

Seminar: The Road to Brexit: British Discourses of Europe
Lecturer: Prof. Dr. Ina Habermann
Podcast Contribution, Author: Flavia Giudice
Topic: Invasion Scare Literature

The Uses of Invasion Scare Literature for the ‘Leave Campaign’

Author:

There is no doubt that the media, and particularly tabloid newspapers, helped pave the way towards Brexit. Crucially, papers in favour of ‘Leave’, such as the *Daily Mail*, had powerful cultural narratives to tap into, among them the ample invasion scare literature that flourished before the First World War. The first ‘invasion scare’ novel is usually taken to be *The Battle of Dorking*, published in 1871 by George Chesney – a piece of counter-factual literature describing a German invasion of Britain. All of these tales carry the same political message:

Speaker:

If our leaders become too complacent, our island fortress will be penetrated by the enemy.

Author:

Hence the impact of Churchill’s exhortation:

Soundbite Churchill:

“... we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender”

Author:

During the Brexit debate, one invasion scare novel of 1972 received renewed attention: Daphne du Maurier’s *Rule Britannia*, written during another historical turning point when British identity was at stake. The British Empire had all but disintegrated, and previous colonial territories all over the world, such as India, Jamaica, and Malta, had sought independence. In addition, inner conflicts such as the Irish Troubles threatened to destabilize the nation.

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Britain had been facing a difficult economic situation since the Second World War, and it was agreed that the country would join the European Economic Community.

Du Maurier follows the pattern of invasion-scare narratives by setting *Rule Britannia*, somewhat prophetically, in the near future, when Britain had entered the European Economic Community, and had already decided to leave again. The country's ensuing weakness allows foreign troops to invade and take control.

Du Maurier introduces an interesting twist here, since the invading nation is not Germany, as many classic invasion scare narratives imagined, but the United States of America. Weak leaders and disastrous political and economic decisions have apparently made the country vulnerable. Setting the novel on the Western margins, in Cornwall, in traditional smugglers' territory with its cliffs and caves, du Maurier shows how the natural border fails when determined foreign invaders appear and how Britain's natural isolation and independence is only an illusion. Tellingly, while London has succumbed to the powers that be, resistance comes from the Celtic fringes.

In the eve of the 2016 Referendum, there was no military threat to British soil. However, since the financial crash of 2008, the belief in financial security and stability had weakened or disappeared, and fears of unemployment or social decline are everyday issues. This prepared the ground for fears of an 'invasion' of workers from the European Union, and Eastern Europe particularly, so that many people responded to the United Kingdom Independence Party's call to 'take back control', and to re-assert Britain's greatness and independence. In this context, *Daily Mail* articles claimed that

Speaker:

"there is nothing petty-minded about being proud of our traditions and history as a great seafaring country".

Author:

This had far more visceral appeal than less patriotic headlines, such as *The Independent's* quibbling

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Speaker:

“Some chance of a better Europe is better than no chance”.

Author:

Just as around 1900, the ‘Leave’ campaign conjured up the invasion scare motif and the image of the British island fortress under siege, in order to fuel anti-alien populism, for example the *Daily Mail* warning against uncontrolled immigration, untrustworthy politicians, and the lack of control over faceless bureaucrats.

This goes to show how powerful such narratives can be; they are residual in the cultural memory, stored there to be amplified again as the occasion arises. Daphne du Maurier’s use of the invasion scare motif in the early 1970s is highly ambivalent, since the ‘Baddies’ are not Germans or other Europeans, but Americans asserting their global hegemony. Interestingly enough, this aspect was downplayed when du Maurier’s novel gained new currency after the Brexit vote.

Speaker:

Did du Maurier predict Brexit? What did she get right?

Author:

Thus the BBC asked in August 2016, and commentators were quick to over-emphasize the anti-European bias in the novel in their haste to enlist a famous English author for the cause. This proves both the power of fiction, and the perils of turning literature into propaganda.