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[**The Perfect Organizer – Almost**](http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/04/15/the-perfect-organizer-almost/)**; by Mike Miller; April 15, 2016.**

**A review of *America’s Social Arsonist: Fred Ross and Grassroots Community Organizing in the Twentieth Century*. By Gabriel Thompson. University of California Press. 2016.**

Fred Ross, Sr. was as close to the perfect embodiment of the myth of the organizer as is humanly possible. Cesar Chavez called him “my secret weapon”. In “Finding and Making Leaders,” Nicholas Von Hoffman, Saul Alinsky’s favorite organizer, said, “The good organizer…judges his work a success when he can leave the organization without even being missed. He is rare, rarer than first-rate leadership, but he exists…and he can work in almost any situation.”

In [*America’s Social Arsonist*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0520280830/counterpunchmaga), Gabriel Thompson captures Ross’ life story and core ideas. It is among the books to be read by anyone interested in labor or community organizing and the future of democracy as more than marketing politicians to consumer “citizens” when real power lies in the hands of those with money.

**Early Years**

Two important early influences on this social arsonist contributed to the mind-set of an organizer: rejection by his father and mother, and loving acceptance and affirmation by his maternal grandparents. The former created the pain that later lead to identification with the marginalized; the latter provided the self-confidence essential to the necessarily marginal role of the outside organizer. His parents were conservative bigots; Ross rejected their ideas.

At the University of Southern California during the Great Depression, Ross met Eugene Wolman—a Jew, communist and union organizer—all of which were new to him. They became good friends, and from Wolman Ross got his first political orientation. Wolman joined many other American radicals in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and was killed in the Spanish civil war. His ideas and commitment made a deep impression on Ross, though he never joined the Communist Party.

After graduation, Ross got hands-on experience with poverty when he worked for the State Relief Agency (SRA), which was supposed to help the poor but acted as a job placement and strike-breaking agency for California agribusiness. Ross didn’t last long there. But he did meet “Milligan”, who he described as a “plain, ordinary, working stiff who wasn’t shiftless and wasn’t stupid, and gave it his best shot for his whole pain-filled life, and still couldn’t make it.” Ross hoped to write the “Great American Depression Novel” with Milligan his central character. Instead, he ended up working for the federal Farm Security Administration (FSA), a Roosevelt New Deal agency that sought to help displaced agricultural workers and small farmers. (It took its mission too seriously: Congressional Dixiecrat Democrats and conservative Republicans forced it out of this program in 1943.)

In the FSA’s Arvin farm worker camp, made famous by John Steinbeck in [*The Grapes of Wrath*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0143039431/counterpunchmaga), residents governed themselves through an elected council. There, Ross learned two important organizer lessons: listen and have faith in the capacity of everyday people for self-government. He became deeply involved in the communist-led farm worker organizing efforts and learned from them, saw strikes broken with support from local police and sheriffs, and complicity on the part of the “liberal” state government. From author (and later editor of The Nation) Carey McWilliams’ [*Factories in the Fields*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0520224132/counterpunchmaga) he learned about agribusiness’ power in California, and he saw it on-the-ground in the growers’ violence against union efforts and absolute refusal to negotiate.

Thompson also identifies what he calls “an authoritarian streak…a dogmatic tendency [that] could also have an egalitarian edge”. This streak manifested itself in Ross’ occasional bypassing of the elected camp council when it didn’t move quickly on things he thought were important, including evicting troublesome tenants and discrimination against Mexicans. It’s a point he might have elaborated. I find the characterization “authoritarian” not quite right, though I think Thompson is onto an important point.

Ross’ next stop was World War 2 work with Japanese and Japanese-Americans who were unconstitutionally relocated from their communities to relocation (concentration) camps. Thompson calls this period a transition from Ross the social worker to Ross the organizer, and details the experience. Ross concluded early that he did not want to do things for people. Rather, he wanted to challenge them to do things for themselves, and then help them figure out how to do it. By the end of the war, he was committed to a path to “bring about full democracy in race relations.” It led him to work with Ignacio Lopez and Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, and sent him on the way to becoming an organizer.

