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"Aiming to Misbehave:" Role Modeling Political-Economic Conditions and Political Action in the *Serenity*verse

[1] The theme of power underlies all of Whedon's work. "It's not about what's right. It's about power," the First Evil tells Buffy, in the final season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Of course, the First is a villain defining the situation in order to set things up in its favor, so the First lies. It is really about power *and* it is about the right and wrong use of power. "It" is the quintessential stuff of human relations. As Whedon tells us in the *Buffy* Season 7 Commentary, "we thought we'd get back on track with our real agenda," and the Commentary editor uses a sudden cut to the First's monologue to affirm his words, "It's about power." The right and wrong uses of power are Whedon's *uber*theme.

[2] Power is also a major subject of the social sciences (my academic home field is anthropology.) This article uses an anthropological/social science/political science perspective to explore the value system of the right and wrong uses of power—the political economy—depicted in the *Firefly/Serenity* universe. And, since as anthropologist, I am not merely interested in story, but in the social actions of real people, this article will ultimately explore the ability of Whedon's message to motivate real world actions by his fans regarding the right and wrong use of power—specifically, the growing relationship between the film *Serenity* and the women's human rights organization Equality Now.

[3] The power relations Whedon confronted in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* centered on gender inequity. Using metaphor to expose common injustices in our culture, he gave us role models for individual and social change. While relatively few theorists argue with his portrayal of gender, *BtVS* has been criticized for its less than stunning depiction of racial issues (c.f. Ono 2000; Helford 2002; Alderman and Seidel-Arpaci 2003) and for its white bread, middle class suburban perspective on class (Jowett 2005:13).

[4] In *Firefly/Serenity* Whedon shows us he can do class (and colonialism) as well as gender. Throughout the 'verse's fourteen episodes, three comics, and single film, the space ship Serenity's crew of hungry outlaws travels the black reaches of space, landing on planets of exploited workers, forgotten colonists, trafficked slaves, and endangered prostitutes. Their enemies are the idle and indifferent rich, and an inept state—the Alliance—that "meddles" and menaces, yet rarely protects, nor fights injustice. "Fighting the good fight" increasingly becomes the task of the Serenity crew, as they mature from case studies in loss and post-traumatic stress to become a committed, well-oiled crew of "big damn

heroes" ("Safe," 1005). Not only do *Firefly* and *Serenity* deconstruct class, but through the metaphor of multiple planets to stand for multiple nations, Whedon confronts inequality on a global scale, as rich and poor planets mirror the power structure of rich and poor nations—the colonizers and the colonized of our own world.

[5] Whedon has never seen his creations as mere entertainment, and neither do the more sophisticated of his fans. His stories are intended—and taken—as metaphors for the world in which we live. In "Future History: the Story of Earth that Was" (*Serenity* DVD "Bonus Material") Whedon tells us, "it's a vision of the world more or less as it is today . . . because that's what's going on right now." The cast are no less aware, as Nathan Fillion (Captain Mal Reynolds) explains in "The Making of *Firefly*": "…this is us, in the future, our problems are the same" (*Firefly* DVD "Extras"). Fans and critics notice the parallels as well, with few stating it so succinctly as Mercedes Lackey in her chapter assessing the politics of *Firefly* in Jane Espenson's *Finding Serenity* (2004): "The dystopian society in which the crew of Serenity operates feels *real* . . . It resonates because the rules by which this dystopia operates are familiar" (63).

[6] The picture isn't pretty, so just as Whedon did to portray the trauma of adolescence in *BtVS* (Bacon-Smith 2003), he uses metaphor in *Firefly/Serenity* to show us things in the global political economy that we need to see. They are things we really wouldn't want to look at without the glamour of a good fantasy to soften the punch.

[7] My particular perspective on *Firefly* and *Serenity*—their rare ability to depict the harsh realities of our world's greed-based political economy—congealed for me as August turned to September 2005, when crises converged on my television. I had run out of new episodes on my *Firefly* DVD, and resorting to cable, I was confronted with omnipresent images of Katrina—the stranded, hungry, thirsty and dying—live images of the abandoned tens of thousands in post-hurricane New Orleans.

[8] Retreating back to the metaphorical world of science fiction I turned to the "Special Features" on the *Firefly* DVD and was struck by a deleted scene in which Zoe explains the aftermath of the Battle of Serenity Valley to a shocked Simon. "But you see, they left us there. Wounded and sick and near to mad as can still walk and talk. Both sides left us there . . . for a week, and we kept dying" *(Firefly*, "Deleted Scenes"). The image of a dark-skinned woman describing what could just as well have been New Orleans in real time hit home, and it hit hard, as metaphors do when they brush so close to reality.

