Complex and contested processes of definition surrounded the currency of the liberty cap during the French Revolution. I argue for a dynamic picture of the ways in which the red “bonnet of liberty’s” meanings were selectively and polemically negotiated at different points in the Revolution, which takes account of both topical polemic and retrospective interpretative rationalizations. The liberty cap was not understood as some kind of stable or orthodox emblem for which there was an agreed rationale; as is shown here in detail, the opinions that were projected onto, and clustered around, the generic idea of the cap were not only multifarious but inherently in mutual tension. The complexity of the liberty cap’s currency during the Revolution are further investigated by considering its position within attitudes to the politicization of dress and the inconsistencies and uncertainties that run through these attitudes. What emerges emphatically is that one cannot separate consideration of the cap as dress from the range of emblematic meanings it was given as articulated across texts and imagery.