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SOCIAL CONTRACT

Rebellion and Dissent aboard *Serenity*

Susanne E. Foster and James B. South

The major plot of *Serenity*, the companion movie to Joss Whedon's TV series *Firefly*, pits the crew of the spaceship *Serenity* against their interplanetary government, the Alliance. River Tam (Summer Glau), a member of the crew who begins as a stowaway, was severely damaged while at an Alliance school for "gifted" individuals.¹ By the time the movie opens, River's brokenness and the Alliance's persistent attempts to find her lead the captain and crew to believe she is a threat to their safety. While attempting to discover what happened to River and why the Alliance is so desperate to recover her, the crew learn that an Alliance experiment in controlling human aggression annihilated the population of the planet Miranda and created the Reavers, a group of hyperviolent individuals.

MAL. I know the secret now. The truth that burned up River Tam's brain and set you after her. And the rest of the 'verse is gonna know it too. 'Cause they need to.

THE OPERATIVE. You really believe that?

MAL. I do.

THE OPERATIVE. You willing to die for that belief?

MAL. I am. Of course, that ain't exactly Plan A.

In this scene, which occurs late in *Serenity*, we see Malcolm ("Mal") Reynolds (Nathan Fillion), the captain of the spaceship *Serenity*, expressing the reasons why he finds himself at odds with his interplanetary government,

the Alliance. Over the course of the series *Firefly* and its sequel movie *Serenity*, the Alliance has been shown to be systematically keeping secrets from its citizens and to have policies that lead the government to sacrifice members of the community in pursuit of some greater good. By contrast, the relationship that develops between Mal and the crew of *Serenity* is one in which each individual is kept informed of the plans, and reasons for the plans, of the group, and in which those plans are never predicated on sacrificing any member of the crew for the good of the others. One especially salient feature that emerges from the interactions of the crew members is that they demand compliance with the rules that keep everyone safe while not judging one another's motives and actions as long as crew members stay within these boundaries.

At the beginning of the series, Mal and his crew are rebelling against their interplanetary government, attempting to avoid interaction with or dependence upon the Alliance. But as the series progresses, the crew of *Serenity* moves from rebellion to dissent, working to hold the Alliance accountable for its decisions and to force it to change its policies and actions. The complex story of the community that develops among the crew of *Serenity* and their changing relationship to their government can best be understood by exploring the meaning of the term *consent* within the framework of "social contract theory,"² both in the classical sense, expounded by John Locke, and in the development of the view found in the writings of the contemporary philosopher Stanley Cavell, who points out succinctly that "the force of the idea of a social contract is to put the advantage of a society, as it stands, in question."³

Rebellion and Marginalization

The series begins a few years after a civil war between the Alliance and a rebel group called the Resistance. A member of the Resistance, Mal was present at the Battle of Serenity Valley, where the Resistance was defeated. His decision to name his ship *Serenity* and his penchant for picking battles each year on the anniversary of that defeat demonstrate his deep anger and inability to let go of the war. As captain he gathers to himself other individuals who are marginalized by or rebelling against the Alliance government. His own continuing rebellion against the Alliance is further demonstrated by his decision to make a living for himself and his crew by engaging in illegal activities, thereby depriving himself and his crew of the protection

the Alliance could provide them and forcing them to hide from the threat of violence from the Alliance itself.

We contend that Mal's relationship to the Alliance consists of an attempt to withdraw consent from the social contract. Locke claimed that citizens enter into a social contract in order to protect their property and the rights that flow from it. In entering into the contract, citizens consent to be governed, that is, they give up some autonomy and freedom in exchange for a social world in which they can flourish, while being cognizant of the kinds of behavior and practices that are now off-limits to them.⁴ Mal's rebellion as captain of *Serenity* may well strike us as juvenile, a mere thumbing of his nose at the government that defeated the Resistance. After all, Mal is now living a life in which he barely scrapes by, often short of fuel and parts for his ship as well as food and provisions for his crew. Moreover, he continually puts his crew at risk while engaging in illegal activities. It is worth noting that, ironically, even to the degree that Mal is able to make do in his rebellious activities, he is nonetheless parasitic upon the good functioning of the social contract. One can become an outsider only by leaving the inside intact. Furthermore, the community on board the ship presupposes the language and social customs of the wider community.⁵ In short, it seems that despite his attempts at rebellion, Mal is still a member of the Alliance community to the extent that he relies on the good functioning of the Alliance to make his own living possible.