[9] Media junkie that I am, I next turned to my mailbox and found illumination, if not solace, in the September 2005 issue of *American Anthropologist*. It featured a collection of articles, titled "Moral Economies, State Spaces, and Categorical Violence," based on the socio-economic theories of James Scott, a political scientist turned ethnographer—a man interested in power relations who studies real people instead of statistics about them. He, like Whedon, has made a career out

of depicting the right and wrong uses of power. His most recent work is *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. It may be apparent to the reader that its title might just as well be the subtitle of the movie *Serenity*. I hope this becomes even more apparent as I proceed. To begin, I will need to bring my non-anthropologist readers up to speed on some advanced social science terms.

[10] We start with the Anthro 101 concept of economy: the distribution of goods to people. It can be accomplished through one (or a combination) of three types of reciprocity, or sharing. General reciprocity runs the economies of hunter-gatherers. Basically, if you need it, and I have it, I give it to you, confident that you will give to me when I have need. For the majority of human time on our planet, the majority of economies were run this way. Then there is balanced reciprocity, in which you and I have equal power to negotiate an exchange of mutual benefit. This is the way of primitive market economies.

[11] Negative reciprocity runs the large economies of the modern world, in which each party tries their best to get the advantage of the other party; all profits derive from taking advantage. This is the "buy low, sell high" ethos of capitalism, the antithesis of sharing, hence *negative* reciprocity. We see it in the brutal competition for scarce resources in *Firefly*: the exploited Mudders of Canton ("Jaynestown," 1007), the thievery of the underworld in several episodes as well as *Serenity*, the slavers in the pool hall and the slave owners at the rich party ("Shindig," 1004). In our world we see it in increasing rates of downsizing, underpaid illegal aliens, sweatshops, famine, human trafficking, the under classes who are increasingly left to settle in harm's way of natural and manmade disasters, and in the drastic discrepancies between rich and poor individuals, and rich and poor nations (Robbins 2005).

[12] In all competitive economies heavy on negative reciprocity, inequality results. But we also find what Scott terms moral economy: the idea derives from studies of peasant systems (Scott 1976). It is the expectation that in even the most exploitive economies, groups of people find fellows who do not practice negative reciprocal advantage-taking in their interactions. This can involve friends, family, extended families and clans, and even the exploiters usually give some little bit back for the benefit of their fellows. In America we encourage profits to be made, but even here we have charities. We tax and redistribute to the poor—even our legislators have a rudimentary idea of moral economy.

[13] In *Firefly*, when Jayne's stolen money fell on the Mudders, they took it as their due and held a riot to keep it ("Jaynestown"). That's the moral economy in action. Thief that he is, Mal Reynolds is the epitome of moral economic values. He gives back stolen medicine to needy settlers ("The Train Job," 1002), and he won't knowingly take jobs involving slavery. He only agrees to the drug heist on Ariel when reminded that it is a core planet, able to replenish its stores with ease, and that the medicine

can be sold to peripheral planets for the mutual benefit of needy people and the crew ("Ariel," 1009).

[14] Whedon contrasts the negative reciprocity of his villains with the moral economy of his heroes, clearly advocating the latter. When Mal catches up with the double-crossing Saffron, who lives by negative reciprocity alone, she says, "everybody plays each other; that's all anybody does." Mal replies, "I got people with me, people who trust each other: who do for each other; and ain't always lookin' for the advantage" ("Our Mrs. Reynolds," 1006).

[15] The Serenity crew also extends their moral economy beyond the ship as they practice balanced trade and mutual support with the twins, Haven and Mr. Universe (*Serenity*). Even Jayne sends money home to his mother! As the captain and Zoe's old war buddy, Tracy reminds us, "If you can't walk, you crawl; if you can't crawl, you find somebody to carry you" ("The Message," 1012).

[16] Few submit willingly and with full knowledge to exploitation: states and economic entities in the exploitation business expend great energy to keep the exploited in place. They do this three ways. First, they use force: violence, deprivation and incarceration. Shoot people. Lock them in tiny boxes for years ("Jaynestown," 1007). The second option is to use *fear of* violence, deprivation or incarceration. Place the tiny boxes of prisoners in the workplace for all to see ("Jaynestown"). In our world, officials lock people in slightly bigger boxes and take tourists to Alcatraz to show the boxes off. If they won't take tours, other types of power-brokers broadcast prison images into everyone's living room on cop shows from Hollywood or news shows direct from Guantanamo Bay. Out of fear, people behave.

