

Winter 2017

## 'Confounding Powers: Anarchy and International Society from the Assassins to Al Qaeda' by William J. Brennar (review)

Zachary C. Shirkey  
*CUNY Hunter College*

### [How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc\\_pubs](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_pubs)



Part of the [International Relations Commons](#)

---

#### **Recommended Citation**

Shirkey, Zachary C. 2017. "Review of William J. Brenner *Confounding Powers: Anarchy and International Society from the Assassins to Al Qaeda*," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*. 47(3): 399–400

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Hunter College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu).

hand, Christian sources from Syria depicted labor as a burdensome penalty for the fall of Adam and Eve: Ascetics who lived like angels, free from earthly labor, represented the transcendence to which all Christians aspired (Chapter 4). The Manichaean division between the ascetic Elect and their supportive Hearers represented a stark version of this two-tiered community model (Chapter 3). On the other hand, literary sources constructed an ideal image of the Egyptian monk as a self-supporting laborer who worked with his hands (Chapter 5). This self-sufficiency suggested solidarity between the monk and fellow human beings who must work for their food; it also enabled lay donations to monks seemingly above being bought (Chapter 6). If we widen our view to include Buddhist and Manichaean communities farther to the east, the clash of these Egyptian and Syrian models becomes “the western end of a debate on wealth, labor, and monks that was as wide as Asia itself” (116).

Brown has been a pioneer in the interdisciplinary study of late antiquity, drawing especially on sociology and anthropology. In these chapters, which retain the brevity and conversational style of the original lectures, his interdisciplinary sophistication remains primarily implicit (except in his discussion of the sociology of Buddhism [xii], and of the irrelevance of Max Weber’s distinction between charismatic and bureaucratic authority [104, 109–110]). Instead, readers profit from an innovative historian telling a fascinating story with clarity, grace, and insight.

David Brakke  
Ohio State University

*Confounding Powers: Anarchy and International Society from the Assassins to Al Qaeda.* By William J. Brenner (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2016) 276 pp. \$99.99

Brenner asks why, and when, polities that are fundamentally different in “behavior and unit structure” from most of the other polities in the international system emerge (40), whether such novel polities exhibit patterns of behavior, and how the existing international system responds to them. His theoretical approach draws primarily from political science—relying heavily on neorealism, constructivism, and the English school—while also incorporating elements of social psychology. Brenner illustrates his arguments through detailed comparative historical case studies about the Nizari Ismailis (the Assassins), the Mongols, the Barbary states, and al Qaeda.

Brenner argues that radically distinct polities are more likely to emerge when the international system is in flux, particularly during periods of great power decline. In other words, changes in systems lead to changes of systems. Although his discussion leaves the exact connection between great-power decline and the rise of new types of polities slightly

underdetermined, his cases draw distinct parallels between great-power decline and the emergence of radical polities. These new polities are destabilizing; they generate considerable uncertainty in the international system, which causes existing states and international society to see them as both physical and ontological threats. Faced with such threats, existing states and international society either engage in extreme alienation of the new polities, portraying them as illegitimate malefactors, or attempt to squeeze them into existing normative frameworks to lessen the ontological challenge despite the obvious misalignment. Being vulnerable to physical violence, new polities, rather than imitating the behavior of existing states, typically engage in innovative behavior while simultaneously making a few adjustments in an attempt to conceal their intentions, the nature of their identity, and even their physical location if possible to protect themselves. These new norms and behaviors, arising from the actions of, and reactions to, the new polities further the process of systemic change.

Brenner's argument would be enriched by considering two complications. First, he uncritically accepts neorealist assumptions that the international system is characterized by anarchy and that states rely on self-help for survival. Although such assumptions are widely held in political science, they have been questioned by historians and political scientists alike. Second, Brenner considers only polities that differ significantly from existing states in their outward form. Yet, states with radically distinct internal structures, such as revolutionary France or the Soviet Union, have, like the objects of Brenner's study, provoked hostile reactions because of their being perceived as physical and ontological threats to the system.

Had Brenner been willing to extend his premises and consider additional states that ontologically threaten both the international system and its units, he might have uncovered a wider range of behaviors. That said, the book raises important questions and provides provocative answers. It should prompt further research about systemic change and the interactions between international society and the diverse political entities and behaviors that constitute it.

Zachary C. Shirkey  
Hunter College  
City University of New York

*Desertion in the Early Modern World: A Comparative History.* Edited by Matthias van Rossum and Jeannette Kamp (New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016) 213 pp. \$112.00 cloth \$29.95 paper

Until relatively recently, deserters in past times, with the exception of runaway slaves, have generally received bad scholarly press. Why? Acts of desertion—the abandonment of “duty” without permission—often suggest moral dereliction, and, thus, the repudiation of widely valorized