Some social-contract theorists at this point invoke Locke's term *tacit consent* to describe how it is that consent has been given when "few people have actually consented to their governments so no, or almost no, governments are actually legitimate."⁶ On this interpretation, Mal's use of Alliance-backed currency and goods such as produce and Alliance-developed technology might seem analogous to Locke's example of the tourist who uses the roadways of another country and thereby agrees to abide by the laws of the state.⁷ The problem for the social-contract theorist who wants to make this move is that Locke's use of the concept is restricted to aliens present within a state; he nowhere makes the claim that tacit consent provides for genuine membership in a political community. Indeed, as Cavell notes, even in the sections where Locke brings up the notion of tacit consent, "he reiterates his contention that *membership* in the polis requires *express* consent."⁸ So, we are left with three questions: What is required before one can be said to have given express consent? What would be required to withdraw that consent? and What would legitimate the withdrawal?

Cavell's insight is that express consent is best understood in light of an adequate account of withdrawal of consent. In what follows, we will discuss in some detail the ways in which Mal and the other crew members seem to have withdrawn consent. But we will show, drawing on Locke's work, that they do not manage to actually withdraw consent. The crew's initial response to the Alliance does not rise above acting out in a juvenile and rebellious manner. Locke foresaw rebellious reactions such as Mal's, but he argued that they were fruitless insofar as they would fail to effect social change: "The examples of particular injustice, or oppression of here and there an unfortunate man, moves them [the mass of citizens] not." And so, Locke concludes, "Nor let anyone say, that mischief can arise from hence, as often as it shall please a busy head, or turbulent spirit, to desire the alteration of the government."⁹

Mal's crew consists of those who find themselves actively harmed by their government, or marginalized, or simply forgotten—as can happen in any society. These crew members, then, represent concretely those whom Cavell describes as subject to "specific inequalities, and lacks of freedom, and absence of fraternity."¹⁰ So, for example, Jayne Cobb (Adam Baldwin) starts out as a member of a group of bandits threatening Mal and the crew. When Mal points out to him that he will benefit financially if he switches sides, Jayne ends up fighting against his erstwhile companions on behalf of Mal ("Out of Gas").¹¹ Just as Jayne was a mercenary before, he is now clearly in a kind of mercenary relationship with Mal. It is always an open question whether someone will make him a better offer and give him a financial reason to turn on Mal and his crew. So Mal's agreement with Jayne is a strictly financial one.

Inara Serra (Morena Baccarin) holds the position of a Companion, a profession akin to a legalized form of "prostitution" that involves a set of cultured, intellectual, and social functions similar to the Japanese notion of a geisha. Prior to leasing a shuttle aboard the spaceship *Serenity*, Inara walked away from her position as a rising member of the Companion House Madrassa. Although being a member of this guild afforded her a considerable amount of power, respect, and political clout, not to mention luxuries in food and clothing, it also meant she was socially compromised and constrained in a number of ways. Although we are not told the explicit reasons she has for leaving that position to take up residence with Mal and his crew, whose actions clearly lack social respectability, it is clear that by taking a position upon *Serenity* she gained a degree of autonomy and distance from the direct

affiliation with her guild while still plying her trade as a Companion. Her initial agreement to become part of the *Serenity* crew is explicitly financial. She tells Mal that he cannot enter her shuttle and that her services will not be available to the crew. But during their initial negotiations, Mal calls her a "whore," attempting to assert his moral superiority, and she responds that he does not get to call her that again—as a stipulation of their agreement—and thus makes it clear that in addition to financial gain, she requires a position in which she is not being judged morally ("Out of Gas").

Kaylee Frye (Jewel Staite), in contrast, becomes a member of the crew because she has no good reason to stay on her home planet, which appears to be exceptionally poor and limited in resources and opportunities. Rather than being morally compromised in the way Inara is, Kaylee's circumstance is marginalization through poverty. She refers to her life as boring, and her agreement with Mal is to use her exceptional skills as a mechanic to keep the ship in flying condition, in return for the adventure of being part of Mal's crew ("Out of Gas"). She betters her circumstances by being able to indulge her sensuality: wearing pretty dresses, eating strawberries, and acting on an earthy sexuality. This suggests that while Kaylee is marginalized by her society, she is too naive actually to rebel.