[17] But a more effective mode of state control is the third one, hegemony—pretty stories that convince the oppressed that the situation is natural, inevitable, ordained by God or even good for them. It works because people can sometimes be convinced they are incapable of living well in freedom. Another hegemonic ruse is to convince people who are not free that they are free, "really." Ironically, the imposition of control in the name of fictive freedom works all too well. In the post-9/11 era, the Bush Administration has increased limits on freedom of movement and freedom of speech, all in the name of preserving our "freedom," and it's all in a day's hegemonic work.[1]

[18] Although it is never named as such, the characters in *Firefly/Serenity* are acutely aware of hegemony. As Simon tells Zoe, "history is programmed by the winners" (*Firefly* DVD "Deleted Scenes")." As if continuing the conversation, Mal adds in the film that "half of writing history is hiding the truth." And Mr. Universe tells the crew at length, "there is no *news*. There's the truth of the signal—what I see; and there's the puppet theater the parliament jesters foist on a somnambulant public." In fact, slogans about "the signal" have developed from being part of the film's advertising to become an essential part of fan interaction and in-

group understanding, enabling face-to-face and internet discussion of hegemony among fans without conscious awareness of the social science version of (and term for) the concept.

[19] Ever since the first primitive king of the first little city-state proclaimed himself descended from the gods, all states have used hegemony to control their citizens. Some get more creative with the facts than others. *Serenity* opens with an exposé of Alliance hegemony, as River's sweet lady teacher tells her pupils about the beneficent Alliance, and the uncivilized rebels—unworthy of self-determination—who fought against it. She tells her pupils:

> Earth-That-Was could no longer sustain our numbers, we were so many. We found a new solar system, dozens of planets, and hundreds of moons. Each one terraformed—a process taking decades—to support human life. To be the new earths. The central planets formed the Alliance. Ruled by an interplanetary parliament, the Alliance was a beacon of civilization. The savage outer planets were not so enlightened, and refused Alliance control. The war was devastating. But the Alliance victory over the Independents ensured a safer universe. And now everyone can enjoy the comfort and enlightenment of true civilization.

[20] Not only is history programmed by the winners, but so are the children. At this point the film abruptly cuts from River's schoolroom memory-dream to River as captive in an Alliance torture chamber.[2] The stage is set: the theme of *Serenity* is a battle with hegemonic disinformation, and again, folks, *it's about power*.

[21] Like all Westerns, *Firefly* and *Serenity* take place on a frontier. This word means something very specific in anthropology: best described in Bodley's anthropological classic, *Victims of Progress*. Negative reciprocity peaks in frontier situations: the lawlessness of the frontier is found worldwide to be committed primarily by the "civilizers" against "uncivilized" peasants, colonists and indigenous peoples. The Serenityverse has no space aliens—no indigenous peoples of distant planets. Human colonists take their place—as backwoods farmers, miners, whores, indentured slaves, survivors of The War for Unification; they become the Alliance's uncivilized Other.

[22] That the violence of the civilizers is more lethal than that of the uncivilized is demonstrated in the *Firefly* episode "Shindig" (1004) where petty pirates raise some bruises in bar room brawls, but their "civilized superiors" engage in sword duels *to the death*. This one-on-one barbarity of the civilizers serves to foreshadow the massacres in *Serenity*, as Alliance troops under The Operative kill everyone in the Serenity crew's system of moral economy who might offer the fugitives aid. Such state-

sponsored violence is familiar to Native Americanists, or to those who advocate on behalf of indigenous peoples in the non-fictitional world, from the wholesale slaughter of the Conquistadores to the present "removal" of Indigenous peoples in South America, Asia and Africa (Bodley 1999; and see Curry, this issue, and Rabb and Richardson 2008[RG1]).

[23] Conquered people are hungry people. Half the population of *our* world live in poverty. Twenty percent do not have safe drinking water. Millions have died from famines in the past decade, nearly all of these being in areas of Africa and Asia that have never recovered from their experiences as European colonial frontiers (Rossi 2003). A major focus of the Scott-inspired *American Anthropologist* articles is "food security," a major focus of plotlines in *Firefly* as well. Picture Kaylee savoring that strawberry—Whedon's way of showing us she doesn't get many ("Serenity," 1001), or Simon's birthday cake made of protein powder because they had no flour ("Out of Gas," 1008). Recall Mal, in *Serenity*, when he leaves a man to the Reavers rather than jettison a stolen payroll, as he reminds Zoe, "I got bits fallin' off my ship, I got a crew ain't been paid, and oh, yeah, a powerful need to eat some time this month."

