Review 6

Title: Confounding Powers. Anarchy and International Society from the Assassins to Al Qaeda. By William J. Brenner (2016). 290 p. New York: Cambridge University Press. ISBN: Cambridge University Press

Reviewed by: Lauren Vandenbroeck, University of Antwerp, Belgium.

This is a noteworthy book if you are interested in the international political systemic and societal origins of historical actors. The book concentrates predominantly on William J. Brenner's comparative historical case study about the Nizari Ismailis (the Assassins), the Mongols, the Barbary States and Al Qaeda.

In his theoretical study, Brenner tries to find an answer to the main question: 'How systemic developments rooted in the logic of anarchy may engender international society?' Brenner accurately details his study focusing on the power of deviant international polities in the international political system, providing new insights into the influencing forces of these novel actors.

The main issue highlighted in this study emphasizes how 'systemic change (change within the system and its power distribution) in the form of the decline of dominant actors sets in motion mechanisms and processes that lead to system change (change of the system and its composition)'.

Brenner argues that when dominant political powers decline and their global impact reduces, 'marginal political organizations' see the opportunity to profile themselves as systemic actors, while they are merely 'subsystemic adjuncts'. The actors pointed out in this study each deviate structurally in their development leading to dissimilar outcomes compared to their more powerful challengers. Their growing relevance creates a climate of uncertainty, which causes for the international society to see them as extreme threats. Faced with these threats, the existing order operates in two ways. Either they establish an effect of alienation, reflecting the actors as illegitimate malefactors, or they force them into existing normative frameworks to decrease the real challenge. New actors at their turn establish innovative behavior trying to conceal their intentions rather than imitating the behavior of existing states. Despite their successes in establishing themselves as misfits within the system, they still suffered from their divergent behaviors. How can those actors hasten this process? Three sorts of constraints are cited in this study. Material constraints, structural constraints and negative sanctions suppress the deviation of the actors.

The book is divided into five chapters. Four of them are case studies where Brenner spells out each case using a theoretically eclectic posture. The combination of neorealism

and the English School enriches the theoretical synthesis. Ultimately taking into account both methodologies adds an extra productive proposition.

In chapter 1, "International society and the logics of anarchy," Brenner explains how systemic change acts as a trigger for system change. A complex set of mechanisms and processes associated with security seeking and dealing with uncertainty leads to a wider range of forms and behaviors. These behaviors result in both international systemic and societal outcomes.

This chapter considers how a wider range of unit-structural, behavioral and, accordingly, systemic and societal outcomes may be obtained. In order to define the relationship between the international society and the logics of anarchy, one should investigate a range of contexts in which uncertainty is increased by actors who do not comport to routine processes of emulation and socialization.

Chapter 2, "Confusion in the hearts of men" is the first case study. This study investigates the Nizari Ismailis, who are also known as the Assassins of medieval Persia. The beginning section describes the historical setting. The decline of the Abbasid Caliphate coincided with Seljuk rule led to some degree of regional autonomy. This situation resulted in an opportunity structure for the Nizari Ismailis. It made their challenge to the established order stray from the norm. The explanation of the significance of the Nizaris is followed by a description of the reception and diffusion of the Assassin legends that emerged from the encounters with their contemporaries. The effects on the international society consisted of a transformation of the political and identity challenges into enduring symbols that provided reference points for the firming of civilization well after their demise.

In chapter 3, "A furore Tartarorum libera nos; The Mongol eruption and aftermath" Brenner gives an account of the Mongols' success and their impact in international systemic and societal terms. He looks after the mechanisms and processes behind their uncommon achievements. This chapter first identifies the condition and terms under which the Mongol polity emerged. The actors introduced include the dominant powers and the Steppe tribe that becomes the rudimentary state under Chinggis's leadership. The Mongols' unlikely emergence is accomplished by Chinggis's improbable rise including the role of his relationship with his future adversary the Jin dynasty. Over time the devastating effects of the Mongol invasion diffused as the once modest Steppe tribe became a recurring symbol of the potentially explosive peril seen by those who act contrary to the tenets of civilization.

Chapter 4, "Out of the shadow of God" takes a look at the Barbary States, who tested their limitations by extending far into the Mediterranean Sea and well beyond their limits. They lasted during much of the seventeenth century and beyond, forcing great powers to tolerate their destruction. The primary focus of this chapter is how the Barbary powers achieved their impact on the system and maintained it, despite strong pressure from their more centralized and powerful European antagonist. The chapter starts with descriptions of the international systemic context into which the Barbary powers occurred and of its most important actors. After this introduction, the chapter discusses the relationship between the corsairs and the Ottoman Empire and how that relation was affected by an episode of Ottoman decline. The chapter further examines the limited ability of the Barbary powers to establish sovereignty beyond their city walls, and how this deficiency affected

their political development. The question moves to how encounters with odd powers shape norms and identities. The chapter concludes with a consideration of piracy and slavery as the opponents of the emerging standards of civilization.

In chapter 5, "In the shadow of the spears" Brenner focuses on 'How did Al Qaeda emerge and survive taking on multiple states including the dominant unipolar power, the United States?" A systemic prejudice has distorted our view of Al Qaeda and its significance in the study of world politics. We have generalized it to the world of non-state actors and threated it as disembodied doppelganger acting on, rather than in, the international system. This chapter explores Al Qaeda's development from its beginning in the struggle against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan till the developments in the Muslim world. After having described the various actors, the author gives an explanation for the timing of Al Qaeda's emergence. The decline of the Soviet Union, the authority of the United States, and the conditions of globalization are seen as important factors. After that, the author presents an account of Al Qaeda's reactions to its narrowed circumstances and of its evolution within the international system. The chapter closes with an assessment of the actor's impact so far on the norms and identities that constitute international society, eliminating the idea that they represent a clash of civilizations.

The conclusion by Brenner at the end of the book is threefold. The first two parts of the conclusion are a synthesis of the observations about transformations in international systems and the development of the international society. The third part reflects on the implications of these observations for the challenges we currently face. The main expectations have been confirmed in almost all the cases. New questions are raised, and a number of remarks are made.

Brenner did an excellent job in gathering multidimensional historical material. He compiled several views of scientific experts, thereby providing a thorough perspective on key issues. Until now, many scholars within the discipline of international relations considered these historical cases to be irrelevant. Brenner, however, looks at the topics with an interesting methodological and political point of view. Another strength lays in the peculiarity of the cases. Among the four cases, the contemporary case of Al Qaeda is the most familiar. Although the other three cases are less accurately known, they form an interesting challenge for the more motivated scholar.

Although the book has a lot of strengths, it is appropriate to note that Brenner only uses actors that are radically different from dominant states in their external mode of operating. If the author had extended his premises, he may have uncovered a wider range of hostile states.

The book is, overall, worth reading since it provides an innovative view on international systems, with dissimilar types of actors. The book falls beyond restricting interpretations like neorealism. In sum, the book is well written and very sophisticated in its references; it covers a lot of scholarly research and it is balanced in its approach.