Thompson uses one of his stories to point out that Ross learned, “…the issue that gets people upset might not be the issue to tackle…[An organizer encourages] others to think through a problem, to turn it around in their heads and talk through the merits of various solutions. An organizer always starts out where people are, but that doesn’t mean that he or she can’t help them to get to a different place.”

And Thompson notes: “For a man of his time, Ross would prove remarkably egalitarian when it came to gender.” In his organizing work, women played key leadership roles. Ross also began to better understand leadership through his accidental use of house meetings in a voter registration drive. At one house meeting he asked if anyone there would host another one. That led to people who had people they could invite—i.e. they were leaders (people with a following). “I began to get the idea that this was a really good way to organize, because each of these meetings was linked with the last one,” Ross later observed.

Thompson elaborates:

“The house meeting, which later became synonymous with Ross, was effective because it recognized that people existed within a social network of close friends and relatives. By using house meetings…an organizer could tap into and activate that network…[Ross found] the meetings were small enough to allow quieter voices to be heard but large enough that they felt productive and built momentum…He noticed…that the meetings were a forum in which skeptical people could be won over—not by arguments from the outside organizer but by their close companions. Ross would eventually turn house meetings into something of a science and train thousands of people in this method…”

In a subsequent voter registration and get-out-the-vote drive, Ross demonstrated what became one of his hallmarks: careful attention to detail. “He never tired of sharing a favorite line about the craft of organizing: ‘The incidentals make up the fundamentals’.” The drive also “cemented his reputation as a hard-driving disciplinarian.” And it put Ross in the crosshairs of the ultra-conservative Associated Farmers—a growers’ organization that Carey McWilliams called “fascist”. They started a red-baiting campaign against Ross that undermined his local work, and prodded sociologist Louis Wirth, the Chairman of the board of the American Council on Race Relations (ACCR)—Ross’ employer—to take steps to terminate him.

Now one of history’s important accidents took place. Wirth was a card-playing buddy of Saul Alinsky, then emerging as the United States’ pre-eminent organizer, and told him about Ross. Ross had read [*Reveille for Radicals*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0679721126/counterpunchmaga), and liked it. The two met; they liked each other; in August, 1947, Alinsky hired Ross to be his Industrial Areas Foundation’s (IAF) West Coast organizer, based in Los Angeles. He wrote a friend, “I have hired a guy who I think is a natural for our work. It will really be the first time that I have had a capable associate who understands exactly what we are after.” Ross was by now, Thompson tells us, “deepened in his faith in the abilities of so-called average folks—field hands, blue-collar workers, housewives—to upend the status quo.”

Thompson: “Alinsky grew bored easily, having little patience for the sort of grinding organizing work that became Ross’s life.” His source is Bill Pasterich, “one of Alinsky’s students.” Pasterich’s connection with IAF was Ross—who was his fieldwork supervisor in a Syracuse University program of which Alinsky was a consultant and on-site for only limited periods. Detailed conversations with his organizers was the heart of Alinsky’s way of training them. In my experience, he paid a lot of attention to detail. I watched him with leaders of the Kansas City organization where I worked for IAF.

Thompson also reveals the beginning of what later became an organizer’s debate about direct membership versus organization of organizations approaches to building people power. He tells us that Ross convinced Alinsky that the California Mexican-American/Mexican groups that existed were either weak or subject to selling out. “Alinsky trusted Ross on this account…” I wish Thompson had told us more. In my conversations with Alinsky, he said that he never had the time to fully discuss his approach with Ross. He withdrew from a lot of his activities when, in September, 1947—soon after he’d hired Ross—his wife died in a tragic drowning accident in Lake Michigan. Knowing Alinsky’s need to be right, I tend to give more credence to Ross’ account. But the stickler for detail in me would like to know more.

