

Call for Submissions
Business Ethics Quarterly

Special Issue on:

Business Ethics, Illiberalism, and the New Democratic Order in the Digital Age

Guest Editors

Andreas Georg Scherer, University of Zurich, Switzerland

Peter Bloom, University of Essex, UK

Cristina Neesham, Newcastle University, UK and Swinburne University, Australia

Yuan Li, Saint Mary's College of California, USA

Overview

The purpose of this Special Issue is to examine the ongoing transformations of democratic societies by analyzing the political and ideological projects that position themselves against liberal democracy—be they postliberalism, (techno-)feudalism, (tech-)fascism, and other variants of illiberalism (Laruelle, 2022, 2024; Sajó et al., 2022). It investigates the evolving roles of the state, executive power, digital technologies, media industries, social movements, and other non-state actors, while questioning how the moral and political responsibilities of business must be redefined amid democratic backsliding. The emerging illiberal context is marked by exclusionary practices, the erosion of participatory and deliberative norms, the refusal to recognize legitimate actors and positions, assertions of absolute truths, the rise of transgressive publics and politics, and sustained attacks on democratic institutions. While preserving the appearance of democratic legitimacy, these practices in effect consolidate a more illiberal and authoritarian form of democratic order (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024; Kauth & King, 2021; Zakaria, 2007).

Business enterprises are not merely bystanders in this process of replacing liberal democracy; they are among its principal architects (Scherer et al., 2006, 2023). The corporate consolidation of communication platforms, the privatization of data and public discourse, and the fusion of financial and technological authority have blurred the boundaries between market and state. Platform companies have become de facto sovereign actors, shaping the flow of information, public deliberation, and even electoral outcomes. As Zuboff (2019) has shown, surveillance capitalism transforms human experience itself into a raw material for prediction and control. The result is a system in which democratic citizenship is gradually replaced by managed participation and algorithmic modulation of behavior. What emerges is not the totalitarianism of the past but an illiberal order in which formal democratic procedures coexist with substantive autocracy (Zakaria, 2007).

Aims and Scope

This Special Issue takes as its central premise that business ethics, as a field, must respond to this epochal shift. For decades, business ethics and corporate responsibility research have operated within the horizon of liberal democracy, assuming markets as embedded in legal and moral frameworks that guarantee pluralism and deliberation. Yet this assumption no longer holds (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). The rise of far-right movements, illiberal governments, and corporate-state alliances challenges the moral premises upon which much of business ethics has been built (Brown, 2019; Slobodian, 2025). The discipline can no longer treat

democracy as a stable background condition but must confront the ways in which business practices, and technological infrastructures actively participate in the reconfiguration of power.

Consequently, the Special Issue addresses the political foundations of business ethics. It calls for new theoretical and empirical research that examines how the moral assumptions of capitalism intersect with the dynamics of authoritarianism. The goal is not to conflate capitalism with fascism or illiberalism but to investigate how certain corporate and managerial logics—efficiency, obedience, unity, the valorization of strong leadership—can, under specific historical conditions, align with the political and affective structures of illiberal ideologies. The contemporary proliferation of conspiratorial thinking, anti-intellectualism, and technocratic fatalism is not external to business but often reproduced within its organizational culture and discourse. By bringing illiberal perspectives into analytical focus, we invite reflection on the dark side of corporate modernity and the complicity of economic institutions in the moral crises of democracy.

BEQ has been a central venue for research on how corporations wield forms of authority with implications for democratic governance – be it political CSR (Dawkins, 2015; Mäkinen & Kourula, 2012; Scherer et al., 2006), stakeholder engagement (Mena & Palazzo, 2012) or corporate citizenship (Moon et al., 2005; Neron, 2008). However, this research has largely assumed the persistence of broadly liberal-democratic institutional conditions in which dialogue, participation, and deliberation remain viable (Hielscher et al., 2014). The Special Issue addresses the reality that such assumptions can no longer be taken for granted, and therefore focuses on postliberalism, technofeudalism, and resurgent authoritarianism to extend *BEQ*'s existing frameworks toward a more critical theory of the firm under conditions of eroding democracies. In this context, recent *BEQ* scholarship on digital governance and organized immaturity provides a crucial foundation for rethinking corporate power in the contemporary political landscape (Scherer et al., 2023). Work by Schade (2023) and by Harracá and coauthors (2023) demonstrates how digital infrastructures generate new forms of dependency, opacity, and behavioral modulation that undermine the epistemic capacities required for democratic participation – not only in markets but in public life, more generally. The Special Issue brings together adjacent yet still separate bodies of literature – such as political CSR, legitimacy theory, digital ethics, and historical or comparative analyses of corporate-state entanglement (Christensen, 1997; Martin, 2023; Scherer et al., 2006) – to examine the role of business/corporations and technology in this broader shift toward illiberal forms of governance.