Simon Tam (Sean Maher) and his sister River are from a well-positioned family on one of the more cosmopolitan planets in the Alliance. The family, in short, has the privilege of power and wealth. The parents have sent River to a school for gifted individuals, but it turns out that the school is really an Alliance program engaged in experimentation and exploitation of the students' gifts in order to train them for later use as Alliance operatives. She manages to get a message to her brother asking for help. Simon, although already embarked on an impressive career as a doctor, poses as an Alliance official and infiltrates the facility where River is being kept. He is able to extract her, but he and his sister are now wanted by the Alliance because River, while at the school, was accidentally given access to top-level secrets. Her knowledge of the Alliance's past misdeeds and Simon's knowledge of what was going on at the school threaten the Alliance. This act of rescuing his sister costs Simon a lot. He is unable to function openly as a physician, and it is clear he is drawn to practicing medicine. For example, in a scene in which he smuggles River into a medical facility for a series of diagnostic tests on her brain, he risks being caught in order to save a patient from the incompetence of another doctor ("Ariel"). Simon and River, then, represent those individuals in a society who are subject to gross, but isolated, injustices.

The initial moment of their joining the crew of *Serenity* is especially complex. Simon masquerades as an ordinary passenger and smuggles River on board in his luggage. When an Alliance operative follows him, his act puts the crew of *Serenity* in danger. Although the crew protects Simon and River from the Alliance, Simon now must negotiate an agreement with Mal to become part of the crew and not just a passenger. He offers his services as a doctor—services they will need because, in their dangerous and illegal work, they will be unable to obtain needed medical help openly for fear of exposure (“*Serenity*”). This negotiation has to be reaffirmed frequently since, as a result of the experiments performed on her, River’s behavior is erratic and often puts the crew in danger.

Building Community: Speaking in Mutuality

Our discussion of the individual crew members so far shows that the group on board the ship began as a mere collection of misfit individuals marginalized or persecuted by the Alliance. They have assembled for diverse reasons. First, they want to achieve the advantage of their common protection. Second, each believes that as a member of this particular crew, he or she can more effectively meet his or her needs for various goods and services. Third, each will now have opportunities for meaningful action, free from the prior constraints imposed by the social structures supported by the Alliance. Over the course of the series, though, it turns out that through their diverse abilities and the leadership of Mal, they begin to form a community, one that becomes superior to the political community fostered by the Alliance. The new community that develops on *Serenity* shows its superiority in four ways. Decisions are always made based on some common agreement; no one’s good is sacrificed for the group; in spite of the diversity of moral perspectives among the crew, each is assured of the respect of the rest of the community; and although Mal is in a leadership role on *Serenity*, his leadership is by common consent and not absolute. In contrast to Locke, who argues that a prince is in a state of nature in relation to his subjects because there is “no common, higher appeal” between them, we believe that *Firefly* exemplifies a different model, one in which disagreements between Mal and the crew cannot be settled by a higher appeal but nonetheless can be resolved by a common appeal.¹²

The first key element in the communal understanding of the crew is their willingness to tolerate and even respect differences in goals and con-

ceptions of the good held by the other crew members. After all, everyone is well aware that Jayne's sole motivation for being on *Serenity* is the hope of financial benefit. No one upbraids him for his motives, and the only limit Mal ever places on Jayne is that his pursuit of money cannot be at the expense of any member of the community. When, in one episode, Jayne sells out the Tams, Mal threatens to open an airlock, thus pulling Jayne out into space. Mal makes his point: "You turn on any of my crew, you turn on me. But since that's a concept you can't seem to wrap your head around, then you got no place here. You did it to me, Jayne, and that's a fact" ("Ariel").

Another example of this mutual toleration involves Mal and Inara's substantially different standards of respectability. When Inara points out that, unlike Mal's smuggling, her own career is legal, Mal responds that unlike hers, his chosen profession is not morally questionable ("Out of Gas"). Nonetheless, the two respect each other and work together. When an Alliance official questions Inara's willingness to associate with the crew of *Serenity*, Inara responds, "It's a mutually beneficial business arrangement. I rent the shuttle from Captain Reynolds, which allows me to expand my client base. The Captain finds that having a companion on board opens certain doors that might otherwise be closed to him" ("Bushwhacked"). But it is clear that the relationship develops beyond a business arrangement predicated on mere mutual toleration. When a man Inara is accompanying to a party implies that Inara is a whore and his property, Mal rushes to her defense. Inara asks Mal about his behavior: "You have a strange sense of nobility, Captain. You'll lay a man out for implying I'm a whore, but you keep calling me one to my face." And Mal responds: "I may not show respect for your job, but he didn't respect you. That's the difference, Inara. He doesn't even see you" ("Shindig"). Another element in the crew's mutual relationship is that decision making aboard the ship is always transparent and results from a discussion among them, as seen throughout the series. Even more significant, though, is that the community's plans are restricted by the need to meet the goals of all the members. When Inara points out to the captain that he is seeking jobs in areas where she cannot get work, Mal, however grudgingly, takes on jobs in a more populated area ("Trash").