[24] The heart of Whedon's space ship is not the bridge; it's the dinner table. "In this way the cold ambiance of space acquires a familiar heat" (Maio 2008). Mal and the crew are a metaphor for the hungry of our world. Compressed protein bars may be as valuable as gold ("Serenity," 1001), but they don't offer food security because they are produced elsewhere; they are not created or controlled by those who eat them. A herd of black market cattle may lead to food security because they can breed new cattle for their hungry owners ("Shindig," 1004; "Safe," 1005). However well-meaning, most charity creates dependence—it can only empower when it endows *control* over food sources, when it provides food security (Heifer International 2007).

[25] As anthropological economist Marshall Sahlins made clear in *Stone Age Economics* (1972), until their conquest by colonial powers, primitive peoples have had a remarkable ability to feed themselves. Surprisingly, it is the most primitive people in the most remote parts of the globe—those lucky few, still largely unaffected by globalization—that have the greatest food security (Sivaramakrishnan 2005, Robbins 2005). Hunter-gatherers had excellent nutritional status, and the life expectancy of egalitarian foragers and tribal horticulturists (all of whom controlled their own food supplies) was longer than the life expectancy of the lower classes of technologically advanced agricultural states (whose food is controlled by exploitive upper classes). The assertion by Independents in the outer worlds of the Serenityverse that they don't need the "benefits" of Alliance civilization is proven true by comparative anthropology, *if* the outer planets can achieve food security.

[26] In our modern world, food security requires more than control of land and the means of production. It requires military might to repel invaders. The universe inhabited by Serenity's crew is a post-colonial world in which the peripheral losers of the War for Independence suffer the consequences of Alliance control from the outside. It parallel's our own world's division into mighty "have" and weak "have-not" nations. Anthropologists call the haves "core" and the have-nots "peripheral" nations; in his mirror of our modern world, Whedon gives us "core" and "peripheral" planets.

[27] In our world, as well as Serenity's, the core is the seat of social and economic power (that word again). The core is the site of luxury, privilege and approved knowledge. The core is the site of consumption, while production of goods and extraction of resources take place in the periphery. The workers in peripheral regions (like the workers on Whedon's outer planets) consume shoddy goods, make do with what they can build and grow for themselves out of scant resources, and often live and die without sufficient nutrition or essential medical care.

[28] One of the most difficult tasks in any Intro Cultural Anthropology course is to demonstrate to students that the people of the periphery are not poor because of laziness or lack of natural endowment; they are poor because the core employs military might and hegemony to control the periphery for its benefit. The core uses the global economy to extract cheap labor and valuable resources from the periphery for consumption in the core (Robbins 2005). In other words, the global economy was created *by* the core, *for* the core, just as the core's Blue Sun Corporation seems to have its blue hands into everything in the Serenityverse.

[29] In *Firefly* we are taken to the terraformed satellite Canton ("Jaynestown," 1007). It is mined for mud used in common pots and space age ceramics. The Mudders live in squalor. Draconian overseers lock miscreants in tiny boxes which cause their bodies to wither in almost living mummification. The workers confine themselves to dissent through song and strong drink, but mostly, they just mine mud. Profits go to the overseers. Profits go to the middlemen. Profits go to the manufacturing business entities that make finished goods. No doubt profits go to retailers. The point is that profits do not go to the Mudders who mine the mud. It is the situation of our planet's Third World in a nutshell.

[30] Most Americans know the term Third World. But few understand that in order for there to be a Third World, there must be a First and a Second. The term was coined to show the interconnectedness of economic cause and effect on "worlds" inhabiting our single planet. The First World is comprised of the powerful, prosperous, capitalist nations such as America and Great Britain. The Second is the powerful Communist (or formerly Communist) nations. The Soviets built their military and industrial might on the extraction of raw materials and cheap labor from places they called "satellites," the conquered areas of Siberia, Eastern Europe, and the many Stans (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, etc.) of central Asia. Sometimes the situation is complex; even though it continues to function (temporarily) as a Third World nation in relation to the First World, China has rapidly gained the highest Second World status, in part because it now exploits labor and resources in Mongolia, Tibet and parts of Southeast Asia.

[31] As First World leader, the United States dominates markets in South and Central America and holds military sway in dependent sweatshop nations such as the Philippines. Meanwhile, England retains neocolonial economic domination in many of its former colonies; for example, British corporations continue to exploit workers and natural resources in India, despite India having achieved political independence more than half a century ago. Japan holds economic power over much of

the Pacific, and the First World nations of mainland Europe have economic and military domination over former colonies in much of Africa, bits of Asia and the Middle East. A Fourth World is situated in the exploited minority areas of First and Second World nations, where conquered tribal peoples, agrarian regions and urban slums inhabited by underclass ethnic groups are denied the opportunities shared by dominant core elites. The First and Second World are the core; the Third and Fourth are the periphery. Whedon quite accurately reflects current global power structures by having China's power grow to the point that it and the U.S. survive into his distopian future to form the core Alliance.

