Atal

When Companies Rule

Corporate Power from the East India Company to Silicon Valley

Company towns are back. From Indian oil refineries to Kenyan canned food factories to Amazon warehouses, companies today rule over the daily lives of around a million people. In these enclaves of unregulated corporate power, bosses suspend workers' health care to break up strikes, police residents' sex lives, and control what children learn in school. These stories echo those of colonial-era companies that ruled whole countries with private armies and raise fears for the rights of workers and citizens today. In When Companies Rule, Maha Rafi Atal blends investigative journalism and historical research to tell the gripping four-hundred-year story of company rule over daily life. Atal argues that we have misunderstood what makes corporations powerful. Corporations are not rational profit-seekers pursuing their business needs. Instead, corporate rulers are trying to build their own ideal societies. These utopian visions shape not only how managers rule but also whether people in these communities accept their authority. Managers' moral values and personal ambitions, not the pursuit of profit, are the ultimate source of companies' political power. Atal illustrates this argument with examples ranging from the East India Company to Silicon Valley, and she explores what superpowerful corporations in science fiction reveal about real-world company rule. This book offers a new account of how corporate power works—and what we can do to limit it.

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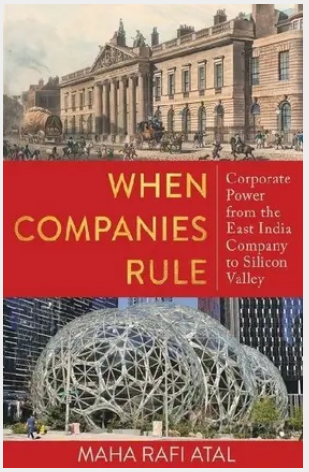

32,00 €
32,00 € (zzgl. MwSt.)

vorbestellbar, Erscheinungstermin ca. Dezember 2026

Artikelnummer: 9780231222907
Medium: Buch
ISBN: 978-0-231-22290-7
Verlag: Columbia University Press
Erscheinungstermin: 15.12.2026
Sprache(n): Englisch
Auflage: Erscheinungsjahr 2026
Produktform: Kartoniert
Seiten: 328
Format (B x H): 140 x 216 mm

Kundenservice Verlag Dr. Otto Schmidt KG
Neumannstraße 10, 40235 Düsseldorf | kundenservice@otto-schmidt.de | 0221-93738-997 (Inland)