

Workshop:

*Business Ethics and Democracy –
Illiberalism as a Challenge for Business and Society*

Philadelphia (PA), 28-29 July 2026

Call for Papers
Submission Due date 29 March 2026

Workshop Theme and Rationale

Across the world, liberal democracy—the normative foundation of the postwar political economy—has entered a period of acute decline. Polarization, increasing executive power, declaration of state of emergency, disinformation, and the instrumentalization of media have eroded the institutional and moral architecture that once defined “the West.” (Brown, 2019; Columbia, 2024; Seymour, 2024) These trends have been accompanied by the reemergence of authoritarian movements, nativist ideologies, and the normalization of transgressive discourse in increasingly illiberal public spheres (Adler et al., 2023; Bennett & Kneuer, 2024; Bennett & Livingston, 2025), making illiberalism and its variants a widespread phenomenon (Kauth & King, 2021; Laruelle, 2024; Sajo et al., 2022). From Hungary and India to the United States and parts of Western Europe, democratic institutions persist in form but often lose their deliberative, pluralistic, rule-of-law substance. This transformation is not only political but also economic and organizational (Slobodian, 2024). The growing concentration of corporate power, particularly in big-tech and financial sectors, reveals how contemporary capitalism has become a central vector of authoritarian drift (Varoufakis, 2024).

This Workshop examines the ongoing transformations of democratic societies by analyzing the political and ideological projects that position themselves against liberal democracy and their implications for Business Ethics. Such projects could take the form of postliberalism (Deneen, 2023), (techno-)feudalism (Murphy, 2025), (tech-)fascism (Klein & Taylor, 2025), and variants of illiberalism from across the political spectrum (Laruelle, 2022; Sajo et al., 2022). By exploring the evolving roles of the state, executive power, digital technologies, media industries, social movements, and other non-state actors, we aim to question how the moral and political responsibilities of business must be redefined amid democratic backsliding (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). 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, appropriation of post-truth narratives, 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., 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 (Castello et al., 2025). 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).

Through this workshop, we aim to create a forum for bringing illiberal perspectives from a variety of political and ideological positions into analytical focus, and to invite empirical, theoretical, and normative research that aims for reflection on the dark side of corporate modernity and the complicity of economic institutions in the moral crises of democracy.

Thematic Areas and Focus Questions

The workshop welcomes scholarly contributions on the following areas:

- Corporate-state alliances in illiberal or hybrid regimes
- Technological infrastructures of authoritarianism and/or and techno-feudal 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.

To focus our discussions and stimulate debate, we suggest addressing questions such as:

- How do contemporary corporate 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 organizational 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 appropriate the language of the post-truth era, 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?

Invited Keynote Speakers

We are delighted to have amongst us distinguished scholars leading the conversation and commenting on workshop papers and presentations:

- Professor **Joanne Ciulla**, Rutgers University, USA
- Professor **Eric Orts**, University of Pennsylvania, USA
- Professor **Abraham Singer**, Loyola University Chicago, USA

Workshop Organizers

- Professor **Andreas Georg Scherer**, University of Zürich, Switzerland
- Professor **Peter Bloom**, University of Essex, UK
- Dr **Cristina Neesham**, Newcastle University, UK & Swinburne University, Australia
- Professor **Yuan Li**, St Mary’s College of California, USA

Submission Process

The submission should be a **short paper/extended abstract (1,500-2,000 words)** plus short-bio & contact of author(s)) setting out the research question, an overview of the literature, the methodological approach of the proposed inquiry, key findings or insights, and significance of contributions for advancing any of the proposed thematic areas. We also encourage the submission of **full papers** where available. A Call for Papers on a related topic for a Special Issue of ***Business Ethics Quarterly*** will be launched in April 2026 (with a planned deadline for paper submissions April 2027). In line with the ***BEQ*** Guidelines, participation in the workshop will not be required for the submission of manuscripts to the Special Issue, which remains a separate, open-call process.

All proposals must be submitted **by 29 March 2026** as Word documents to Silvia Agustoni (University of Zurich) via the designated email address (**democracy@business.uzh.ch**). The workshop space is limited. The organizers will select papers for the workshop based on thematic fit, (potential) contribution and development and will give feedback to authors by mid-April 2026.

Key Dates

• Submission of short paper/extended abstract	by 29 March 2026
• Notification of acceptance	ca. 15 April 2026
• Workshop presentation	28-29 July 2026

Workshop Venue

The workshop is by invitation only and will take place at a conference Hotel in Downtown Philadelphia (Penn., USA) on the two days prior to the *Society for Business Ethics Annual Meeting* (which is hosted at the Sonesta Hotel, main program starting 30th July 2026) and the *Academy of Management Annual Meeting* (located in Downtown Philadelphia and starting 31st July 2026). On site catering will be provided to invited attendees during the workshop free of charge. Further information will be given with the notification of acceptance.

Contact Details for Workshop Enquiries

For any enquiries regarding this workshop, please contact Silvia Agustoni (University of Zurich) at the designated email address: democracy@business.uzh.ch

References

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Zakaria, F. (2007). *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (Revised Edition). W. W. Norton & Company.

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. PublicAffairs.

Workshop organizers :

Andreas Georg Scherer (University of Zurich, Switzerland) serves as Associate Editor of *BEQ* and has published extensively on political CSR, legitimacy, and global governance in democratic and fragile state contexts. He explores the sociopolitical and technological changes in the corporate environment and analyses implications for business ethics and business-society relationships. He has published over ten books and his conceptual and empirical studies have appeared in journals such as *Academy of Management Review*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Organization Science*, *Organization Studies*, among others. He has been guest editor on a dozen of journal special issue publications, among them two special issues of *BEQ* and he is a frequent organizer of academic conferences and workshops.

Peter Bloom (University of Essex, UK) contributes expertise in critical management and democratic theory. He has published extensively in monographs and journals on critical aspects of capitalist society. He is the author of *The Ethics of Neoliberalism* (Routledge) and other influential books. His work, published in leading journals such as *Human Relations*, *Organization*, *Organization Studies*, and *Theory & Event*, develops concepts such as the digital democratic imagination, post-capitalist entrepreneurship, and prefigurative organization. As co-founder of the Centre for Commons Organising, Values, Equalities and Resilience (COVER), he collaborates with civic groups, cooperatives, and social movements to advance democratic experimentation, commons-based governance, and institutional transformation.

Cristina Neesham (Newcastle University, UK, and Swinburne University, Australia) is a trained philosopher with an enduring interest in normative ethics and digital technology. She serves on the board of *BEQ* and is a frequent organizer of academic exchanges at the intersection of management, business ethics, technology, and philosophy. Neesham is co-editor of the Springer *Handbook of Philosophy of Management* and has published extensively in journals such as *Business Ethics Quarterly*, *Business and Society*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Organization Theory*, *Philosophy of Management*.

Yuan Li (Saint Mary's College of California, U.S.) is an organization theorist interested in the relationship between rhetoric and reality, language and truth, and the semiotic processes of organizing and institutionalization. She is studying the field dynamics, organizational practices, and ethical dimensions of artificial intelligence (AI), particularly in policing and in autocratic contexts. Li has published in Journals such as *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Management Communication Quarterly*, among others.