short, meliorism is at once a militant and cocksure social philosophy, and a practical and aggressive social program. (p. 175)

Consequently, it is not the case that liberal empowerment’s core tenets preclude a ‘practical and aggressive social program’ (Robinson 1924, 175) for change. Nonetheless, seemingly confirming the critique of liberalism’s inherent instrumentalism, data collected from industry representatives reveal a desire to not only work with existing field structures but to also secure employees supporting this. Employers referenced
coding hot spots such as Malang in Java, and other significant sites including Singapore and China (Putri). And as noted, references are made to a competitive burgeoning start-up market (Trisna).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the students reproduced this discourse, embracing the perceived potential in the existing employment market. One student explained that (‘God willing’) his dream was to work overseas for a company like Google (‘*ingin bekerja di luar negeri seperti di perusahaan Google, dipusatnya. Astungkara*’). Elsewhere, a dream was to create a start-up (‘Pastinya saya berkeinginan untuk membuat startup’). And in relation to supply and demand, it was explained that with the right skills it was not so much a matter of looking for jobs but jobs looking for the developer (*supaya kita yang dicari bukan kita mencari kerja*). Hence, students envisioned opportunities arising from engagement with the existing field.

That’s why I continue with this program to upgrade my skills so I can more easily find work.

While claims that this field might be changed were absent in student discussion, the response of Trisna towards rural Balinese youth aiming to secure a place in this field was indicative of the capacity of liberalism-based empowerment for meliorism and change. In providing training opportunities to junior high school students from his village, Trisna highlighted one youth who was now a project manager (‘*kita ajarin dia sampe bisa, sampe jadi project manager*’). Indeed, such was his support for local youth, that he received parents’ requests to take children into training, which he was often not able to respond to, asserting: ‘can you image how difficult that is’?

With this, Trisna’s response to rural Balinese youth resonates with that of HBLC, wherein the aim is not to profoundly alter prevailing economic structures, but to support agentic mobility within such, by providing access to opportunities previously inaccessible due to a lack of capitals. Hence, from the pre-COVID-19 coding class of students whose parents were predominantly manual labourers and petty traders, not wishing to till the soil like their parents, and mostly having no personal computer or home WiFi, let alone knowing the difference between high- and low-level programming languages, the following outcomes were achieved:

- 7 students awarded boot camp scholarships.
- 5 students received internships at a software development company.
- 1 student became a coding teacher.
- 2 students pursued higher education in information technology.
- Several students now participate in the *Kampung Kode* start-up, attracting contract work from Singapore and Jakarta.
- 1 student is now able to support his parents.

What is more, subsequent establishment of the Kampung Kode initiative, a *not-for-profit digital agency*, provided income source opportunities supervised by field professionals in a time of income scarcity.
What does this mean?

A more realistic liberal theory would be one that paid greater heed to the facts of our social world so as to offer better normative guidance for political action. (Sleat 2017, 30)

Resonant with key premises in critical theorising, Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory not only holds that differential access to capitals (economic, cultural, social, symbolic) shape groups and outcomes but also informs the individual’s subjectivity or ‘habitus’ (1996). For critical theory, emancipation from such positioning is affected when structuring logics are identified and challenged (Rodriguez 2019). But as explored above, critical theory can be dismissive of liberalism’s framed empowerment to bring about change, asserting that it comprises an approach to education and development ignoring capitals and structuring capacities. To the contrary, drawing upon the analysis above, we suggest critique of liberal empowerment might do better than simply constructing liberal empowerment as a strawman wickered from problematics not intrinsic to liberalism at all. Here we elaborate, returning to each problematic.