[32] Core peoples have a real attitude when it comes to peripherals. Labeled "uncivilized," in our world, just as they are in *Serenity*, the peripherals of our world have been subjected to genocide, forced religious conversion, the outlawing of extended family support systems, various forms of conscripted labor, mass rape, loss of land, environmental degradation and systematic extraction of resources for the benefit of the core (Bodley 1999, Robbins 2005, Scott 1998, Sivaramakrishnan 2005). It is these practices, beyond all doubt, that are most responsible for Third World poverty, as I keep reminding my students and the non-anthropologist reader. Hunter-gatherers and tribal horticulturists had no trouble feeding themselves until colonial powers took over their economies for their own benefit (Sahlins 1972).

[33] The extraction of resources by underpaid peripherals is accomplished under specific conditions. In our world, "industrial diseases" strike workers because of unsafe, toxic, mutagenic and carcinogenic working conditions. For example, in 2002 World Watch Institute was able to document 300,000 children in Columbia, some as young as five, working in mines and suffering from resulting lung diseases (Starke 2004). It is a typical Third World situation. Social scientists have also noted "environmental racism." It is so named because the exploited classes in harm's way of environmental degradation are usually a different color, height of cheekbone or ethnicity than those who benefit from the exploitation. For example, in the United States we only mine uranium on Indian reservations. There is plenty uranium on land inhabited by other ethnicities, but since uranium mining leaves radioactive waste in its wake, only America's Fourth World natives are subjected to the risks (Churchill & LaDuke 1992). The Chinese place their most polluting industries in Tibet, and the Soviet Union built unsafe manufacturing and nuclear power plants in subjugated Eastern European satellites, while power lines bypassed the locals and brought the energy generated from the unsafe facilities into Russia itself (Harper 2005). The notorious plant in Chernobyl, Ukraine was one of these.

[34] Western Europe and America's most dangerous industries used to be located in Fourth World neighborhoods of devalued minorities and immigrants, within each nation itself:[3] now most factories have been shipped—along with their negative impacts—to the Third World (Robbins 2005). *Firefly* shows us environmental racism in "The Train Job" (1002),

where an entire planet's population suffers from a debilitating industrial disease brought from their underground mines. Mal Reynolds returns stolen medicines to these victims, while the Blue Hand operatives of the Alliance/Blue Sun cadre refuse to investigate anything so trivial as a peripheral planet's supply of medication.

[35] When Mal first discovers River cryogenically suspended in a cargo crate, his immediate assumption is that Simon is transporting her for sale ("Serenity," 1001). When Mal meets slavers in a pool hall, he makes a moral point of stealing their money ("Shindig," 1004). When local warlord Rance Burgess treats the whores on the edge of his town as if they were his property, Mal risks life and crew to protect them ("Heart of Gold," 1013). When the citizens of a small moon make Mal the gift of a wife in return for services rendered, he sets her free with a good talking-to on the rights of woman, "if someone ever tries to kill you, you try to kill 'em right back." Meanwhile Jayne offers his favorite gun to Mal in trade for her ("Our Mrs. Reynolds," 1006). As Lackey (2004) points out, even Inara is only one step away from becoming a sex slave, should she make the mistake of trusting the wrong client on a peripheral planet where the Guild's power cannot reach her ("Shindig"). Obviously, slavery is no small part of the political economy of Whedon's future dystopia.

[36] Yet based on the responses of my anthropology students when I raise global issues, I guess that the average viewer would wonder why Whedon revives a practice in his future world when (they assume) it has been virtually eradicated from our own. In fact, the belief that slavery ended with the American Civil War is one of the hegemonic deceptions we live by: widespread ignorance about slavery is the primary shield of modern slavers. The actual number of people bought and sold and trafficked from place to place against their wills today is estimated to be higher now than it ever has been in human history. In Asia and the Pacific alone it is estimated that 30 million women and children have been sold into brothels in the past three decades, and no nation in the world is free of slavery (Starke 2004). Millions work in sweatshops, on plantations and in mines, but just as depicted in *Firefly*, most human trafficking in our world involves the sex trade: slavery, exploitation and recurring rape of peripheral women and children by sex tourists from the core.

