

David O. Russell's *Amsterdam* and the 1933–34 “Business Plot”

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Amsterdam, the latest film by writer-director David O. Russell (*Three Kings*, *I Heart Huckabees*, *The Fighter*, *American Hustle*, *Joy*), is a muddle of the first order. It focuses attention on an important historical episode, the effort by elements in the ruling class to organize a coup in 1933–34 against Franklin D. Roosevelt (the so-called Business Plot or Wall Street Putsch), but severely fails in its treatment of the event as well as its contemporary significance.

Russell's new film takes place for the most part in New York City in 1933. A title informs us that “A lot of this really happened.” Two close friends, Dr. Burt Berendsen (Christian Bale) and lawyer Harold Woodman (John David Washington), both wounded in World War I, become convinced that their beloved commander in that conflict has been murdered. The latter's daughter, who hires the pair to investigate her father's death, is herself pushed into traffic and killed. Berendsen and Woodman are falsely accused of the crime.

In a flashback, we learn that the two men spent time in 1918 recuperating from serious injuries in a Belgian military hospital where Woodman fell in love with a nurse, Valerie (Margot Robbie). The three passed a few bohemian-utopian months together in Amsterdam after the war, hence the film's title. Valerie ultimately disappeared, and Woodman and Berendsen eventually made their way back to New York.

The half-Jewish Berendsen, who lost an eye in the war, faces the disapproval of his wife's upper crust family. Woodman, an African American who returned from the war to attend Columbia Law School, helps veterans and is in love with a white woman. The two are vaguely at odds with official society.

In the course of the investigation into their general's death, Berendsen and Woodman encounter Valerie again, the sister of the wealthy Tom Voze (Rami Malek). The sleuths (now a trio with Valerie) begin to suspect that nefarious forces—including the Committee of the Five, which, among other things, funds sterilization clinics—are behind the two killings and more.

All of this eventually leads them to Gen. Gil Dillenbeck (Robert De Niro), who has been approached by the Committee of the Five to address a gathering of veterans. The group of wealthy businessmen (“They believe in nothing but making money”) want Dillenbeck to deliver a speech that would incite the former soldiers to overthrow the US government and apparently install Dillenbeck as dictator.

Amsterdam was filmed in early 2021. Although Russell notes that he has been working on the film for at least five years, it is impossible to believe that the events of January 6, 2021, did not have an influence on the filmmakers. At least, one would like to think so. In typical fashion, however, Russell, as far as this reviewer can determine, has never raised the Trump coup plot seriously in discussions of the film. He insists simply, “Christian [Bale] and I really wanted to make a film about friendship and loyalty.”

This is a very foolish remark, and helps to indicate some of the film's weaknesses. It is a political commentary very much in spite of itself, in

fact, to the point of almost extinguishing such commentary.

Amsterdam takes an inordinate amount of time, proceeding in a tedious, roundabout manner, to arrive at the fascist plot uncovered in the film's final moments. Bale's performance is a series of irritating quirks. Washington and Robbie lack chemistry. A variety of oddball characters make an appearance, but they lack any special purpose or sharpness. Amorphousness, muddiness, scenes that go nowhere between individuals whose motives are unclear and for the most part uninteresting...

Although a conspiracy by big businessmen is ostensibly at the heart of things here, Russell's film is hardly a radical undertaking. Why did he go out of his way to insert two undercover intelligence agents, one American and one British (Michael Shannon and Mike Myers), unamusingly posing as birdwatchers, as enemies of the plot? Or to make a New York City policeman a sympathetic figure?

Almost inevitably, contemporary identity politics issues loom large. The question of American society's attitude toward interracial relationships is an entirely legitimate subject to explore, but *Amsterdam* makes no serious effort to approach its concerns historically. Aside from the clothes, cars and décor, there is no genuine sense of the 1930s and the Depression years here. In any event, if Berendsen and Woodman were radicals in New York City at the time, they would inevitably have had some sort of association, friendly or otherwise, with the Communist Party, the Socialist Party or the Trotskyist movement—or *if not*, that too would have had its significance. Instead, these are figures floating around largely in Russell's mental space, which is not as clear as it might be.

This is his first film in seven years, and it has failed with the public. Russell was far more successful with the chaotic, anarchic satire of *Flirting with Disaster*, *I Heart Huckabees* and *American Hustle* or the greater social realism of *Three Kings* and *The Fighter*. Not all the attacks on *Amsterdam* are fair, but to a large extent the writer-director has opened the door to criticism, including that from the right, by the paltry, unconvincing character of the work.

His film ends up advocating love and kindness, while opposing hate and intolerance. It is about as deep-going and effective as the anti-Trump “Hate Has No Home Here” signs that appear in various American front yards. The work, in any case, doesn't seem to have much confidence that these sentiments will win out. That being the case, everyone apparently should hunt for his or her own “Amsterdam,” an individually carved-out utopian space, as soon as possible.

Perhaps the unkindest thing one could say about the film, released at a time of unprecedented political crisis and concerned itself *with political crisis*, is that it will not have a significant impact on anyone.

The actual events referenced in *Amsterdam* are noteworthy, both for what occurred and what did not end up occurring.

According to the testimony of retired Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Smedley Butler in 1934 before the Special Committee on Un-American Activities, also known as the McCormack–Dickstein Committee (ironically, the predecessor of the ferociously right-wing House Un-American Activities

Committee), he was initially approached by representatives of powerful business interests in July 1933, four months or so following Roosevelt's inauguration.

At first, Gerald MacGuire, who worked as a bond salesman for the Wall Street banking firm Grayson Murphy & Company, merely suggested that Butler attend the next American Legion conference and deliver a speech denouncing Roosevelt and his decision to take the dollar off the gold standard. MacGuire showed Butler a bank account with \$42,000 in deposits (worth more than \$800,000 today).