First, regarding definition. Indeed, empowerment discourse can fail to define its central term, ‘empowerment’. It is often grounded in liberalism, failing to acknowledge its default ideological foundation. Somewhat hegemonically, liberalism emerges only as an absent centre. Critical literature is correct in highlighting this. However, in seeking to make less opaque the liberal underpinnings of ‘empowerment’, the critical response often fails to define more precisely the kind of liberalism under review, such that it is asked: Which liberalism are we referring to? The kind of liberalism we propose is Mill’s deracialised liberalism (Dawson 2020; Mills 2017); a framing that does not permit overlooking the significance of power to empowerment.

Regarding the problem of the individual and that of the group, liberal empowerment discourse has been deployed in ways constructing the individual as isolated from group relations; particularly in more self-centred psychologistic usage (Woodall, Warwick-Booth, and Cross 2012). Yet as Mills contends, the argument that liberalism conceives of the individual as an isolated entity distinct from the group is incorrect. There is a distinction to be made between the fundamental tenets of liberalism, what they permit, what they do not exclude, and liberalism in practice (2017); a distinction not always informing critical representations. On the contrary, deracialised liberalism exemplifies non-ideal liberalism, whereas critique of liberal empowerment often emerges from working with ideal liberalism. Ideal liberalism is that in which key tenets have been abstracted and idealised such that its normative claims are irrelevant to particular groups. As Mills asserts, idealised liberalism produces a conceptual history . . . that never touches down to hard ground of reality (p. xiv). Expressed otherwise, abstract(ed) liberalism functions to exclude, such that a ‘greater concern for the facts . . . will produce a theory more suited to guiding action here and now’ (Sleat 2016, 29). Not to be conflated with realism (Sleat 2016), non-ideal liberalism-informed empowerment can, as shown above, be attentive to ‘reality’.

While the abstracted sovereign individual of ideal liberalism affords diminished grounds for empowerment to work with macro-level dynamics, where grounded in ‘praxis’, as is the Bali Coding Class, liberalism does not exclude understanding the individual in relation to society. Rather, it is the value attached to the individual (above
caste for example), which drives liberalism’s capacity for change. Deracialised liberalism which is change-focused offers theoretical resources for asserting the necessity of change because it is the individual, and by extension groups, to whom rights accord including freedom and liberty (Mills 2017; 2008). And despite such values being criticised as inappropriately Western (Hickel 2014, 1356), these are precisely the values including ‘freedom, equality (moral egalitarian), and fraternity/sorority’ (Mills 2017, 20), which have presumably well ‘served ... progressive movements seeking social emancipation’ (Mills 2017, 21).

Further, in response to the admonition that liberal empowerment asserts a Western will over the local, while our curriculum and delivery has been overwhelmingly local, there are caveats, not the least of which are those emerging from critical argument. Buckley (2000) notes, for example, that ‘traditional’ knowledge production is no less inscribed by competing perspectives – dominating and dominated – and the politics of participation and hierarchy, than non-local knowledge production. Balinese Hindu caste structures, for example, are explicitly inscribed by social differentiation (Cahyaningtyas 2016). Hence, while HBLC aims to ‘off-set’ implications of local inter-group structuring, it cannot be ignored that the student cohort mostly comprise the lowest caste (Sudra), while the founding family belongs to the higher Ksatria.

But perhaps most significant in terms of ‘what does this mean’, it seems from the above that individuals have a capacity to exercise agency. Hence, it should not be assumed that all students from similar demographics are fated to act in the same way. To read social reproduction theory in this way, overlooks possibilities for individual change, action, and mobility acknowledged in Bourdieu’s later and less determinist discussion (Aitkinson 2012). Furthermore, Bourdieu seems to acknowledge that individual ‘hard work’ (Lederman 2012) leads to different outcomes for those inscribed by similar capitals, despite constraints imposed by the cultural arbitrary (Sullivan 2002, 147). This is not to state that the success of the few in this project implies the success of all. Some students did not complete the class. Rather, it is a position not only evidenced in Bourdieu’s own life but one that avoids the ‘dead end’ determinism of both organic individualism and collectivism, or even more curiously, ignoring any role for the individual in the process of change (Bech 2021). Reflecting the compatibilist position, data above show, for example, students of a similar demographic if not habitus, responding differently; differently during apprenticeships and regarding parental wishes. Some liked coding, some did not, and some found it easy while others did not, indicating the salience of the individual to agency. Mills (2017) compatibilist position, which informs deracialised liberalism acknowledges structure and agency; an approach helping explain intra-class and arguably intra-caste variation (Aitkinson 2012, 738).

