

Journalist imitates Sergeant Schultz: “I know Nozzink” about the Paris attacks

“It’s not the internet that is ailing journalism. We’re killing ourselves, thin in our coverage, and often intellectually lazy and shallow.” – The Journalism Iconoclast

Right after the January 7 murderous attacks on the satirical magazine “Charlie Hebdo” and a kosher supermarket in Paris, TV and internet commentators regaled or outraged us with immediate analyses of what these attacks might mean. Predictably enough, conservative pundits saw in them another attack on Western values by radical Islam while liberal and left ones emphasized the “blowback” element of Islamic rage against the West’s often violent interference in the politics and culture of Muslim countries.

Comments, lacking information about the attackers’ inspiration and motivation, were therefore mostly recycled hot air. But one internet journalist outdid many others in intellectual laziness and shallowness the Journalism Iconoclast decries. And that was the onetime Washington Post and MSNBC wunderkind Ezra Klein, now Editor in Chief of the VOX media website.

On the day of the attack Klein posted the following:

“These murders can’t be explained by a close reading of an editorial product (the Muhammad cartoons in ‘Charlie Hebdo’) and they needn’t be condemned on free speech grounds. They can only be explained by the madness of the perpetrators, who did something horrible and evil that almost no human beings anywhere ever do, and the condemnation doesn’t need to be any more complex than saying unprovoked mass slaughter is wrong.”

Unprovoked incuriosity and ignorance are wrong too, if not

lethal, and Klein is guilty of both. How could a journalist, on the day of the Paris mass slaughter, immediately adopt a “Nothing to see here folks, now move along” stance when media had not even begun investigation of the Paris murderers and the path that led them to commit their “horrible” acts?

And how can an educated person (Klein earned a B.A. from UCLA in 2005) write that mass murder is an evil “almost no human beings anywhere ever do?” Is it really necessary to dispel his inane “ever” with pictures of skulls from Pol Pot’s killing fields, frozen corpses from Stalin’s gulags or piles of victims’ shoes from Hitler’s death camps? Is he not aware that the perpetrators of those slaughters were not “mad,” but followed the logic of a political ideology, as the Crusaders in the Middle Ages followed a religious one as they hacked up infidels—Muslims, Christians and Jews alike. (For a starter, I’d recommend Christopher Browning’s ground-breaking book “Ordinary Men,” which initiated historians’ focus on the role of “normal” Germans in the Holocaust, away from the “madness” of the bad and fanatical SS types as sole perpetrators.

But Klein insists, rather pedantically, that only “madness” can explain the Paris attacks. Two fine pieces of investigative journalism soon proved him wrong. The first one was The New York Times’ front-page story on January 18, “From Scared Amateur to Paris Slaughterer.” In it readers learned that by September 2004 the Kuachi brothers, Cherif and Said, “began going regularly to Mr. (Farid) Benyettou’s apartment to discuss the religious justifications for suicide attacks. There they talked about how to load a bomb into a truck and drive it into an American base.” A decade later, they translated some of what they learned from their mentor into the attack on Charlie Hebdo.

A day later the German newsweekly DER SPIEGEL published on its English website a five-part report: “Terror from the Fringes: Searching for Answers into the ‘Charlie Hebdo’ Attacks.” The work of ten reporters, the series asks three questions that

expose the mind-numbing shallowness of Klein's simplistic response: were the attackers angry young men? Was their anger fueled largely by problems within French society? And, were they fed a misguided interpretation of Islam? Without supplying definitive answers to any of the questions, the thoroughly researched article suggests that one explanation would not suffice to provide even fragments of answers.

Or, as might have been suggested to Klein, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, but at other times it's more .

In DER SPIEGEL readers found out that "radical Islamists and terrorists have for decades been especially active in France." And that the the two young Kouachi brothers and their accomplice "as adolescents seemed quite normal and promising." They also learned that Benyettou convinced them "that armed conflict was the right approach and touted the martyr's death as a path to paradise." Moreover, "he incited his followers to engage in jihad" and quoted holy texts and Muslim scholars." Cherif Kouachi is quoted: "It helped to convince me."

Had Klein waited to dismiss complex answers to a complex issue and history, he might not have reached for the "madness" defense but concluded with a sentence often attributed to Voltaire: "Where people believe absurdities, they commit atrocities."

He might also, should he touch this topic again, read the 1990 essay in The Atlantic by Bernard Lewis: "The Root of Muslim Rage." Its subtitle is "Why so many Muslims deeply resent the West and why their bitterness will not easily be mollified." But if he's too busy, here's Lewis:

"It should by now be clear that we are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less a clash of civilizations – the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian

heritage, our secular present and the worldwide expansion of both.”

Lewis’s stance is not an invitation to Islamophobia. To the contrary, Lewis insists that “It is critically important that we on our side should not be provoked into an equally historic but equally irrational reaction against that rival.”

Klein, who promotes “explanatory journalism,” is capable of explaining all that to his readers. For his sake and for journalism’s, let’s hope he’ll come back to the explanatory journalism he advocates but abandoned in his VOX posting on the Paris attacks.