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A slightly edited comment from a correspondent who wishes to remain anonymous

Cultural Studies

Perhaps more of a contact print of Modern England than a snapshot: a reminder that, to me (adapting what Sir James Jeans said of the Universe) England today is not only stranger than I imagine, but stranger than I *can* imagine:

On Saturday morning in brilliant sunshine I was sitting in a train from Rye to Ashford, crossing Romney Marsh. Opposite me was a young lady busily tapping away at a laptop. Alongside this were two paperback books, whose titles I noticed. *Cultural Studies*—well, I thought I could understand what that was likely to be about, but to be sure I searched just now on Google for “Cultural Studies”. A mere 202,000 entries, as compared with the 18 that came up earlier today when I was looking for information on a painter who recorded our towns in the early part of the 20th century before (as Betjeman memorably observed) “traffic changed everything.” The following from—almost inevitably—Sussex University was the third entry:

Cultural Studies at Sussex takes a deeper look at the meanings of culture in relation to certain key concepts: identity, history, globalisation, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity. By the end of the programme, you will not only understand more about the topics you have covered in your degree—you will have acquired the skills to better understand new and unfamiliar cultures for yourself.

(I rather wish I hadn't looked now!)

Harder to grasp for its probable content was the second book: *Making Sense of Cultural Studies*. In view of the entry above, this book probably needs to be several thousand pages longer than it actually was. I don't think that a defined academic subject needs books with such a leading-by-the-hand title. *Making Sense of Medicine, Engineering, Mathematics, Astronomy*, etc—hardly! But *Making Sense of Cultural Studies*—ah, now I see the point. It is *not* an academic subject, but a branch of opinion, with political undertones: as such, it appears that the student probably needs to be *told* what to think about it, how to make sense of it. Hardly consistent with the drawing-out nature of proper education.

The Sussex University website page for “cultural studies” is at www.sussex.ac.uk/cultural. On it, the sentence preceding my original excerpted quote reads: “It seems as if the word culture can be attached to almost anything.” Er, yes. But can it really stretch to Cultural Studies?

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