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Review Essay 46

William J. Brenner. *Confounding Powers: Anarchy and International Society from the Assassins to Al Qaeda*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316271650>.

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What Would Waltz Say?

A decade after the end of the Cold War, the debate about structural realism in general and *Theory of International Politics* in particular had heated up.¹ Twenty years earlier, Kenneth Waltz had developed an explanation of international affairs based on three components: (1) the international system's ordering principle (e.g., anarchy vs. hierarchy); (2) the differentiation of units and their functions; and (3) the number of dominant units. The demise of the Soviet Union potentially reflected a significant change in the third component of Waltz's theory: some observers claimed that a unipolar moment had emerged, while others pointed to the rise of multipolarity, changes in the number of dominant units that could be expected to produce observable differences in international behavior and outcomes. Democratic peace theorists, globalization boosters, and prophets of the Information Revolution also pointed to potential changes in the system's ordering principle (component one). Waltz suggested that a unipolar moment would be fleeting (and that the world remained more bipolar than many believed), and that a democratic peace and associated transformational ideologies would not change the system's ordering principle,² leaving critics to revisit the "static" nature of Waltz's theory and thinking.³

¹ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

² Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security* 25:1 (Summer 2000): 5-41.

³ Critics were quick to note that there was not much room for change in Waltz's theory see John Gerard Ruggie, "Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Toward a Neorealist Synthesis," *World Politics* 35:2 (January 1983): 261-285.

This debate was abruptly ended by the September 11, 2001 al-Qaeda attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. Scholars and policymakers alike turned their attention to the so-called Global War on Terrorism. In any event, structural realism had little to say about Osama bin Laden and his rag-tag band of miscreants and fanatics—Waltz always insisted that the nation-state was the dominant actor in international affairs and that all states undertook similar functions due to emulation (i.e., copying best-practices of others) or the shaping pressures created by anarchy. The rise of al-Qaeda, much like the rise of General Motors, was not only beyond the scope of structural realism, but was also of little theoretical significance in Waltz's theory.

Not so fast, argues William J. Brenner. According to Brenner, new types of international actors occasionally burst upon the world stage, disrupting the status quo and fundamentally changing the other units in the system. In a brilliant insight, Brenner suggests how structural realism can explain the rise and impact of “confounding powers” on the nature of a systems' units and even on the international system's ordering principle. Brenner has managed to include a truly evolutionary force into what is an admittedly rather static conception of international politics, and he does so by using *Theory of International Politics* to explain the rise of al-Qaeda. For aficionados of structural realism, Brenner guides us on an intellectual path worth taking.

Brenner begins by acknowledging that Waltz's notion that emulation and systemic constraints creates a remarkable degree of similarity among the dominant actors in the system, in contemporary terms the nation-state. Occasionally, one of the dominant actors in the system weakens, which literally opens up political and territorial space for the emergence of innovative entities that are highly divergent (horrifically deviant?) from the ‘standard’ units in the system. Brenner notes how all four of the confounding powers he discusses—the Nizari Ismailis (Assassins), Mongols, Barbary Pirates, and al-Qaeda—emerged as one or more dominant actors in the their international setting weakened. He then makes a convincing case that this room for maneuver allowed these new entities to overcome emulation pressures and to devise new conceptual, cultural, administrative and behavioral responses to anarchy. In other words, Brenner does not disagree with Waltz. Instead, he offers an important caveat describing the circumstances in which organizational innovation can occur in a global system that otherwise favors similarity and conformity.

To be fully responsive to Waltz's version of structural realism, however, Brenner's innovation has to specify how these confounding powers were significant, not just some nuisance or flash in the pan. Brenner goes about this task in two ways. He first demonstrates what made these confounding powers different, rocking the dominant actors to their foundations by posing both a dangerous military threat and a conceptual challenge. The shock effect they produced was not just due to the power they could wield, but also because they were inherently different from and inscrutable to the dominant actors of their day. Second, he then goes on to suggest that the impact of confounding powers continues to reverberate in international norms and law, conceptions of the scope of state power, and the ideas and actions that are considered to lie beyond what is often referred to as “civilized” behavior.

Ironically, it might be a bit of a stretch to treat Al-Qaeda, the subject that motivated Brenner's analysis, as a true confounding power. The organization, along with its progeny and affiliates, are currently exhibiting signs that they will be short-lived, at least by historical standards. Already, they are slowly being shoved aside by the rising salience of growing great power competition. Nevertheless, given the acceleration of world affairs, produced by the information revolution, globalization, environmental change and the emergence of new forms of social interaction, the eruption of deviant actors that can produce shock and mayhem seems likely in the future. In fact, the one development that receives relatively little attention in Brenner's analysis—technological innovation—might actually be opening new avenues for deeply disturbing deviance to manifest.

Confounding Realism is more than just theoretical sleight of hand. It offers new insights into international politics of interest to neorealists and policymakers alike. What would Waltz say about Brenner's creative and compelling addendum to *Theory of International Politics*? Alas, we will never know the answer to that question. For a devoted structural realist, however, what's not to like?

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