**Community Service Organization**

Ross began working in East Los Angeles with a group of working-class Mexican-American leaders, several with trade union experience, on what later became the statewide Community Service Organization (CSO). Advised to have the group adopt a clause against Communist membership in the organization, he steered CSO away from that course. He wrote Alinsky: “no redbaiting,” and soon thereafter refused to sign a loyalty oath required for voter registrars while, at the same time, keeping people identified with the Communists marginal in the organization. He wanted CSO’s core people to have it as their principal organizational loyalty. CSO soon began a campaign that registered 11,000 new Mexican-American voters in Boyle Heights, which was increasingly becoming a transitional neighborhood from Eastern European Jewish and a mix of others to Mexican-American.

CSO’s first president, Ed Roybal, sought a political career. His was defeated in his first campaign for city council—prior to CSO’s growth and grassroots power. He resigned his CSO presidency to run again, and won. Ross’ grassroots voting operation was responsible for a massive vote. But the relationship between the two of them became strained, and Ross had his first sour taste of electoral politics. The bitterness grew. “The experience with Roybal,” Thompson reports, “helped clarify Ross’s true passion: organizing people, who could then move politicians to do what they wanted… Reflecting on the Roybal campaign in the mid-1980s, Ross concluded, ‘At the time, I wasn’t as cynical about politicians as I am now.’”

CSO’s major agenda item was a frontal assault on the Los Angeles Police Department’s history of brutality in the barrio. A break came when CSO President Tony Rios was himself beaten by policemen. Thompson details the story, and how a successful campaign was waged that led to assault convictions for five cops, and sentencing of one to more than a year in prison.

But electoral and issue victories didn’t raise funds, and Ross had opposed dues for CSO, believing the organization first had to develop a track record. A scramble ensued for foundation grants, and Ross ran head-on into a deep problem faced by people power organizations that are dependent on outside funding: typically, with important exceptions, the outsiders think they know what is best for the community. Ross went six months without pay, and finally had to resign to take a job in Northern California.

**CSO Moves North**

Situated in his new job, with a boss and board members who were friendly to CSO, Ross used his “spare time” to develop a San Jose chapter. He met some young Catholic priests who, steeped in the social justice tradition of the church, wanted to help. Through them he met Cesar Chavez, who was initially uninterested in CSO, and Herman Gallegos. The two of them ran for the top two leadership posts in the newly forming CSO chapter, and were surprised that they beat more articulate opponents. They wanted to know from Ross why they won: “They won because they put in the work, Ross said. People saw them knocking on doors…Anyone can make a speech…For Gallegos, the episode was a classic example of Ross’s teaching style: use real-world experiences to help people draw conclusions. ‘These little lessons were very, very informative…This is how he nurtured us. Not by lecturing, but helping us to see for ourselves what made the difference.’”

His trip north also led Ross to Josephine Duvenek, a wealthy Boston Brahmin, now active in the American Friends [Quakers] Service Committee, and one of the exceptions to the general wealthy donor rule noted above. As both his board chair and personal supporter, she raised money to keep him going. Then he struck gold as the result of Alinsky connecting with another wealthy angel for social and economic justice and small “d” democracy. The Emil Schwartzhaupt Foundation gave IAF $150,000 (which over the decade turned into $500,000—more than $4 million in today’s dollars), which Alinsky spent on Ross and CSO. Alinsky wrote Ross, “This action has been taken because of my personal and complete confidence, not only in your ability in the area of organization (which I regard as tops) but also in your character, intelligence and ideals…[CSO] might well be one of the most significant organizational programs in the nation. I believe that I am not overstating the fact.”

