

# The Trial

## The FBI vs. Orson Welles

by James Naremore

Writing from the vantage point of California in the mid-Forties, the influential European social theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argued that American movies, radio, and mass-market journalism had fused into a single, all-pervasive "culture industry"—a monstrous outgrowth of technology and monopoly capital designed to control consciousness and saturate the earth with *Kitsch*. In the best-known chapter of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, entitled "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," the authors claimed Hollywood had become so powerful that it could afford to indulge in a bit of repressive tolerance, allowing minor deviations from standard practice. "Whenever Orson Welles offends against the tricks of the trade," they remarked, "he is forgiven because his departures from the norm are regarded as calculated mutations which serve all the more strongly to confirm the validity of the system."

Meanwhile, on the East Coast, J. Edgar Hoover saw things differently—and was disinclined to forgive "departures from the norm." The Federal Bureau of Investigation file on Orson Welles, which I obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, consists of 189 pages of reports and news clippings gathered by the agency between 1941 and 1956, and it reveals that throughout the Forties Welles was the subject of close scrutiny. In 1945, near the beginning of a Red Scare that would influence Hollywood for the next decade, the Bureau designated Welles a "threat to the internal security" of the nation. For nearly ten years FBI operatives compiled secret reports on his political activities, his personal finances, and his love life. They followed up tips from crackpots and used Hedda Hopper's gossip column as a source of information about his behavior. In a few cases, they even wrote special reports on Welles' work, becoming a sort of reading formation or interpretive community within the federal government.

This doesn't mean that the FBI was an enforcer for Hollywood, or the agent of an intractable ideological hegemony. The Bureau's investigation amounts to nothing more than a footnote to movie history; it turned up very little, and will surprise no one who is familiar with Welles' career—or with the politics of J. Edgar Hoover. (The FBI dossier on Charles Chaplin is undoubtedly a good

REPLY, PLEASE REFER TO  
FILE NO. 100-5440

 Federal Bureau of Investigation  
United States Department of Justice  
Los Angeles, California  
November 3, 1944



Director, FBI

RE: ORSON WELLES, WA  
SECURITY MATTER - E

Dear Sir:

It is recommended that a Security Index card be prepared relative to the individual named below:

Name: ORSON WELLES  
Aliases: GEORGE ORSON WELLES

Residence Address: 136 S. Carmelina, Brentwood, Los Angeles, California. Telephone number (unlisted)  
Arizona 1966

Business Address: Mercury Productions, Inc., self-employed as independent actor, writer, director, and producer. 422 N. Canyon Drive, Burbank, California

Native Born  
 Communist  
 Fascist (Italian)  
 Alien  
 German  
 Japanese  
 Miscellaneous

Date of Birth May 6, 1915  
Place of Birth Kenosha, Wisconsin  
Entered U. S. \_\_\_\_\_  
Naturalized (date) \_\_\_\_\_  
Naturalized (place and Court) \_\_\_\_\_

Very truly yours,  
R. B. HOOD  
SAC

100-5440  
74 FEB 22 1945

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deal larger, and we can easily imagine what Hoover's men might have reported on a couple of radicals like Horkheimer and Adorno.)

There is, moreover, no evidence that the FBI was urgently preoccupied with Welles, or that they ever tried to subvert his work. That would have been unnecessary, since the Bureau's files indicate widespread resentment of Welles within a movie industry quick to brand him an unprofitable eccentric and a leftwing ideologue. By the mid-Forties, when FBI observation of Welles reached its peak, the Mercury Theater hardly existed and Welles himself was becoming a mere celebrity, chronically in debt and beleaguered by the IRS. If anything, the FBI files simply confirm what we already knew: that Welles was a social activist whose future in movies was problematic, and that Hoover was an even worse judge of the cultural scene than the theorists of the Frankfurt School.

Even so, the FBI wasn't simply a bunch of clowns. Although their detective work was sometimes inaccurate or bumbling, it *might* have had serious consequences for Welles' career, and I think it ought to be publicly described. I've tried to write a brief, relatively straightforward account of how the Bureau investigation proceeded. For historians, my report will help confirm the fact that projects like *Citizen Kane* weren't taken lightly by the American right wing. For biographers, it will provide a few details about Welles' politics and private life (although under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act the names of most third parties have been deleted). And for all of us, it will offer chilling, if sometimes darkly humorous, evidence of how a State agency could attempt to control or suppress the activity of intellectuals and artists.

