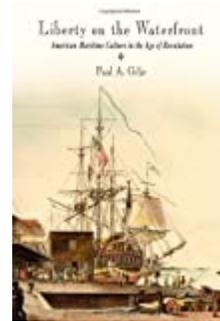




**Paul Gilje.** *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. xiv + 344 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3756-6.



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**Published on** H-Atlantic (November, 2005)

## Workers of the Waterfront, Rebel!

In *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution*, historian Paul Gilje offers a much-needed assessment of the role that maritime workers played in the early years of the American Republic and the ambivalent nature that the ideology of liberty played in the lives of maritime workers. As Gilje asserts, “Sometimes Jack Tar thought about an immediate liberty; at other times he thought about larger issues connected to the revolution; most times he had several ideas of liberty swimming through his head simultaneously. Whatever definitions of liberty appeared on the waterfront, the maritime world’s understanding of liberty helped to shape America” (p. 99). This wide-ranging study, based on an impressive collection of primary and secondary sources, focuses chiefly on the century between 1750 and 1850 and is an important contribution to American maritime history and to our understanding of the social history of the colonial era.

Gilje is a skilled writer who uses his sources well. We are treated to first-hand accounts that support the author’s thesis that maritime workers—sailors, longshore-

men, and others—consciously and assiduously adopted and used the rhetoric of the American Revolution to assert their own rights. While serving in the vanguard of America’s fight for independence, either as waterfront rioters or as sacrificial lambs in hulking British prison ships, maritime workers also challenged traditional notions of hierarchy, deference, and social comportment. Gilje represents Jack Tar’s world as a rough and egalitarian counterculture, where knowledge of the sea and shiphandling skills mattered above all else. At the same time, Jack Tar’s ideals of liberty, based on freedom of action and immediate gratification, were in direct contrast to the acquisitive middle-class virtues being espoused in early national America.

Gilje shows how maritime work in early America was itself a study in contrasts, simultaneously offering unfettered liberty and a life akin to slavery. Ironically, sailors saw in capricious shipboard treatment an appreciation for their own particular, and peculiar, brand of liberty, one that allowed a sailor to affirm his identity as a “free man” by willfully resisting authority figures and flout-

ing contemporary conventions. Reveling in his deviancy, Jack Tar stood as an embodiment of, and challenge to, the promises of the American Revolution.

Gilje is at his best when he analyzes the attachment of waterfront workers to the American Revolution. While it is a well-known fact that maritime workers were at the heart of the political upheaval accompanying the move towards independence, Gilje asserts that earlier hagiographic treatments—which attributed to maritime workers the highest of patriotic ideals—are misleading and that their motivations and loyalty to the greater cause were often ambiguous. Indeed, Jack Tar’s penchant for pursuing his own self-interest (economic and otherwise)—a penchant that evades the standard ideological boxes so favored by many historians—was at the heart of his often fleeting commitment to the cause of the nation. Many on the waterfront were less concerned with the ideals of the Revolution, and more concerned with survival; only when the two dovetailed were maritime workers wholeheartedly committed to the cause of the Revolution.

During the early national period, politicians of all stripes tried to lay claim to Jack Tar in the public discourse; when quarrels with France and Great Britain arose in the 1790s, Federalists and Republicans elevated the maritime worker as the ideal American, a “symbol of the new republic,” a “common man who reflected national values,” and sought to capture his allegiance (p. 175). Showing their political savvy, sailors and sundry other waterfront workers played this game astutely, subscribing to whichever party offered the best hopes of personal gain. As sailors continued to pursue their own varied agendas, their political motivations consistently “combined pragmatism and patriotism” (p. 169). And even if there were those among them who were committed to the ideals of the Revolution, “economic and social reality kept many on the waterfront clinging to their own peculiar notions of liberty” (p. 234).

Gilje’s work is more than just an examination of maritime culture in the Age of Revolution. It is also an

appraisal of society’s reaction to this world. Maritime workers’ understanding of liberty, a view so antithetical to the rest of society, occasioned a variety of responses. Evangelicals saw maritime workers as “proper objects of Christian compassion” and built a network of organizations to protect Jack Tar from landlords, brothels, and grog shop owners (p. 195). They were unsuccessful. When reformers turned their attention to shipboard conditions, conditions that Jack deplored (such as the ritual flogging—which Melville saw as a sign that the “Revolution was in vain; that the Declaration of Independence was fraud,” p.233) and abuses of power (that were “un-American and not fit for a republic that cherished liberty,” p. 216), they were more successful. Again, Gilje shows that maritime workers were astute actors who took advantage of situations when they could manipulate them to their advantage.

Gilje does state that many of the ideas and ideals of the Age of Revolution eventually worked their way into the fo’c’sle, allowing common seamen to challenge the dictatorship of the quarterdeck. But his lack of economic and social mobility left Jack Tar powerless in the face of the forces of the standing order. Unable to triumph over these conditions, he made the best of his world, employing the logic and rhetoric of the Age of Revolution, to claim for himself a place in American society. Gilje, then, ascribes to maritime workers a level of political sophistication and agency that few had previously imagined.

*Liberty on the Waterfront* is an important work. Building on the work of Marcus Rediker, Jeff Bolster, Peter Linebaugh, and Jesse Lemisch, it is a valuable addition to the growing literature on maritime workers in the early republic. Focusing on both naval and merchant fleets, on society afloat and ashore (including “the maid left behind”), and on literature as well as first-person accounts, it is a scholarly treatment of a specific topic that manages to steer clear of an overly myopic attention to detail. This work is sure to become the standard treatment of American maritime culture in the Age of Revolution.

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**Citation:** Timothy G. Lynch. Review of Gilje, Paul, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution*. H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. November, 2005.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10931>

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