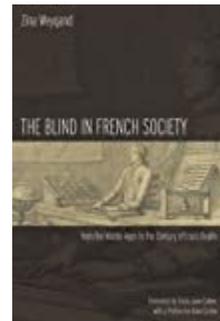




Zina Weygand. *The Blind in French Society: From the Middle Ages to the Century of Louis Braille.* Translated by Emily-Jane Cohen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009. Illustrations. xiii + 403 pp. \$60 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-5768-3; \$60 (e-book), ISBN 978-0-8047-7238-9.



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From Alms to Education

Blindness, according to William R. Paulson, means very different things, and moreover it is very different things, at different times, different places, and in different kinds of writing.^[1] Blindness is more than an ontic fact of biology; rather it is circumscribed by culture and it bears the weight of social configurations. Such an acknowledgement informs Zina Weygand's explication of blindness as she parses how it was invested with meaning over the course of several centuries in France. As a historian, Weygand heeds Friedrich Nietzsche's exhortation to serve history only to the extent that history serves life: for it is possible to value the study of history to such a degree that life becomes stunted and degenerate.^[2] To this end, one of her most urgent research questions is, "Why is [it] that today, in a disenchantèd world, blind people still face irrational behavior that partially determines their place in society?" (p. 293). Though this is a grand question, it is one that animates Weygand's efforts to trace the jagged trajectory of blindness throughout the French past. Her exploration investigates the ways that blind people—despite the many ways that blindness was

reconfigured according to social, political, and pedagogical upheavals in France—remained exoticized due to their perceived limitations. As a piece of scholarship, Weygand's study fills the lacuna at the center of the history of blindness. More than merely fleshing out the missing details, though, her monograph admirably engages her subject with both precision and erudition. Indeed, it is the rare text meriting the praise that inhabits its foreword.

Through her responsible, meticulous research, which includes both archival work and the scrutiny of period literature, Weygand adroitly demonstrates how the vagaries of French political structures and the vicissitudes of pedagogy for blind people were concomitant. As a piece of disability history, the study provides a narrative of connected episodes that is neither too tidy, nor too deterministic. Instead, the trajectory that she defines, which begins with the founding of the *aveugleries* (blind institutions) and Louis XI's inauguration of the *Quinze-Vingts* and ends with Louis Braille's death at l'Institution des Jeunes Aveugles (Institution for Blind Youth),

remains satisfyingly coherent while faithfully representing the calamitous changes surrounding the treatment of blind people in France. Her study begins in chapter 1 with an examination of the signification of blindness in the High Middle Ages, where blind people were the subject of scorn, ridicule, and contradictorily, charity. As a concept, disability formed a double helix with poverty. The hospices of the Middle Ages were therefore as concerned with the perceived lack of productivity of blind people as they were with blindness itself. "The essentially religious and eschatological ambitions of the founders of specialized hospices," writes Weygand, "dispensed with any notions that the individuals assisted could be economically viable" (p. 23). It was not until the beginning of the sixteenth century that a recalibration began to occur and found its expression both in the subtle intervention of state power in the affairs of charitable organizations as well as in the heightened intolerance of mendicancy and vagrancy. And yet, as Weygand's argument demonstrates, despite the partial desacralization of poverty that occurred in this period, disability, and blindness in particular, never entirely shed its aura of mystery.

The transition to modernity occurs quickly in Weygand's text, and in chapters 2 and 3 she convincingly argues that despite the change in period, the treatment of blind people initially remained fairly static. Until the Enlightenment, blindness was rhetorically configured and culturally defined in essentially the same ways that it had been during the preceding centuries. Blind people were seen as objects of revulsion and their care and interests were ignored, and therefore noninstitutionalized, by a largely disinterested state. The sole exception was the *Quinze-Vingts*, which remained the only major institution devoted to the welfare of the blind until the founding of the *Institution des Jeunes Aveugles* by Valentin Haüy in the late eighteenth century. However, despite its status as a state-sponsored hospice for blind people, the *Quinze-Vingts* failed to alter the perceptions of blind people by French society. In fact, because it confined the livelihoods of its inhabitants to alms seeking, and this during a time when mendicancy was met with tremendous hostility, the *Quinze-Vingts*, according to Weygand, actually further entrenched the image of the blind beggar. And yet she does take into account the paucity of counterexamples that existed in this period. Most notable were Father Francesco Lana-Terzi, Blaise-François de Pagan, and Jean de Saint-Samson, all of whom challenged the conventional roles of blind people. While Lana-Terzi was an exceptional pedagogue, the latter two men were themselves blind but were accorded high status despite

their disability. All three influenced the growing relationship between blind subjects and the written word. What is more, all three served as evidence that the seventeenth century "saw, here and there, the first manifestations of the rise of the blind subjects in their singularity" (p. 53). Thus, rather than being heaped together with the poor, or bundled together as a mass of unfortunates, blind people in this period began to assume the contours of subjectivity.