[37] I find the most amazing thing about Whedon's future 'verse to be the fact that *Firefly* and *Serenity* were created by, and are loved by, citizens of that same power core. The 'verse's heroes represent the periphery, the very people that our own core nation and corporations exploit. Metaphorically, *we* are the core planets, *we* are the Alliance, and many of us work—with varying degrees of reluctance—for equivalents of the Blue Sun Corporation. Yet the hearts of the fans—Browncoats, as they call themselves after the losing Independent Army in the 'verse—fly with the rebels of the periphery. Many fans no longer believe in the old hegemonic deceptions and are struggling to re-conceptualize global power relations. This is evident from observation of internet fan discussion threads centering on real world news events, and use of the

Firefly/Serenity term "the signal," to mean something very close to the social science concept of hegemonic transcripts (cf. fireflyfans.net, Can't Stop the Serenity).

[38] With all the suffering that the powerful inflict on the oppressed in the world around us, what is a Browncoat to do? It appears that we could use some expansion of moral economy and basic "human decency" in the Serenityverse, as well as in our own world. James Scott's studies (as well as Whedon's works) make some suggestions. Both share striking similarities. Scott is perhaps best known for his descriptions of two things: "weapons of the weak" and "hidden transcripts."

[39] Weapons of the weak are the small, everyday forms of resistance that become a creative tradition in the cultures of the oppressed. Weapons of the weak violate the norms set by oppressors, but are often tolerated because they offer no serious threat (until they reach a certain volume and reveal hidden transcripts). For example in *Firefly*, the Mudders of Canton have barely enough to keep them alive, but they are permitted to sing rebellious songs about the Robin Hood folk hero Jayne ("Jaynestown," 1007). Does it change anything essential? No. It is only resistance, not revolt.

[40] This lack of revolt in *Firefly* is the topic of Lackey's "Serenity and Bobby McGee: Freedom and the Illusion of Freedom in Joss Whedon's *Firefly*." In fact, she accuses the crew of all-out collusion with the oppressor. Wait a minute—collusion with the Alliance? Our favorite space pirates? Well, yes. As Lackey points out, dictators need smugglers and Robin Hoods to keep the masses going when the official rules would let them starve. Workers do all the work; one can't let the workers all die. Real hope might give them the confidence to revolt and topple their oppressors, but false hope might keep them in line all their lives. The likes of Mal Reynolds provide the workers with life-sustaining goods, as well as false hopes. Lackey asserts that this is why Serenity is allowed to "fly below the radar," along with an extensive network of thieves and smugglers who supply the periphery with essential goods.

[41] Similarly, Scott points out that in our own world, the modern Soviet state was propped up by the Russian Mafia. It supplied goods to needy citizens that the national economy could not. In the same way, its Sicilian predecessor supplied parts of Italy through lean times. Notably, a revitalized Russian Mafia today supplies all of Eastern Europe with luxuries, necessities and vices in the new hunger-driven capitalist era (Scott 1998). Even in America, it's not unusual to find small Midwestern farming communities near the Canadian border that give credit to local Prohibition-era "rum runners" for the town's economic survival through the Great Depression. Crime not only pays; it saves lives.

[42] Mal Reynolds was a revolutionary once, but the revolution was lost in Serenity Valley. Throughout *Firefly*, he only uses weapons of the weak; he practices only resistance, not revolt. The transition back to revolt is made in *Serenity*, when he directly confronts the Alliance. It is not guns and thievery that can bring the Alliance down: it is the exposure of what Scott and his intellectual descendants call the hidden transcript.[4] The hidden transcript is comprised of the small unspoken truths known to oppressed locals on the one hand, and the high hegemonic falsehoods which prop power elites, on the other.

[43] In the Serenityverse, the key to power is the secret of the Reavers. These crazed gangs of mass-murderers are very real to those who have survived their attacks or found the remains of their victims. But they are a debated reality to everyone else, a reality utterly denied by Alliance hegemony. The key is Miranda—the Alliance/Blue Sun experimentation on unknowing citizens that killed millions and turned thousands of others into Reavers. Irrefutable information about Reaver origins—in the form of an Alliance investigative team recording—is the crew's most powerful weapon.

[44] The moment Mal grasps this, we reach the turning point in the *Firefly/Serenity* narrative.[5] He addresses his crew:

> someone has to speak for these people . . . 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. I do not hold to that. So no more running. I aim to misbehave, (*Serenity*).

[45] In an act paralleling the final empowerment of potential Slayers in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Whedon has the crew of Serenity empower the willing and unwilling alike with key knowledge: Miranda. Do the actions of the Serenity crew bring down the Alliance over night? No. Knowledge-based solutions, unlike violence or technology, *usually* take time, although not always as much as one might assume.

