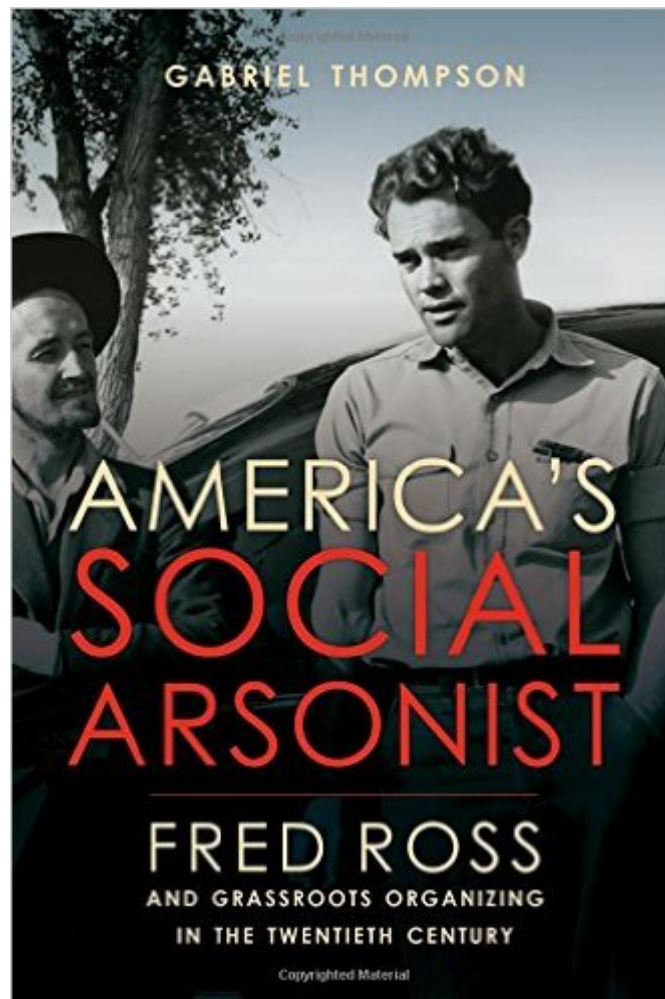


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# America's Social Arsonist: Fred Ross And Grassroots Organizing In The Twentieth Century



## Synopsis

"A good organizer is a social arsonist who goes around setting people on fire." — Fred Ross Raised by conservative parents who hoped he would stay with his own kind, Fred Ross instead became one of the most influential community organizers in American history. His activism began alongside Dust Bowl migrants, where he managed the same labor camp that inspired John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. During World War II, Ross worked for the release of interned Japanese Americans, and after the war, he dedicated his life to building the political power of Latinos across California. Labor organizing in this country was forever changed when Ross knocked on the door of a young Cesar Chavez and encouraged him to become an organizer. Until now there has been no biography of Fred Ross, a man who believed a good organizer was supposed to fade into the crowd as others stepped forward. In America's Social Arsonist, Gabriel Thompson provides a full picture of this complicated and driven man, recovering a forgotten chapter of American history and providing vital lessons for organizers today.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

When the topic of community organizing comes up, a single name comes quickly to mind: Saul Alinsky. Alinsky is often cited as the founder of the field, having made his name through a hugely successful campaign on the South Side of Chicago in the 1940s. Two books he wrote, *Reveille for Radicals* (1946) and *Rules for Radicals* (1971), cemented his reputation nationwide. During my own brief experience as a community organizer in the late 1970s, Alinsky's methodology dominated

the field, largely through his writings. Yet another man, working in the fields of California, much closer to me in Berkeley, was compiling a record to rival and perhaps surpass Alinsky's. He is the subject of an excellent new biography, *America's Social Arsonist: Fred Ross and Grassroots Organizing in the Twentieth Century*. Community organizing in rural California After brief periods as a teacher and social worker, Fred Ross found his way into community organizing through a series of posts with the New Deal's Farm Security Administration. As the manager of relief programs in a series of migrant camps set up to house the "Okies" made famous in John Steinbeck's classic novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, Ross became familiar with poverty at its worst. During World War II, Ross worked for the War Relocation Authority, which managed the relocation of Japanese-Americans to internment camps throughout the West. In Cleveland, as the *Los Angeles Times* pointed out in its obituary, he was credited with persuading defense plant owners to hire [thousands of] Japanese-Americans, who were then freed from the camps to work. Following the war, Ross played a leading role in establishing the Community Service Organization (CSO) in South Los Angeles.

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