Although we acknowledge the significance of conscientisation, dialog and action to transformative change in the critical tradition (Jemel 2017), our curriculum is yet to explicitly engage students in discussion of how they have been positioned relative to capitals in their context; suffice to say they seem much aware of their socio-economic location. Consequently, rather than ask students who wished to pursue coding as a career, if this is what they ‘really’ desired as critical commentary suggests (Hickel 2014, 1359), which asserts a false consciousness requiring expert remediation, liberal empowerment accepts that individuals will choose their own version of the good life from a range of available
possibilities (Freeden 2015). Consequently, it seems that the Coding Class, like other curriculum areas at HBLC, empowers students by offering access to more versions of the good life – as they themselves see it – more obtainable through acquisition of new capitals.

**Conclusion**

This paper emerged in response to our unease working with social reproduction theory and the notion of ‘empowerment’ as an overarching goal framing a coding curriculum for rural Balinese youth. Despite the growth in empowerment education discourse, it is often challenged in critical theorising. Presented with seemingly incompatible framings, we could have either abandoned the commitment to empowerment or engaged it more rigorously to identify possible contiguities with social reproduction theory. We chose the latter by reviewing literature critical of liberal empowerment, and we responded to these literature through Mills (2017) and data obtained from participants in the Bali coding class research project.

The discussion above shows that the critical response to liberal empowerment is grounded in four problematics, mostly arguments deployed against liberalism more broadly – portal into the reading of empowerment. Notably, they are arguments also challenged by Mills (2017). The significance of Mills to establishing a space for contiguity between social reproduction theory and liberal empowerment is, however, not only that he writes from within a group historically subordinated by ‘interpretations’ of liberalism but also as a former critic of liberalism’s discriminatory practice around colonisation, race, and gender (2017, xiii, 21). However, working with Mills’ and participant data to frame liberal empowerment’s response to the problematics, we find no significant antagonism between social reproduction theory and the goal of empowerment – at the broadest level. Aside from the necessity for clarity in definition, we argue that liberal empowerment need not assert the individual to be sovereign. It need not exclude understanding individuals in relation to groups and relations of power, and it need not oppose significant change – because none of these comprise core tenets (Mills 2017) – contrary to what some critical literature claims.

In conclusion, the Bali coding class was conceived to enhance rural Balinese youth employment options, and through these expanded livelihood choices, both difficult to enact from a position of economic disadvantage (Sen 1999). Acknowledging this, our curriculum initiative has arguably supported student agency, a degree of field mobility, and generated income for the broader cohort of disadvantaged rural youth at HBLC. This, of course, has not resulted from working with an ideal abstracted version of liberal empowerment, which would indeed have been antithetical to social reproduction theory. Rather, it is an outcome of working with non-ideal deracialised liberal empowerment at an over-arching level and drawing upon social reproduction theory to highlight how macro-level structuring – which liberalism does not deny – might constrain achieving empowerment. Future research might explore more closely the specific kinds of capitals acquired by the students, and why some did not complete the class.
Notes

1. The first author is of African American descent, the second Balinese; groups having experienced exclusionary interpretations of liberal (–humanism).
2. Gianyar district to Denpasar (capital city) is 26 km.
3. As students were under 18, their voices have been anonymised.
4. Despite differences, Hobbes and Locke held that an external authority such as the state should direct/arbitrate affairs of individuals in pursuit of peace. For Locke, states would act to protect “three inalienable natural rights of ‘life, liberty, and estate’” (LawTeacher.net 2021).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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