[46] Some fans express skepticism that the news of Miranda is going to do much to change power relations in the 'verse. Scott's studies indicate otherwise. He discusses the phenomenal power of hidden transcripts to break hegemonic power in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990). I'll briefly mention one of the more spectacular of his many cases, the end of Ceauşescu's dictatorship in Romania. Ceauşescu's schemes razed entire villages for forced resettlement in industrial work camps, instituting manufacturing policies responsible for one of the worst industrial disasters since Chernobyl (Harper 2005). He forbade birth control, forcing couples to have children they could not support under his economic policies, filling orphanages with starving babies without adequate medical care ("certain schemes to improve the human condition," yet again). Ceauşescu accomplished his social engineering through total control of media and state police. In 1989 the dictator scheduled yet another of his media spectacles at which thousands were forcibly assembled to cheer another of his state-policy speeches, broadcast nationwide. It was supposed to be a glorious celebration of state power; instead, the crowds booed. Angry shouts heard via mass media by millions of oppressed citizens suddenly let every frightened, isolated person in the nation know that they were not alone, that Ceauşescu was the hated enemy of millions, that they had millions of allies against him. "The image of Ceausescu's uncomprehending expression as the crowds began to boo him remains one of the defining moments of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe" (wikipedia 2007). Within days media broadcasts displayed his beheaded corpse; it was reality, not fiction. The 1988 Romanian Revolution had begun and ended in less than a week, a revolution triggered simply by the broadcast sound of jeering crowds (Scott 1990).

[47] If, as in Romania, anger for wrongs accumulated over many years smoldered silently out in the peripheral planets . . . If, as the crew reminds one another in *Serenity*, millions had settled and died at Miranda, many more millions would be wondering in grieving silence over the fate of their missing friends and family . . . Then the Serenity crew's Miranda "signal" had the potential to motivate mass actions that would surely modify the Alliance power base, possibly enough to bring down the Alliance entirely. The population of the Serenityverse could unite into a new Browncoat counter-Alliance. That movement could be particularly potent if they welcomed disillusioned former Alliance pawns like The Operative (the way Buffy converted rogue demons to her cause) There could finally be hope beyond false hope in the Serenityverse. It is an anthropological fact: states are inherently unstable. The difficulty in the Serenityverse as well as our own world is not in overthrowing problematic regimes; the difficulty lies in replacing them with something better.

[48] Threats to hegemony—the revelation of hidden state transcripts, as well as resistance transcripts—can be the greatest threat of all to an overextended state, increasingly expending resources on an increasingly reluctant periphery. Sometimes you can "stop the signal"—the false signal of the oppressor—and replace it with your own. Sometimes an oppressor "can't stop the signal" of rising public awareness and revolt.

[49] Lackey raised the question of unwitting collaboration with the oppressor displayed by the crew in *Firefly*. Is Whedon merely doing the same? Is he just writing a "big damn hero" tale to make us feel better about our powerlessness, like "The Ballad of Jayne" sung by the helpless Mudders? Do his stories merely make us feel better while we passively allow workforce downsizing, corporate monopolization and job exportation to spread deprivation in the core, while sweat shopping and human trafficking expand so far in the periphery that they finally become the norm in the core as well? Or are the social metaphors of *Firefly* and *Serenity* going to make a real difference, in the *real* world? It is certainly Whedon's intent to do more. As he explains the film in *Serenity: The Official Visual Companion*, "the idea was to say people can make a difference, they can show the wrongs that are being done, they can speak out against them and make people aware of them. They can even create giant scandals. Sometimes they can topple governments; sometimes they can't make a dent. The point is always that the truth is more important than the power structure" (Whedon 35-36). I might add as a social scientist that the might of the power structure ought always to be taken into consideration.

[50] In some small ways, "a difference" is already apparent. Inspired by Whedon's vision of empowered action, fans have organized into local social groups across the United States and in many countries, taking for themselves the name of Browncoats, after the Independence fighters which Mal and Zoe so proudly represent. Their "Can't Stop the Signal" campaign inspired by the series' resistance values got the canceled TV show made into a major motion picture. Through a technique called "guerilla marketing" wherein active fans promote sales through globally coordinated local action, they have sold a lot of DVDs of their favorite heroic TV series and film. Though it continues to be contested and negotiated (Cochran 2008), this is a genuine, innovative democratization of power relations between media producers and media consumers. As the Browncoats say, "we've done the impossible, and that makes us mighty."

[51] Enjoying the sense of freedom and power gained in the "Can't Stop the Signal" campaign, Browncoats are expanding into a new era with "Can't Stop the Serenity." Every year on Joss Whedon's birth-weekend, Browncoats beg, borrow or steal movie theaters to show the film (sometimes accompanied by the series) in order to raise funds for the international human rights organization Equality Now.