Interestingly, the FBI didn't take notice of Welles until he moved his operations base from the New York theater to Hollywood. He had directed the WPA's controversial production of *The Cradle Will Rock*, Marc Blitzstein's agitprop music-drama, and he was an outspoken participant in Left and Popular Front activities throughout the late Thirties. Nevertheless, the Bureau seems to have remained unaware of him till April 1941—one month before the U.S. premiere of *Citizen Kane*.

At that juncture Hoover sent a memo to Assistant Attorney General Matthew McGuire, listing Welles' membership in over a dozen organizations "said to be communist in character." Hoover's

immediate concern was Welles' involvement in the Free Company, a group of writers and actors—including William Saroyan, George M. Cohan, Archibald MacLeish, Marc Connelly, Stephen Vincent Benet, Maxwell Anderson, Robert E. Sherwood, and Paul Green—who were currently producing a series of radio dramas on civil liberties for CBS. The American Legion was particularly upset by Welles' contribution—a show entitled "His Honor, the Mayor," that dealt with race prejudice. One post in California had described the program as "encouraging racialism," and according to FBI reports, "Spokesmen for the American Legion charged that [all the

Free Company programs] were subversive in nature and definitely communistic in aims although camouflaged by constant reference to democracy and free speech."

At Hoover's request, agent F.E. Foxworth compiled biographical data on each member of the Free Company. Foxworth's sketch on Welles, derived mainly from *Who's Who* and various journalistic sources, notes his membership in Spanish relief committees, his work on behalf of International Longshoremen's Union president Harry Bridges (an alleged Communist the Government was trying to deport), and his production of *The Cradle Will Rock*.



Subject with wife Rita Hayworth.

According to an anonymous informant of Foxworth's, "Welles has written stories which were apparently for the movies and . . . the subject matter was considered too far to the left to be used at the time by the studio."\*

Over the next few months a series of "confidential reports" were submitted by agent B.E. Sackett, consisting of material on Welles assembled by Representative Martin Dies' Special Committee on Un-American Activities (a pre-HUAC group charged with investigating subversive propaganda). In July, agent W.S. Devereaux in Chicago presented photocopies of documents from a "confidential contact" who was concerned with "un-American activities of various individuals throughout the United States"—among them Welles, who had been favorably discussed in the pages of *The Daily Worker*.

In October an agent in Los Angeles confirmed the previous reports: Welles had produced certain leftwing plays; he had joined with art critic John Hammond and Harvard professor F.O. Matthiessen to form the Citizens' Committee for Harry Bridges; and he had proposed films for RKO that were turned down by the studio because they were considered "too far 'leftist.'" A quick check of the Los Angeles draft board revealed that Welles had been rejected for military service because he had "inverted flat feet." "No further investigation into this or other matters regarding Welles is contemplated," the agent wrote, "unless he should appear in radical broadcasts . . . which could be considered to be of subversive character."

Soon afterward, the FBI compiled special dossiers on two of Welles' "subversive" productions. The Bureau's dossier on the 1941 stage version of Richard

\*The commentary on George M. (*Yankee Doodle Dandy*) Cohan elsewhere in the same report makes an amusing contrast. According to Foxworth, "an examination of the files of the Bureau with respect to Mr. Cohan fails to reflect any derogatory information concerning him nor was a search productive of any indication of his being associated with left wing organizations." Cohan had been a member of something called "the National Federation for Constitutional Liberties," but this hint of liberalism was more than offset by the fact that he was president of the Catholic Actors of America, an organization Foxworth described as "thoroughly reputable." "As a matter of interest," he added, "the Director [i.e., Hoover] was a member of the advisory board of this organization." Foxworth also noted that Cohan "received the highly prized award offered by the Penn Athletic Club for outstanding achievement and in February, 1937, the same award was offered to the Director and accepted."

Wright's *Native Son* is composed in the style of a legal brief, supported by 16 pages of "exhibits" aimed at showing "the communist teamwork involved in the production of this play." Among the exhibits are various complimentary articles about Welles from *The Daily Worker* and *The New Masses*; a copy of Wright's novel; and a notice of a meeting of the League of American Writers in New York, where members planned to agitate for production of a film based on the play. "The cumulative evidence," says the author of the report, "adds to the conclusion that Orson Welles' interests are entirely bound up with those of the Communist Party."