Ross was now on a roll. Via Alinsky’s friend Msgr John O’Grady, national head of Catholic Charities, Ross got access to local priests and nuns who gave him legitimacy and opened doors to local people. He added several people to his staff: Eugene Lowery, a former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) worker who knew from the inside the ropes for gaining citizenship, Chavez, and soon thereafter Dolores Huerta, who he met and recruited in his Stockton chapter-building work. Chapters were now springing up across the state, both in rural towns and medium-size cities where there were concentrations of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. Citizenship classes became a major focus, and a transmission belt to voter registration.

Now Ross had to train organizers, and Thompson gives us a good look at how he did it. With Chavez, who initially lacked self-confidence, Ross went over in detail the individual meetings he held with local people; they were carefully dissected, line-by-line of exchanges, and lessons were drawn from the experience. With Huerta, who came from a middle-class background and bubbled with self-confidence and anger at injustice, Ross had a different problem—slowing her down and bringing discipline to her work. “Dolores, you’re not thinking—you’re feeling,” he would tell her. “For Huerta,” Thompson explains, “Ross showed that one could channel righteous anger at injustice into a steady and relentless force that was calm and methodical, without getting exasperated at every roadblock.”

In the midst of his chronological development of CSO, Thompson pauses and puts the organization in perspective: “Over its lifetime, CSO amassed a long list of tangible accomplishments—registering hundreds of thousands of voters, electing a handful of politicians, forcing city officials to pave streets and crack down on police brutality—but what many members recalled, decades later, was their transformation into individuals with too much political self-respect to be ignored or abused.”

A few years ago, I was at a CSO reunion. Old-timers, most of whom were successful retirees from well-paying jobs, told their stories with tears in their eyes.

By mid-1955, “CSO had grown to eleven chapters and could legitimately be called a statewide organization. Its strength was beginning to be felt in Sacramento as well.” Now it had to deal with the problems of success.

**Growing Pains**

Alinsky was impressed by CSO growth. But he was concerned about its failure to raise its own money to pay staff. Past experience taught him that without organizers these organizations wouldn’t last—either they would die or change in character. He challenged Ross on the question. Thompson then describes an internal education program that deepened member understanding of what CSO was all about, and helped sustain involvement. But not enough. Direct services were introduced. They didn’t do it either. Chavez built a large CSO chapter in Oxnard with Packinghouse Workers Union money. It was supposed to be a base from which to build a union local; it didn’t happen. The chapter soon declined. It was becoming evident that without the presence of Ross or Chavez, chapters would decline and be run by a small clique that wasn’t interested in member-based action, or, in some cases, die.

Chavez became national director of CSO, and was soon in direct conflict with Tony Rios, its president, over several issues including raising dues and organizing farm workers. The conflict wasn’t resolved. Chavez resigned and moved with his family to rural California to organize farm workers. Ross joined him after one last abortive drive. When he left to join Chavez, CSO died. Ross blamed the failure to increase dues and chapter takeovers by middle-class leaders. Both explanations only raise new questions: why didn’t the members increase the dues? Why were middle-class people able to take over the chapters? Thompson suggests, “…the service model could have brought in enough money to sustain the chapters.” But wouldn’t services have transformed chapters to organizations that did things for people rather than as vehicles through which they could powerfully act for themselves?

I wish Thompson had looped back to the earlier difference between Ross and Alinsky about direct membership versus organization of organization approaches to building people power, and how to financially sustain the former. (Unions don’t have the problem because of “check off”—dues are deducted from an employee’s paycheck.) It remains an important discussion. If only organizations of organizations can sustain themselves, what happens to unaffiliated people? What happens to lower-income people who don’t have unions, and often belong to Protestant churches that, for the most part, don’t have an economic and social justice tradition (Pentecostals, Holiness and evangelicals) or, in the case of Catholic parishes, are mixed with more middle-income people who tend to assume church leadership roles?

Thompson’s final comment is unsatisfactory: “…by the early 1960s the CSO lacked an overarching mission…[it] had largely accomplished what it set out to do: provide Mexican-Americans with a political voice.” I don’t have 1960 census data at my fingertips, but I doubt the political, economic and social status of Mexicans or Mexican-Americans in California (even omitting farm workers) could have been characterized as just. If not, much remained to be done. Which isn’t to deny that much was done. Those of us who are concerned about these questions have yet to solve the cooptation, death or timidity problem that characterizes most of our organizing work.