[52] Equality Now's agenda is to expand basic human rights to women and girls in every nation, core and periphery alike. They do this by organizing resource and information-sharing among local, independent women's rights organizations in many nations. With headquarters in New York, Nairobi and now London, they support local, culturally appropriate solutions rather than fostering more imposition on peripheral nations by self-proclaimed "civilizers." They attack human rights abuses through education of international and multicultural publics. They file "friend of the court" briefs in human rights cases to educate jurors and judges where covers based on common ignorance might otherwise allow slave traffickers, batterers, killers and other "big bads" to get away with their crimes. It is all based on the highly conscious exposure of hidden transcripts and the weakening of hegemony:

> There are two ways to fight a battle like ours. One is to whisper in the ears of the masses, try subtly and gradually to change the gender expectations and mythic structures of our culture. That's me. The other is to step up and confront the thousands of atrocities that are taking place around the world on an immediate, one-on-one basis. That's a great deal harder, and that's Equality Now. It's not about politics: it's about basic human decency.
>
> Joss Whedon, *Can't Stop the Serenity*[6]

[53] Note that Whedon refers to "a battle like *ours.*" He assumes many fans share his egalitarian values. He hopes that by breaking hegemonic silence to educate them about the real world issues behind his metaphors, fans will respond with action. In 2007 "Can't Stop the Serenity" raised over $114,000 for Equality Now, nearly double the amount raised in 2006 (Can't Stop the Serenity). Whedon stands among such greats as Jonathan Swift and H.G. Wells for skillful use of science fiction metaphor to raise awareness of social issues. But the Whedon-Browncoat-Equality Now relationship takes science fiction to a whole new level: it makes sci-fi/fantasy a small, yet measurable locus of social action and social change with the potential for a whole lot more. Resistance or revolt? I'd call it a little of both: quiet, like most resistance, yet focused on direct exposure of hidden transcripts and aimed at genuine change in power relations like true revolution.

Notes

[1] For a discussion of some of the hegemonic myths America lives by, as well as the consequences, see Slotkin (1998) and Hughes (2004). For a discussion of Whedon's exposure of hegemonic myths in *BtVS*, see Bussolini (2005).

[2]For a discussion of Whedon's use of multiple layers of contradictory narrative inserted into the structure of the film at this point to induce the viewer to question the "truths" being presented, see Wilcox' "'I Do Not Hold to That': Joss Whedon and Original Sin."

[3] The subject of environmental racism always calls to mind my Aunt Ruth exclaiming, "look, this book's got a story about the day your grampa's street blew up!" while browsing through a bookstore in my hometown of Cleveland, Ohio. Grampa's home in a poor immigrant neighborhood was inconveniently close to a paint factory that had been dumping experimental chemical mixes into the sewers for years. One day, the year I was born, it just blew. Most of the deaths occurred under a railroad bridge where cars were squashed between the concrete slabs of the airborne roadway beneath them and the bridge above. Cleveland was also home to the infamous "burning river" which snakes through the factory district and neighborhoods of the working poor. Perhaps the worst event was the East Ohio Gas Company Fire in which an explosion in underground natural gas pipes instantly incinerated entire city blocks. In the Whedonverse, Cleveland is known as the "other" Hellmouth. In the real world, the industrial accidents of the Fourth World sectors of my home town are so numerous that an enterprising historian, John Stark Bellamy II, has been compiling them into a popular "true crime and disaster" book series, now on volume 6, with no end in sight.

[4] Scott used "hidden transcripts" to mean the shared meanings and secrets of the oppressed, hidden from the state. Greenhouse (2005) builds on his theories and points out that the hidden transcripts of the state play an equal or greater role in the power-play. While the crew of Serenity reveals the hidden transcript of horrific state secrets associated with Miranda, they do so in order to express *their* hidden transcript—that the Alliance oppresses its peripheral citizens and should be fought—thus breaking through both sides of mutual concealment to their advantage.

[5]For a discussion of other aspects relating to this speech and the meaning of Mal Reynold's heroism in making it, and leading the crew to carry out his plan to speak on behalf of the weak against the powerful, see David McGill's "I Aim to Misbehave: Masculinities in the 'Verse."

[6] Whedon's address to fans was in response to a human rights abuse that made the rounds, even in the mainstream media (which, as part of their hegemonic positioning, usually ignore such things). In the news story, a young Iraqi woman had fallen in love with a member of a rival religious sect and was subsequently killed by her own family to preserve family honor. Her utterly modern brothers recorded the killing and proudly sent the images out on their cell phones. Such "honor killings" are a tradition in many parts of our world. Four hundred sixty-one such killings are known to have taken place in Pakistan in 2002 alone (Starke 2004).

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