A roughly similar document on *Citizen Kane* is supported by 32 pages of newspaper clippings from leftwing journals, including an essay Welles himself had published in *The Daily Worker* ("Theater and the People's Front," April 15, 1938). This essay, written around the time of the Mercury *Julius Caesar*, is symptomatic of Welles' ideas about theater during the period, but it can hardly be described as a radical statement. Welles criticizes Meyerhold almost as much as Broadway, and he seems intrigued by the fact that movies have "taken the hypnotic trick out of [the theater's] hands."

But of course the FBI wasn't interested in Welles' aesthetics. The report on *Kane* never discusses his opinions about anything, and it eschews analysis of the film; it simply points to *Kane's* manifest subject matter and then lists Welles' activities in association with various communist organizations. Throughout, it emphasizes that William Randolph Hearst had often been attacked by the Communist Party, and it concludes that *Kane* "was inspired by [Welles'] close associations with communists over a period of years." "In fact," the author says, breaking into language reminiscent of Walter Parks Thatcher, "the word 'inspired' is much too mild to express the source of Welles' idea for the production of the picture. The evidence before us leads inevitably to the conclusion that the film 'Citizen Kane' is nothing more than an extension of the Communist Party's campaign to smear one of its most effective and consistent opponents in the United States."

Until this point, the Bureau's file consisted of little more than newspaper clippings glossed with stern commentary on Welles' leftist proclivities. But in January 1942, at approximately

the time Welles was preparing to leave for South America to undertake *It's All True*, the Bureau received a letter from a mysterious informant, setting off a brief and more intensive investigation [*In the interest of readability, we have left it to the reader to fill in the sics. —Ed.*]:

Edgar Hoover  
FBI  
Washington, D.C.

Gentlemen:

Orson Wells whose activities and interest in Communistic circles and whose American sympathies are nil, one whose record you have in your files, has been cooking up some scheme having to do with Brazil in S. America. He is known to be pro-Russian and paradoxically sympathizes with all men of the Hitler type who overthrow organized governments.

He is associated in this scheme with [deleted] who lives in [deleted]. This man is a hothead, big word individual who is supposed to represent some newspaper [deleted] but hobnobs with alien Italians and is in reality a native of Portugal, married to a Austrio-Hungarian wife who claims to be an American citizen.

These two plan to leave in a very few days for Brazil either by plane or ship.

They should be investigated at once and possibly prevented from going down there if you find cause for detention.

Its possible their intentions are legal but from reports, there is something screwy about the whole set up. Italian parents are claimed by [deleted] but its known that they are residents of Brazil and are Italians only in claims. They are Portuguese and he gives lessons at times in this language.

There is no time to waste on this tip.

From one who with others is engaged in quiet investigation of subversive actions. Take it or leave it, thats up to you.

[signature deleted]

The Bureau decided to "take it," although their investigations yielded little. They soon discovered that their informant had used a fake name, and when they placed "undisclosed identity" telephone calls to persons who were mentioned in the letter and listed in the Los Angeles directory, they found nothing suspicious; in fact, a check of voter registration lists in Los Angeles County revealed that one of Welles' sinister associates was a Republican. Within a few weeks they also learned that the U.S. State Department had given Welles permission to make a film in South America, and they immediately called off their agents in the field.

No additional information on Welles was filed until the following year,

when his career was brought up to date. In April 1943, a seven-page report was submitted by agent D.M. Ladd to Hoover's assistant, Clyde Tolson, noting Welles' involvement in various pro-Russian committees and in the defense of the Sleepy Lagoon case, a controversial L.A. investigation in which 17 Latinos had been charged with murdering a young man named José Diaz. (In 1944, all the defendants were acquitted.) That same month, Ladd also reported that Welles had been making radio broadcasts from Mexico in which he openly praised the communist movement. Ladd cited these broadcasts as examples of "the shortsightedness of this country in sending an individual having communistic leanings down to Latin America where he will be coldly received by the majority of the people."

Later that year, the Los Angeles office submitted a biographical sketch of Welles, including the news that an unnamed informant had recently made a clandestine search of all records in the Northwest Section of the Los Angeles County Communist Political Association, where he found no record of Welles' membership. The agent noted that the FBI had never been able to prove Welles' actual communism; still, he argued, "[Welles] has consistently followed the Communist Party line and has been active in numerous 'front' organizations." This report concluded with the suggestion that further investigation was in order. Appended was a complete physical description of Welles, together with his unlisted phone number, his Social Security number, and information from his draft board.