The aim is to engage scholars from business ethics, management, law, political theory, sociology, philosophy, and media studies (among other disciplines), to examine the intersection of business, illiberalism, and erosion of democracy. We welcome normative, conceptual, empirical, and historical-comparative contributions that illuminate the structural entanglement of corporate and political power. The scope is deliberately broad, unified by a concern with the moral and institutional transformations of capitalism under illiberalism. For example, we invite normative analyses of corporate legitimacy and political responsibility, asking how firms should act when democratic institutions weaken or when economic success depends on alignment with illiberal regimes. Conceptual and theoretical work may seek to reinterpret categories such as fascism, authoritarianism, technocracy, and postliberalism in ways that make them analytically relevant for business ethics. Empirical and organizational research may investigate policies and practices through which firms either resist or reproduce authoritarian tendencies, e.g., their use of surveillance and algorithmic management, their political lobbying and media influence, or their role in financing and normalizing illiberal movements. Comparative and historical studies can trace continuities between the corporate strategies of interwar fascism and the political economy of the present, while critical interpretive work can analyze ideological

vocabularies—such as meritocracy, disruption, or technocracy—that lend moral credibility to authoritarian capitalism.

Key Thematic Areas

- Corporate–state alliances in illiberal or hybrid regimes
- Technological infrastructures of authoritarianism and/or technofeudal power (surveillance, algorithmic governance, platform monopolies)
- Corporate influence on public spheres, media ecosystems, and democratic deliberation
- Historical lessons from business involvement in interwar fascism
- Postliberal and technocratic ideologies shaping contemporary corporate governance
- Political CSR under conditions of eroding/decaying democracy
- Organizational culture, leadership, and the normalization of authoritarian values
- Moral agency, dissent, and resistance inside firms against illiberal corporatism

Illustrative Research Questions

- How do contemporary corporate policies and practices contribute to authoritarian consolidation, postliberal governance, and illiberal forms of democracy?
- In what ways do managerial logics (efficiency, obedience, strong leadership) intersect with authoritarian or proto-fascist political ideologies?
- How do digital platforms function as political actors shaping public discourse, identity formation, and democratic norms?
- What forms of corporate complicity or resistance emerge in contexts of rising identity politics, far-right populism, disinformation, and illiberal governance?
- How should business ethics reconceptualize corporate political responsibility when liberal-democratic assumptions no longer hold?
- How do illiberal ideologies such as postliberalism, technofeudalism, cyberlibertarianism, or nationalist capitalism reconfigure corporate legitimacy?
- How do autocratic leaders and change agents use rhetorical tropes, arguments, and symbols to make meaning and influence a reality, to enact crises or states of emergency, and to construct a boundary between “us” and “them”?
- What normative frameworks can guide responsible corporate behavior under conditions of weakened institutions, captured states, or authoritarian drift?

Submission Process and Deadlines

Manuscripts must be prepared in compliance with the journal’s instructions for contributors: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/business-ethics-quarterly/information/instructions-for-authors-submission-guidelines> . Submissions that do not conform to these instructions, in terms of manuscript style and referencing, will not be reviewed. Note that, as per the journal’s statement of aims and scope, BEQ does not publish pedagogically focused research or review articles that summarize a body of literature.

Manuscripts should be submitted after March 1, 2027, and no later than April 30, 2027, using BEQ’s online submission system: <https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/beq>. When submitting, be sure to choose the option that indicates that the submission is for this special issue.

All papers will be initially reviewed for suitability by the guest editor team. Selected submissions will undergo a double-blind review by external referees following the journal's standard editorial process. By submitting a paper for consideration, authors consent to be called upon as reviewers. Authors also agree, in the event that a submission after review receives an invitation to revise and resubmit, to resubmit within three months of that invitation.

Pre-submission Online Workshop

A few months before the special issue submission window opens, the guest editors will organize a virtual workshop (via appropriate web conferencing software) designed to provide developmental guidance to prospective submissions. Participation in this workshop is not a precondition for submission to, nor does it guarantee acceptance in, the special issue. The workshop will be organized in one virtual plenary followed by virtual paper development roundtables that bring together paper authors with the guest editors for in-depth feedback and advice.

To be considered for the workshop, please send a proposal or extended abstract (up to 3,000 words, references included) to democracy@business.uzh.ch by October 30th, 2026. The guest editors will select appropriate proposals based on thematic fit and potential. The online workshop will likely take place November 26th and 27th, 2026, accommodating to different time zones.

Key Dates

Pre-submission development online workshop application deadline: **October 30th, 2026**

Pre-submission development online workshop convenes: **November 26th & 27th, 2026** (tentatively)

BEQ special issue submission window: **March 1– April 30, 2027**

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More Information

Further information may be obtained by contacting the guest editors at democracy@business.uzh.ch

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