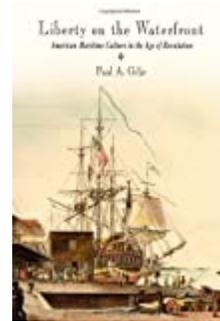




**Paul Gilje.** *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. xiv + 344 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3756-6.



**Reviewed by** Sean Cadigan (History Department, Memorial University of Newfoundland)

**Published on** H-SHEAR (January, 2006)

## Senses of Liberty

The social history of seafaring in the Anglo-American world tends to place seafarers in the vanguard of a plain-dealing, rough-and-ready, almost proletarian egalitarianism. Paul Gilje clearly challenges such tendencies in *Liberty on the Waterfront*, a work of considerable depth. He provides a fine study of the culture of American seafarers from the 1760s to the 1840s. A more theoretical concern with seafarers' popular conception of liberty runs as a strong undercurrent in Gilje's work. Gilje's understanding of popular liberty demands a reevaluation of the nature of seafaring and its relation to emerging bourgeois culture in the American Republic. *Liberty on the Waterfront* advances an essentially conservative argument about the nature of seafarers' views, which does not acknowledge the potentially radical nature of insisting on the right to pursue a sensual, personal liberty in the context of the emerging legal regimes of labor markets in America.

Relying on printed reminiscences, fictional accounts, and related contemporary periodicals, Gilje demonstrates a fine appreciation for good anecdotes in his research. He uses them to develop a lively analysis of

the seafarers' world throughout America's revolutionary age. The book opens with spicy details about seafarers' experiences in the drinking establishments, brothels, and boarding houses of American ports' waterfront districts. From there, readers follow seafarers aboard their vessels, and learn about the wages, shares, and venture rights that composed their pay for the highly dangerous, usually monotonous, and often brutally regulated workplaces of vessels at sea. Gilje briefly addresses aspects of seafaring that other works have made well known, such as the polyglot nature of crew composition, the youth of seafarers, and the particular experience of black seafarers.

Gilje often uses the familiar trope of "Jack Tar" to mean seafarers in general, but his study places seafarers within the milieu of people living and working on the waterfront. He does not populate *Liberty on the Waterfront* with stereotypically reckless and feckless Jacks. Gilje demonstrates that seafarers used an exaggerated and lusty masculinity ashore as a counterpoint to the homosocial world of the ship at sea, rejecting other works that see the seafarers' world as a homosexual one due

to their lack of evidence. While this exaggerated masculinity was important to seafarers, Gilje argues that they tended to have a complicated but shifting “view of women including the sacred mother, beloved sister, innocent daughter, loyal sweetheart or wife, playful Mol, exploitive harlot, and exotic native” (p. 35). Although Gilje briefly considers the experience ashore of the women involved in seafarers’ lives, this book is resolutely about men’s observations and fantasies, which informed seafarers’ consciousness of themselves.

Liberty, not licentiousness, lies at the heart of Gilje’s understanding of seafarers’ consciousness of themselves. As the title of chapter 3, “A Sailor Ever Loves to Be in Motion,” suggests, Gilje argues that the freedom to choose defined seafarers’ sense of liberty. There is a difference in loving to be in motion and actually being in motion. In the case of seafarers’ relationships with women, their masculine fantasies allowed men apparently to change their relationships at will, although seafarers often had long-lasting relationships with wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, and/or lovers upon which they depended. Similarly, men found no real liberty at sea. Rather, they found ships to be cramped and confining, regulated by the technical requirements and dangers of sailing or combat at sea, governed by hierarchical authority, and often marked by seafarers’ conflicts with each other. Nonetheless, seafarers appreciated the voyage as a metaphor for freedom from the bonds of landward society.

While deep-sea voyages are an important element in the world and culture of the seafarers Gilje studies, he acknowledges that seafarers spent a good deal of time in shorter coastal shipping. Gilje’s work is also commendable because he studies the seafarers of merchant shipping as part of the wider maritime world of fishing, whaling, and naval service. While following seafarers ashore and afloat is a surprisingly innovative approach in a literature that otherwise tends to focus on Jack either at sea or in port, by doing so Gilje returns to the original focus of Jesse Lemisch’s pioneering work on the relationship between seafarers’ experiences and revolutionary politics.[1] However, while Lemisch’s work has partially inspired other historians such as Marcus Rediker to consider seafarers as workers with emerging proletarian consciousness, Gilje does not.[2] Instead, he argues clearly that “sailors were not a proletariat in the making, nor were they a peculiar brand of patriot.” Rather than emerging proletarians, seafarers “were a numerous and diverse body of people who shared a common identity.” In the first instance, they were a “great variety of men”

who happened to comprise only in the second instance “the waterfront and shipboard workforce” of the revolutionary age (p. 6).