Were there additional avenues of action that CSO might have explored, such as:

–direct confrontation and negotiation with employers, landlords, bankers, insurers, cheating merchants and others;

–mutual aid possibilities–expanded credit unions, worker and consumer coops, and;

–deeper engagement with education reform—bi-lingual education, class-size, facilities, affirmative action hiring in schools and more.

Perhaps Ross’ agenda was too focused on a narrow view of what constituted politics (voter registration, elections and lobbying).

**Moving On**

Ross moved on to a brief, but highly successful, effort with Yaqui Indians in Guadalupe, AZ. It was also the place where Fred, Jr found his calling: helping his father there, he became a convert to organizing and did it with success the rest of his life.

Next stop: Syracuse, New York. After an initial effort to organize in the African-American community using city money (it was aborted by the mayor and his allies), Ross became field director of a program based at Syracuse University. Professor Warren Haggstrom led the academic part of the program in the Social Work Department and Alinsky was a monthly lecturer and consultant. It was funded directly (bypassing the mayor) by the federal poverty program. It was to be the War on Poverty’s first example of what it called “maximum feasible participation by the poor”.

Thompson incorrectly describes it as ‘a citywide ‘organization of organizations’ modeled after Alinsky’s work in Chicago.” It had more in common with CSO than The Woodlawn Organization (TWO), IAF’s first major project in an African-American community, since each of its component units was organized “from scratch” by using Ross’ house meeting drive. And, unlike TWO, whose principal base was black churches, this program blew up when the Federal government withdrew its funding because of complaints from the Syracuse mayor.

As might be expected, Ross ran the same kind of disciplined organizing effort as he’d run when he built CSO chapters. But his Syracuse trainees were interested in much more. The substance of their conflict with him was repeated throughout the country in discussions between student movement leaders (from both the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Students for a Democratic Society) and Alinsky, both in public lectures and private conversations. Thompson provides a generally good summary of this discussion. In a very interesting side-bar story, he also follows Danny Schecter’s (the student’s principal spokesman) evolution to a friendlier attitude toward Ross.

The students who wanted a participatory seminar with Ross were there to learn a craft—to be apprentices. As Ross once told me, “They [his students] said they wanted to improvise. I told them, quoting Picasso, ‘before you can improvise, learn to render.’”

The Syracuse project illustrates what Alinsky meant when he called the War On Poverty “political pornography”, “a huge political pork barrel…wielding funds as a form of political patronage.” (Thompson describes Sargeant Shriver, the Poverty Program’s national director, as “a tireless visionary”.) When President Johnson capitulated to mayors across the country who objected to federal funding of organizing that often targeted them, Shriver caved in instead of resigning. Ross, on the other hand, tendered his resignation and returned to California.

Thompson gives a little here and a little there in trying to satisfy the protagonists in what are now characterized as the Ella Baker versus Saul Alinsky, and the Frances Fox Piven mobilizing versus organizing debates. I don’t think he succeeds, but his effort is sufficient for the book’s purposes and it’s important that he brings up the questions. (For readers interested in my view on both of these debates, see “[New Labor’s Debt to Saul Alinsky?](http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/03/31/new-labors-debt-to-saul-alinsky/)” CounterPunch,3/31/16, and “Top Down vs. Bottom Up—What Do Grassroots Organizers Actually Do When They Organize?”,  CounterPunch,2/5-7/10.)

**The Farmworkers Union**

Thompson tells the farm worker organizing story in a concise and balanced way; it’s a story that by now has many tellers and often-contradictory versions. His is a good a summary. Ross brought to the union’s staff training his discipline and commitment, which Chavez embodied in his own leadership. It works. The union won strikes and boycotts, initially primarily in grapes, and later in Salinas Valley in lettuce and strawberries where it also had to defeat the rival Teamsters Union—which was supported by the growers.