Coincident with the L.A. report, the investigation entered a new phase. On November 3, R.B. Hood, the special agent in charge of the L.A. office, sent a form letter to Hoover recommending that a "Security Index Card" be prepared for Welles, upgrading his status as a potential subversive and listing him officially as both a Communist and a native-born American.

Three weeks later, a memo from agent J.C. Strickland noted a curious item that had appeared in Hedda Hopper's column. According to Hopper (W.R. Hearst's favorite columnist), Welles was engaged in "special work" on behalf of President Roosevelt. When an FBI field agent discreetly asked Hopper about the matter, she said she did not know exactly what Welles' mission might be; nevertheless, Strickland remarked, the news was troubling, since



Subject with Lila Leeds, c. 1948.

Welles "has been a consistent follower of the Communist party line." Soon afterward, two reports were filed by the Los Angeles office, listing Welles' activity as editor of the L.A. *Free Press*; his membership, along with Ben Hecht and Edward G. Robinson, on a CIO action committee; and his plans to make a series of 16mm educational films for high schools. (This last project was one of Welles' more interesting ventures after the war, when he briefly considered becoming an educator rather than a show-business personality.)

Finally, on February 22, 1945, J. Edgar Hoover sent an official order to the Los Angeles office: "You will prepare without delay a 5" x 8" white card captioned as above [Welles, Orson. Native Born. Communist.] for filing in your Security Index Card File." In an accompanying form letter he spelled out the implications of such a classification: "The Security Index will contain only the names of those individuals who can be considered to be a threat to the internal security of this country." Regular reports on these individuals would be necessary, he observed, especially "in view of the tense international situation at the present time."

Why did the FBI suddenly decide to list Welles as a Communist and a threat to internal security, when none of its previous reports had concluded that he was anything more than a fellow traveler? There's no answer in the files, but the timing of the order is significant. It came just at the moment when the war

was visibly ending, when a purge of American leftists was in the offing, and when Welles' participation in mainstream politics was most visible. During the previous year Welles had campaigned vigorously for FDR's fourth term, and it was becoming increasingly clear that he had ambitions of his own for public office. One month prior to Hoover's order, he had begun writing a syndicated column for the *New York Post*, in which he proclaimed that "everybody should be interested in politics." His radio broadcasts of that year, like his journalist writings and public appearances, were filled with attacks on racial bigotry, on reactionary foreign policy, and on union-busting industrialists. In some quarters he was even being discussed as a Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate.

Whatever the reason, Welles' new status within the Bureau meant that he was watched more closely than ever. Certain of his activities seemed especially suspicious to the agency—as when they learned from Hedda Hopper's column that he was planning to go to Russia with his wife Rita Hayworth to film *Crime and Punishment*. During the next twelve months, agent Hood of the Los Angeles office made frequent reports, often gathering the sort of information one might use for blackmail. In April he informed Hoover that Welles was attending the U.N. conference in San Francisco in the company of another subject of an FBI investigation; prior to his visit, Welles had hired a "commu-

nist" ghostwriter to help with his newspaper column and had begun cheating on his wife: "Of possible interest," Hood wrote, "WELLES spends considerable evenings engaged in extra-marital activities with [name deleted], former Main Street burlesque strip tease artist, who has recently promoted herself to a higher type of nightclub appearance in this city. Also some time ago when WELLES appeared in San Diego in connection with a bond tour he took some girl, other than his wife, down from Los Angeles to be with him there."

On April 21, Hood reported that one

of Welles' associates (name deleted) had "mishandled" his finances, leaving him "practically broke." "WELLES spends large sums of money recklessly. . . his wife, RITA HAYWORTH, is smart, she banking her funds in a separate account." According to Hood, the income from Welles' newspaper column "would not even meet the sums paid to his researchers," but he was nonetheless continuing to lead an active romantic life: "a movie actress who recently has been receiving considerable publicity" (name deleted) was another person "with whom WELLES has been having an

affair." At the conclusion of his report Hood enclosed a list of persons in Hollywood—their names deleted from the document—who would be "glad to be of any possible assistance" in the investigation, and two days later he noted that "Proper coverage of the telephone conversations between WELLES and (name deleted) may reveal information of interest."