As Jonathan Katz explains in *Gangsters of Capitalism: Smedley Butler, the Marines, and the Making and Breaking of America's Empire* (2021), "Over the following weeks, MacGuire continued the courtship. In Newark, where Butler was attending the reunion of a National Guard division, MacGuire showed up at his hotel room and tossed a wad of cash on the bed—\$18,000, he said."

Where had the money come from? "MacGuire told the general he was working for several wealthy backers. One of them was Robert Sterling Clark—an heir to the Singer sewing machine fortune ... Another was MacGuire's boss, the well-connected financier Grayson M.-P. Murphy, who had close ties with the nation's most powerful bank, J. P. Morgan & Co., and Wall Street's most influential law firm, Sullivan & Cromwell."

In 1934, MacGuire contacted Butler again and spoke enthusiastically about his recent trip to Europe, including visits to fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. He was especially impressed by the February 6, 1934, riot in France by fascist elements, led by the far-right *Croix de Feu*.

"MacGuire had attended a meeting of the *Croix de Feu* in Paris," Katz explains. "It was the sort of 'super-organization' he believed Americans could get behind—especially with a beloved war hero like Butler at the helm. Then he made his proposal: The Marine would lead half a million veterans in a march on Washington, blending the *Croix de Feu*'s assault on the French legislature with the March on Rome that had put Mussolini's *Fascisti* in power in Italy a decade earlier. They would be financed and armed by some of the most powerful corporations in America—including DuPont, the nation's biggest manufacturer of explosives and synthetic materials."

"The purpose of the coup was to stop Roosevelt's New Deal, the president's program to end the Great Depression, which one of the millionaire du Pont brothers had deemed 'nothing more or less than the Socialistic doctrine called by another name.' Butler's veteran army, MacGuire explained, would pressure the president to appoint a new secretary of state, or 'secretary of general affairs,' who would take on the executive powers of government. If Roosevelt went along with this, he would be allowed to remain as a figurehead, like the king of Italy. Otherwise, he would be forced to resign, placing the new super-secretary in the White House."

Butler exposed the plot in November 1934 before a two-man panel of the Special Committee on Un-American Activities. Journalist Paul Comly French also told the panel what MacGuire had said to him: "We need a Fascist Government in this country, he [MacGuire] insisted, to save the nation from the Communists who want to tear it down and wreck all that we have built in America. The only men who have the patriotism to do it are the soldiers and Smedley Butler is the ideal leader. He could organize a million men overnight." According to French, however, the Morgan interests were opposed to Butler, considering him too radical—"they preferred a more authoritarian general: Douglas MacArthur."

As Katz observes, as soon as Butler's allegations were made public, "the most powerful men in media did everything they could to cast doubt on them and the Marine. The *New York Times* fronted its story with the denials of the accused: Grayson M.-P. Murphy called it 'a fantasy.' 'Perfect moonshine! Too unutterably ridiculous to comment upon!' exclaimed Thomas W. Lamont, the senior partner at J. P. Morgan & Co."

The committee conducted its brief investigation in "an atmosphere of

overweening incredulity." Nonetheless, its final report declared:

"In the last few weeks of the committee's official life it received evidence showing that certain persons had made an attempt to establish a fascist organization in this country. ... There is no question but that these attempts were discussed, were planned, and might have been placed in execution when and if the financial backers deemed it expedient."

The committee, Katz points out, "said it had 'verified all the pertinent statements made by General Butler.'"

Gangsters of Capitalism takes note of the strong fascist sympathies in the American ruling elite:

"Lamont described himself as 'something like a missionary' for Mussolini as he made J. P. Morgan one of Fascist Italy's main overseas banking partners. The American Legion, an alleged source of manpower for the putsch, featured yearly convention greetings from "a wounded soldier in the Great War ... his excellency, Benito Mussolini." The *capo del governo* himself was invited to speak at the 1930 convention, until the invitation was rescinded amid protests from organized labor.

"Hugh S. Johnson, *Time*'s 1933 Man of the Year, had lavishly praised the 'shining name' of Mussolini and the Fascist *stato corporativo* as models of anti-labor collectivism while running the New Deal's short-lived National Recovery Administration."

The abortive coup undoubtedly led to Butler's own further radicalization. In 1935, he published a short work entitled *War is a Racket*. Based on his own decades of experience as a leading figure in various operations on behalf of American imperialism, Butler explained how US business interests benefited from military interventions:

"I helped make Mexico, especially Tampico, safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefits of Wall Street. The record of racketeering is long. I helped purify Nicaragua for the international banking house of Brown Brothers in 1909–1912 ... I brought light to the Dominican Republic for American sugar interests in 1916. In China I helped see to it that Standard Oil went its way unmolested."

In an article published the same year in *Common Sense*, Butler summed up his conclusions: "I spent most of my time being a high-class muscle man for big business, for Wall Street and for the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer for capitalism."

In the 1930s, American capitalism still had immense reserves. As Leon Trotsky noted, the New Deal was "possible only in a country where the bourgeoisie succeeded in accumulating incalculable wealth." Furthermore, Roosevelt was able to convince, not without a struggle, the most important sections of the ruling class that his plan was not aimed at introducing "socialism" but preserving capitalism. Even then, however, significant layers of corporate America were actively contemplating installing a fascist regime.

On January 6, 2021, Donald Trump prepared and incited an armed attack on Congress with the goal of overturning the results of the November 2020 election and maintaining himself in power as a dictator. The attempted coup, which found no organized resistance within the political establishment, dramatically revealed the historic breakdown of American bourgeois democracy.

In the light of both these past and present events, Russell's film grows even smaller and more unsuitable.



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