But Ross’ weaknesses were present as well: the boycott epitomizes mobilizing on an issue (union recognition and boycott successes) rather than building lasting people power organizations (locals or chapters of a union). Thompson is fuzzy about the distinction.

Ross’ final major activity with UFW was to train its national boycott staff. Thompson gives us a good sense of Ross’ detailed attention to the task, and his demands of the volunteers. Ross went over in elaborate detail what boycott staff had to say to whomever they might encounter in soliciting support. He knew how to play every string of a potential consumer’s heart and mind, but nothing enduring was intended to be built on the ground—in contrast with the intention for CSO chapters. The boycott played to Ross’ greatest strengths, and diminished his weaknesses. (Thompson erroneously calls local boycott operations “chapters,” implying a more lasting organization.)

The book takes us down the sad path of the union’s decline. Chavez began purging loyal and effective leaders and boycott staff. Anyone who raised a question that was uncomfortable for Chavez would sooner-or-later be fired. Purgers, like Marshall Ganz and Gil Padilla, themselves were soon purged. Ganz tells Thompson he later “felt ashamed” of his role, and I know that he apologized personally to Nick Jones, the boycott director Ganz fired. The decline included the major electoral defeat of a statewide ballot proposition Chavez hoped would make the Agricultural Labor Relations Board a constitutionally protected state agency. Through it all, Ross said nothing, made no objections.

Thompson: “Ross’s confidence in Chavez…transformed into unconditional fealty, making it impossible for Ross—the one person he might have heeded—to challenge his former student when he took the union down what would prove to be a very destructive path.” Precisely.

Years earlier, Ross told me of an incident in which he told CSO leaders that he would bring an issue to the membership because they were violating membership-adopted policy. When the leaders said to him, “But you work for us,” he replied, “No, I work for the membership.” Now that changed. Chavez coopted Ross. Whether Ross could have changed Chavez’ mind we can never know. It is a tragedy of Shakespearean proportion that he didn’t try. He admitted to one of the purged organizers (who told me this story), “I’ve been too close to Chavez for too many years.”

**The Personal and the Political**

Ross’ schedule was “maniacal”; he considered that part of being an organizer. His wife Frances (in his second marriage), their young daughter Julia, and her younger brother Fred, Jr, rarely saw him; nor did his son from his first marriage. His pace was beyond human; in those days that was considered par for the course for organizers; Ross played way below par. (Fortunately, this level of time commitment is no longer considered an organizing requirement.)

When CSO ran out of money, and Ross started paying its bills out of his own savings, Frances stayed loyal, tightened the family budget and supported her husband in his calling. But her patience ran out, and she gave him an ultimatum when he failed to honor promises to slow down and spend more time with his family. The pattern repeated itself. There was a brief affair. Their marriage, too, ended in divorce. I have focused on the public man, but Thompson pays sensitive and sympathetic attention to the private one as well.

**Conclusion**

This brief review can’t do justice to Ross, or to Thompson’s telling of his story. It’s an important story, well told. [Read the book](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0520280830/counterpunchmaga)!

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​*Mike Miller is a community organizer and author. He met Fred Ross in the early 1960s through Saul Alinsky for whom he worked in the mid-1960s, and got to talk with Ross about organizing on several occasions when they drove together the two hours from San Francisco to Carmel to meet with Alinsky at his summer home. While he was Bay Area field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Miller was also co-coordinator of the Schenley Liquor Boycott, where his path again crossed with Ross’. His article on the United Farm Workers Union, “The Strike In The Grapes,” was published in the National Council of Churches newsletter, “Commission on Religions and Race Reports”; his interview with boycott coordinator Nick Jones was published in Social Policy. He can be reached at* [*www.organizetrainingcenter.org*](http://www.organizetrainingcenter.org)