

Reclaiming Community

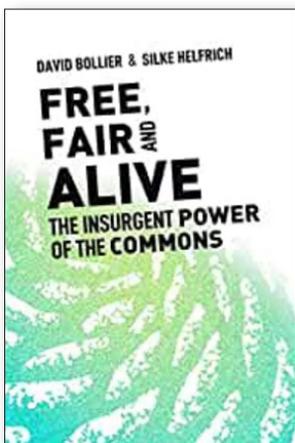
Two books highlight vital changes nonprofits can make to help citizens lead more fulfilling lives.

Reviewed by Terrence Fernsler

Free, Fair and Alive: The Insurgent Power of the Commons.

By David Bollier & Silke Helfrich.

New Society Publishers (newsociety.com).



The authors of *Free, Fair and Alive* argue that the commons aren't shared goods such as land, water, air, and streets. The commons are the social processes we use to share such collective goods. The commons help us recognize the importance of connecting and collaborating strategically.

Boundless individual ownership isn't liberating in a world in which we must rely on each other. Ownership exploits dominance of a few by excluding others.

It's better to think of property and commodities in terms of needs than in terms of possession. Bollier and Helfrich regard resources and goals as tools of joining together rather than ends in themselves. We connect by deciding together how to share resources.

Sustainability, they suggest, will be possible only by participating together, and they provide many examples of how communities are doing just that. Commons are flexible templates in systems that work best in local settings where participation is more likely to occur.

Collaboration is likely to result in more creative adaptation. It may not be the most efficient way to operate, but involvement by all is certainly more effective than what we have.

This book doesn't look favorably on the nonprofit sector as it is, accusing it of perpetuating traditional beliefs of ownership – a focus on individualization and alienation. This reviewer, who likes to think he may be more familiar with nonprofits, instead sees the sector at an inflection point. We can continue down the path of alienation, exclusion, and narrow self-interest that Bollier and Helfrich describe. Or we can lead the way toward stronger community and greater cooperation.

Such a change requires long-term commitment that begins by overcoming polarizing individualistic language. Changing terminology to clarify the use of property will help reframe our behavior. A more careful use of language will help us learn to re-define our community relationships and values.

Mission-driven organizations must be resilient. Resiliency requires evaluating the attitudes, beliefs, and shifts in how we respond to each other and the roles our organizations take in defining society.

Free, Fair and Alive offers important lessons on how to evaluate the way nonprofits relate to each other and the natural world. It examines relationships through resources and goals by changing our foundational perspective of sharing.

The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods.

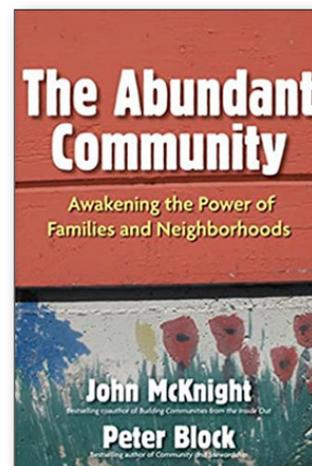
By John McKnight & Peter Block.

Berrett-Koehler Publishers (bkconnection.com).

Despite access to more and more things, Americans seem less and less satisfied. *The Abundant Community* describes what happens to connections – family, neighborhood, community – when we choose consumerism over citizenship.

The function of most nonprofits is to make life more satisfying, yet it's easy to succumb to institutional systems. Such systems turn organizations into problem solvers and dispensers of services rather than conduits of long-lasting social improvement.

It takes associational life to develop peace of mind and share social knowledge – education, health, safety. This is where nonprofits can play a role. Nonprofit leaders must learn to celebrate and magnify the gifts of those in their communities, helping people reclaim their role as citizens and create fulfilling lives. **S**



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