An especially poignant example of the community's commitment to the good of each of the members, and one in which the other crew members are forced to act contrary to the expressed desires of Mal, the captain of the ship, occurs in "Out of Gas." When the ship's engines are crippled, knocking out

life-support systems, Mal directs the others to take the shuttles away from the ship and send out distress signals. Reluctantly, they leave. He remains on board to avoid using life-support resources in either shuttle and hoping for a miracle. A passing ship spots *Serenity*, and Mal barter with its captain for the part he needs to repair the engines. Once on board, though, the pirates turn on Mal, planning to kill him and take *Serenity* as their own. Gunfire is exchanged, and Mal, though injured, acquires the part and forces the others off the ship. Bleeding profusely, he attempts the repairs and as he passes out, he manages the repair. Disobeying his orders, the shuttles return and Simon is able to save Mal's life. When Mal awakes, he challenges the others: "I call you back?" Zoë (Gina Torres), the ship's first officer and fellow soldier from his Resistance days, states that she takes full responsibility. Simon adds, "The decision saved your life," and Zoë remarks, "Won't happen again, sir." Mal's response to Zoë's "apology" is "Good," but he continues by saying, "Thanks, I'm grateful."

As "Out of Gas" shows, in contrast to a Lockean model, where there is no mutuality between prince and subject and the prince is "in a state of nature" with regard to his subjects because there is no higher authority by which to settle disputes, Mal's leadership role depends on common consent, and meaningful dissent can occur between the crew and its leader. Cavell provides resources for understanding this sort of community through his discussion of the forms of life constitutive of community. In an important passage, Cavell writes:

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing ensures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life." Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest on nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying.¹³

So genuine community does not require a higher authority but relies instead on a set of shared agreements in language, thought, feelings, and interests. Understood in this way, we see that despite Mal's early attempts at rebellion, which required an appeal to a higher standard, Mal is embedded in a community that is simultaneously dependent on and aversive to the broader community exemplified by the Alliance. With no higher authority to which he can appeal, Mal instead has to abandon his rebellious attitude toward the Alliance and turn to a form of expression that exists within that community and does not make an appeal to some outside source: dissent. That dissent finds expression in the companion film, *Serenity*.

Dissent: "If you can't do somethin' smart . . . do somethin' right."

When the *Firefly* series was prematurely canceled, Joss Whedon, the show's creator, was fortunate to get funding to make a movie that could serve to wrap things up. As part of the plot of the movie, the crew finds itself in a bar pursuing payment for a completed job. A subliminal message on a telescreen triggers River's Alliance conditioning and she violently attacks everyone around her. Just before the attack, she whispers the word "Miranda." Miranda turns out to be the name of a terraformed planet that the Alliance claimed had been rendered uninhabitable through some natural event. In order to find the cause of River's violent behavior, in hopes of curing her, the crew sets out on a dangerous journey to discover what really happened on the planet. This time, not only must the crew dodge the Alliance, but they must pass through Reaver territory. Reavers are humans who have become vicious cannibals, supposedly driven mad by spending too much time in deep space, away from human communities ("Bushwhacked").¹⁴

When *Serenity* arrives at Miranda, the crew discovers that there has been no natural catastrophe. Instead, the inhabitants are dead, but without apparent cause. Eventually they find a recording made by an Alliance scientist revealing that the government released a chemical, called "The Pax," onto the planet in hopes of making the population "better." But rather than simply removing excess aggression, the chemical destroyed all motivation in virtually all the planet's inhabitants. They simply stopped and thus died. A minute fraction of the population had the opposite reaction. Their aggressive tendencies were tremendously magnified. The release of the chemical, it turns out, was the true origin of the Reavers.