Agent Hood submitted a half-dozen similar documents over the next year, all concentrating on Welles' disintegrating marriage and career, all claiming to "report communist activities." Among the details of special interest were Welles' newspaper column ("ghostwritten by a communist"), his public appearances on behalf of Louis Dolivet's Free World Society, his editorial comments on the radio, his public speeches attacking racism, and his signing to appear in an "untitled post-war psychological melodrama" (probably *The Stranger*). In a special memo to Hoover, Hood also noted that influential Democrats in California were proposing Welles as a replacement for the recently deceased U.S. Senator, Hiram Johnson.

In early 1946, however, the L.A. office received news that Welles had separated from Rita Hayworth and moved to New York, where he proposed to undertake the direction of *Around the World in Eighty Days* on the Broadway stage. After verifying these facts "under pretext," agent Hood suspended his investigation, remarking that his office had been "unable to learn of any recent subversive activities in which the subject might be engaged."

For the rest of the year the FBI seemed to lose interest in Welles, although they still classified him as a Communist. Then, in December 1947, Hoover's office received a phone call from a woman informant (name deleted) announcing that Welles, "one of the biggest communists in Hollywood," had sailed for Italy just prior to a "communist uproar" in that country. The files were checked, but apparently the agency found nothing suspicious. Things remained quiet until August 1949, when Hoover received an anonymous letter from Paris containing a newspaper clipping and the following message, which the FBI translated from French:

[I]f this photograph should come to the attention of a member of the State Department, WELLES will undoubtedly be brought before a court in charge of prosecuting actors suspected of Un-

American activities and perhaps even excluded from Hollywood definitely.

The newspaper clipping is a photograph captioned “Welles dinant avec Togliatti,” showing Welles at a restaurant table, smiling happily at Palmiro Togliatti, the legendary head of the Italian Communist Party, who is seated across from him.

Had Welles been employed by Hollywood at this time, when the blacklist was lengthening and scores of people were being called to appear at the HUAC investigations, the newspaper photo would surely have compromised his career. One can only imagine the kind of charges that might have been brought against him, or how he might have behaved before the Congressional committee. As it was, however, he had trouble enough making movies in Europe.

Agent Hood in Los Angeles was soon put back on the case. After consulting with Italian informants, he wrote a lengthy memo to Hoover noting that Welles was trying to make a movie in North Africa (*Othello*), and that his production company was being ordered to leave its quarters at Nassour Studios because of financial difficulties. One of Hood’s informants offered the opinion that Welles “had been ‘bled white’ financially through the employment by [names deleted] who . . . would constantly proclaim the virtues of Communism.” This same informant “stated facetiously that WELLES had been making pictures over in Italy these past three years in order to finance a trip home to the United States.” Hood himself seemed weary of the matter. He appended a six-page report on Welles’ recent political activity and concluded that there was little need for further action. “In view of the fact that WELLES has never been placed as a member of the Communist Party,” he wrote, “the Bureau is requested to give consideration to . . . cancellation of his Security Index Card.”

Within a month of Hood’s request, Hoover complied, although he added, “In the event the subject again becomes active in CP matters upon his return to the United States, consideration should be given by you to reactivate his Security Index card.”

Afterward, the Bureau entered only an occasional item in the file, sometimes providing data for other governmental agencies; for example, in 1956 they sent copies of their old reports to the U.S. Army, and in 1976 they cleared Welles in a routine security check requested by

something of an historical irony. The FBI letter to the Chief Executive refers to Welles for the first time as “Mr.,” and remarks only that he was long ago the subject of a “security-type investigation” because his name appeared “in connection with Communist front organizations.”

**T**he case against Welles ended there, and I should reemphasize that his activity was never an urgent concern within the government. Nevertheless, the Bureau’s files merit this brief review,

if because they remind us of the fate of the American Left after World War II, and of Welles’ troubles after the making of *Kane*. If Welles hadn’t been brought low by producers, tax agents, and his own complex personality, he would probably have run afoul of witch-hunters. The FBI records demonstrate how a climate of reaction was nurtured from the mid-Forties onward, and they suggest that real issues were once at stake in Welles’ films—in those years before his work could be viewed nostalgically on TV, making him a harmless and official classic. ☸