Liberty, for Gilje, was at the core of seafarers’ common identity. However, liberty was at least as individualistic or divisive as it was collective or solidifying in the social experience of seafaring. Gilje describes liberty as essentially a sensual experience rather than a political commitment. While seafarers may occasionally have thought of liberty by referring to the “higher ideals of the age” of Revolution, according to Gilje, they often thought about “a more immediate and individual liberty” in which indulgence rather than equality was more the watchword (p. xii). Manliness had little to do with the sort of plain-dealing egalitarianism observed among eighteenth-century seafarers by scholars such as Rediker. Instead, as suggested by Gilje’s analysis, seafarers often pursued “personal interest over lofty ideals,” and “expressed a strident individualism” (pp. 175, 179). At a mundane level, seafarers gloried above all else in the personal freedom to “drink, curse, carouse, fight, spend money, and generally misbehave” while freed from the confines of the ship ashore (p. 6). At sea, seafarers might rebel against arbitrary or outrageous captains and mates. While such rebellions might occasion acts of solidarity among crew members, they were usually in defense of baser liberties, such as the right to some grog or ritualistic mischief. Seafarers did not threaten the basic prerogatives of the capitalist organization of shipping or state authority.

Even the apparent revolutionary zeal of many seafarers had more to do with their pursuit of self-interest rather than political ideals. Gilje argues that, as “the Sons of Neptune,” seafarers participated in protests such as the Stamp Act riots and the Knowles riot for three basic, intertwined reasons. First, rioting was another immediate sensual pleasure, filled with drink, boisterous abandon, and amusing mayhem quite apart from any ideological goals. Second, even when seafarers participated in revolutionary agitation with more long-term objectives, they had their own self-interest in mind. In particular, by rioting against specific concerns such as impressment, seafarers pursued an economic goal: “preserving the liberty to contract for their own labor” (p. 104). Third, sensuality and economic self-interest made seafarers susceptible to the radical critique of the hierarchical constraints of colonial American society. Seafarers were not so much interested in republicanism as they were in “a rough egalitarianism,” which would give them more latitude to pursue their own pleasures and interests (p. 105). Even service

in the revolutionary navy was no indicator of republicanism, as seafarers often switched sides. Sensual liberty might induce an American sailor to defect to the British if it would free him from the restraints of being a prisoner of war. While officers might have the resources to make escape possible, ordinary seamen did not. Almost always recaptured, such seamen attempted escape to enjoy a few hours or days of liberty rather than to rejoin the revolution. Seafarers consequently were ambivalent about revolutionary ideals, which were simply abstractions; they cared most about their “immediate liberty” (p. 129).

Gilje does not suggest that American seafarers were insincere republicans. Instead, he argues that, in the context of the new republic’s first armed conflicts, such as the War of 1812 and later conflict with France, “the people of the waterfront viewed themselves as at the center of the republican stage in the great drama to defend American liberty” (p. 162). Seafarers were fully conscious of the manner in which the importance of the new American navy to these conflicts well placed them to help define the nature of American liberty. The importance of the navy also made them “liberty’s” key defenders. The fight against impressment embodied their liberty as the sailor’s right: a commitment to free trade in the sale of their labor. Despite a proclivity for pursuing personal liberties by defecting to the other side when captured, should that prove convenient, American seafarers were generally exhibitionists in their patriotism. American prisoners of war, when not pursuing liberty by defection or escape, established “little republics” of self-government in prison. While such self-governments reflected collectivity, “they also expressed a strident individualism in the pursuit of the main chance” (p. 179). Imprisoned seafarers pursued opportunity in many ways, including education and trade.

Gilje argues that the lack of public outrage over British troops firing on Americans at Dartmoor prison in 1815 and American diplomats’ disregard for the affair, suggests that “the rest of the American public” was not so convinced about the importance of seafarers. Rather than directly defining liberty in the new republic, seafarers’ sensual liberties inspired its bourgeois redefinition in the reforms of the Second Great Awakening. Christian reformers in the ports of America took as their special mission the salvation of seafarers and their families from hard drink, lechery, profanity, improvidence, and rowdiness. Such reformers did not see themselves as trying to restrain seafarers, but rather as trying to free them from the bondage of ignorance and debasement; they fought

hard against officers’ right to use corporal punishment, especially the lash. Few seafarers were convinced. Gilje argues that seafarers might meet reformers with hostility, but more usually persisted in a culture that “revolved around values and practices and an understanding of liberty antithetical to evangelical goals” (p. 222). Middle-class reform did not prove to be the means by which seafarers and other waterfront people could rise above the larger structures of exploitation in their work and lives. Gilje suggests that “seamen did make efforts to take control of their own lives, but the harsh conditions of life and labor aboard ship and on the waterfront prevented such efforts from going very far. Economic and social reality kept many on the waterfront clinging to their own peculiar notions of liberty while trapped in a form of bondage” (p. 234).