The carelessness with which the Alliance acted on Miranda, and the

resulting slaughter, is consistent with its routine attitude toward its citizens. In seeking out River Tam, Alliance operatives exterminated anyone they believed to have talked to her, and in attempting to prevent the crew from releasing the information they have acquired about Miranda, the Alliance indiscriminately destroys any community that they believe might harbor Mal and his crew.

In the final part of the movie, we see Mal and his crew risk their own lives to try to get the news of what really happened at Miranda out to the public. Mal still desires to bring down the Alliance, but he does not simply run away, as in his earlier rebellion from it. Instead, he is trying to do something with revolutionary potential. He demonstrates his commitment to the community governed by the Alliance by showing how the government has become corrupt. Locke, in his account of social-contract theory, made it clear that he thought people would be willing to put up with significant harms from government simply because that course was easier than rebellion. He claims that, "til the mischief be grown general, and the ill designs of the rulers become visible, or their attempts sensible to the greater part, the people . . . are not likely to stir."¹⁵ But the actions of Mal and the crew in reaction to their discovery on Miranda are aimed at making the "ill designs of the rulers become visible." To maim and exterminate human beings in an experiment to improve human nature certainly qualifies as an "ill design." The crew's development of a community that involves mutual respect and tolerance is a model of the social contract that now stands in stark contrast to the Alliance.

Cavell reminds us, "It is a very poorly kept secret that men and their societies are not perfect," but we are always in community despite imperfections because we share language, customs, and the like. "To speak for oneself politically is to speak for the others with whom you consent to association, and it is to consent to be spoken for by them . . . as someone in mutuality speaks for you, i.e., speaks your mind."¹⁶ As Mal expresses his newfound reasons for taking on the Alliance: "Someone has to speak for them." At no point in the series are Mal and his crew able to break free of the larger community they struggle against. In addition to the goods and services for which they must barter, their own smaller community presupposes the language and customs of the interplanetary government. And at no point is Mal content with his stance toward the Alliance. The bigger question, then, is, How does one respond when one cannot assent to the words and actions of one's community? Cavell writes, "Dissent is not the undoing of

consent but a dispute about its content, a dispute within it over whether a present arrangement is faithful to it.”¹⁷ At the end of *Serenity*, we see Mal expressing that dissent: “You all got on this boat for different reasons, but you all come to the same place. So now I’m asking more of you than I have before. Maybe all. Sure as I know anything I know this, they will try again. Maybe on another world, maybe on this very ground swept clean. A year from now, ten, they’ll swing back to the belief that they can make people . . . better. And I do not hold to that. So no more running” (*Serenity*). And once he broadcasts the truth, regaining his voice within the community, dissenting from the lies and actions of the Alliance, he lets go his rebellious anger and need to isolate himself. We see Mal and the crew of *Serenity* continuing their association, but now in a vastly different relationship to the Alliance.

Notes

1. Simon Tam, River’s brother, had rescued her from the Alliance and put her in stasis. While she was in this condition, he smuggled her on board in his luggage. We discuss this incident in some detail later in the chapter.

2. For another treatment of social-contract theory and *Firefly*, with different emphases, see the helpful and interesting essay by Joseph Foy, “The State of Nature and Social Contracts on Spaceship *Serenity*,” in *Joss Whedon and Philosophy*, ed. Dean Kowalski and Evan Kreider (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2012), 39–54. Foy makes good use of Hobbes in showing that the further one gets from civilization, the closer one is to a Hobbesian state of nature. In addition, Foy notes the way in which *Firefly* is indebted to traditional narratives of the Old West.

3. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 23.

4. John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*, in *Locke’s Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), sec. 222, p. 430.

5. This is a continual theme in the writings of Stanley Cavell. A clear statement of his view can be found in his *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 52.

6. Alex Tuckness, “Locke’s Political Philosophy,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke-political/>.

7. Locke, *Second Treatise*, secs. 119–22.

8. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 24 (emphasis in the original).

9. Locke, *Second Treatise*, sec. 230, p. 436.

10. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 24.

11. Episode names are given parenthetically in the text.

12. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 18–182.

13. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* 52.

14. Foy, in his “The State of Nature,” takes the Reavers to represent humans in the Hobbesian state of nature and does an interesting job of comparing their brutality with the brutality of the Alliance.

15. Locke, *Second Treatise*, sec. 230, pp. 435–36.

16. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 27.

17. *Ibid.*