Gilje appears to argue that, left to their own devices, and despite the apparent complexity of their concept of liberty, seafarers could not rise above the pursuit of sensuality. His discussion, in the epilogue, of seafarers’ likely reaction to Melville’s tale of Billy Budd’s fate, suggests that Gilje sees a fatalistic element in seafarers’ world view: authority was so all-encompassing aboard ships that all one might look forward to were the few pleasures of sensual liberty ashore. Bourgeois adventurers and writers, such as Melville or Richard Dana, not seafarers, took up the political cause of seafarers’ rights. Based on their own experiences at sea, such authors wrote sympathetically about the plight of seafarers. Often open advocates for seafarers’ rights, these writers inspired popular interest in improving conditions for seafarers. Ironically, according to Gilje, this combination of middle-class literature and reformist impulse led to a more noble sense of political liberty among seafarers: “out of this interest in the sailor and the rise of a literature centered on Jack Tar, some common seamen began to demand the rights of man. In other words, the ideas of liberty that emerged from the Age of Revolution worked their way into the forecandle” (p. 245).

Gilje’s history presents a very different scenario from the seafaring culture that emerges from the forecandle in the works of historians such as Rediker and Jeffrey Bolster. Plain-dealing egalitarianism shaped by the manliness of skill and the collectivity of the ship gives way to the exaggerated masculinity of pleasure and excess, and the free-for-all pursuit of self-interest.[3] Gilje’s seafarers are accepting of the overall structures of racism associated with slavery. Nineteenth-century middle-class reformers, not eighteenth-century seafarers, are the ones who drew the comparisons between seafaring and slav-

ery. In the early nineteenth century, Gilje suggests, seafarers and dock workers might well have been in the forefront of trade union development and the use of the strike. However, class interest remained elusive as such union efforts foundered on the persistent ambiguity of sensual self-interest.

Considering the terrible suffering inflicted by Hurricane Katrina, and the even more horrifying inability of Republican America to help those afflicted by this tragedy, it is hard not to be attracted to any arguments about the essentially self-interested ideological dimensions of liberty there. Nonetheless, historians such as Rediker and Bolster have made compelling arguments for more collective and humanitarian traditions among seafarers, which remain alternative views to Gilje's work. More importantly, there are implications about seafarers' understanding of liberty, as suggested by Gilje, which deserve more thought. The literature on the history of the law of master and servant in America emphasizes the importance of its restriction on the freedom of contract, and the criminalization of breach of contract. Gilje suggests that middle-class reformers may have pursued "a certain calculating and self-serving rationale" in trying to make "a more compliant labor force" out of seafarers reformed into sober, hard-working citizens (p. 204). Further, reformers' attacks on the crimping practices of boarding houses, and the use of corporal punishment at sea, "reflected a middle-class understanding of liberty that emphasized free labor and the right of each individual to negotiate his own work contract" (pp. 207-208). Yet Gilje's own evidence suggests that such middle-class understandings of how the labor market should operate paled besides seafarers' persistent defense of their own liberty. This book implies that American seafarers were at the forefront of the ideological commitment to the free

market, a radical achievement if set against trends in American legal culture that scholars such as Karen Orren have termed a "belated feudalism." [4]

The determined pursuit of personal liberty by any group of working people comprised a significant challenge to the emerging legal regimes of labor market regulation in North America. Seafarers, as interpreted by Gilje, insisted on the right to be satisfied. These maritime workers demanded that society recognize that their material needs should be met according to their own five senses rather than to the needs of reformers or employers. The importance of such pursuits may only be appreciated sufficiently by placing seafarers in the more general context of work in America, both on land and water, which most of the literature on seafaring does not. Well written, provocative, and engaging, Paul Gilje's *Liberty on the Waterfront* challenges us to rethink the broader, popular meaning of liberty in America.

#### Notes

[1]. Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser., 25 (1968): pp. 371-407.

[2]. Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World 1700-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[3]. W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[4]. Karen Orren, *Belated Feudalism: Labor, the Law, and Liberal Development in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/>

**Citation:** Sean Cadigan. Review of Gilje, Paul, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. January, 2006.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11327>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).