Chapter 4, which begins part 2 of Weygand's text, illustrates the maturation of change during the Enlightenment that existed as only murmurs during the seventeenth century. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to John Locke's and Denis Diderot's responses to the Molyneux question, terrain that has been well trodden in other works. This is supplemented by a consideration of Maria-Theresia von Paradis and Johann-Ludwig Wessenburg, both of whom were adventitiously blinded as children. The experiences of these two figures represent an instantiation of a practical pedagogy for the blind, which built on the sensationalist speculations that Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau advanced. From the private and idiosyncratic efforts to educate blind people, who were almost exclusively members of the aristocracy, Weygand returns in chapter 5 to the themes of state interventionism and control.

In particular, in chapter 5, she introduces Haüy and the *Institution des Jeunes Aveugles*. This lays the foundation for what chiefly concerns the rest of her study, namely, an exegesis of the *Quinze-Vingts* and the *Institution des Jeunes Aveugles*. The remainder of the study chronicles the host of administrative and pedagogical alterations that the Institute encountered under changing regimes. In this chapter, however, Weygand focuses on how the realities of patronage collided with Haüy's initial vision of the *Institution des Jeunes Aveugles*. Based on extant documents, Haüy embraced egalitarian goals for the institute, where it was envisioned that both rich students and poor students would be made literate disciples of history, geography, arithmetic, and music. However, the Philanthropic Society, which oversaw the funding of Haüy's institution, decided that it was best to segregate students according to intellectual aptitude, which predictably often correlated to social rank, so that those deemed unfit were vocationally instructed. In addition, as the *Institution des Jeunes Aveugles* became more institutionalized, the Philanthropic Society required that students be divided according to sex. Finally, Weygand delves into the materials related to the public exhibitions of Haüy's students. This is a particularly lively theme

in Weygand's text, and one that reoccurs in chapters 8 and 13. Whereas many readers might instinctively read these performances as being exploitative, Weygand argues that they were preservationist in the face of budgetary and administrative constraints.

In chapters 6 through 9, Weygand explores the shuffling position of the *Quinze-Vingts* and *Institution des Jeunes Aveugles*. In particular, *Institution des Jeunes Aveugles* migrated from various physical locations and it fell under the custodianship of several administrative bodies during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In these chapters, Weygand illustrates how *Institution des Jeunes Aveugles* was subject to what proved to be an almost inexhaustible menu of reforms conducted by the Crown and then the National Assembly. Reform is a central theme here, and it speaks to the narrative of progress regarding the treatment of blind people which was advanced under the ancien régime, the Republic, the empire, and eventually the Restoration. Weygand explores the collision between the *Abbé de l'Épée's* *Institution Nationale des Sourds-Muets* (Institute for the Deaf and Dumb) and Haüy's *Institution des Jeunes Aveugles*, when in October of 1791 the two institutes merged under orders of the National Assembly. As she adroitly documents, the blind students, as well as their headmaster, Haüy, were placed in an inferior position to the deaf students and their headmaster, the *Abbé Roch-Ambroise Sicard*. Control of the budget, the nomination of personnel, and oversight of the blind youth's workshops were usurped by the *Institution Nationale des Sourds-Muets*. Weygand also paints a stark picture of the panopticism in the newly formed joint institute, where coercion and surveillance came to dominate. The students no longer had free time or private space. Eventually, on April 3, 1794, the tie binding the two institutes was permanently severed and the deaf students departed for a new location.

In this section, Weygand also demonstrates how the rhetoric and practices of the Revolution once again altered the organization and purpose of *Institution des Jeunes Aveugles*. The state assumed a greater role in the activities of the institute and a new emphasis was placed on social integration through productivity. As such, on July 29, 1795, the institute was rechristened *Institut National des Aveugles Travailleurs* (Institute for Blind Workers). Furthermore, during this especially tumultuous period, Citizen Haüy himself fell under intense scrutiny. He was subjected to incarceration after being proven guilty of seven charges, including a very serious one leveled by Haüy's antagonist, Sicard. Eventually,

Haüy regained his freedom and he resumed his function as head of *Institution des Jeunes Aveugles*. What this chapter demonstrates so well is Weygand's aptitude as a conscientious scholar. It would have been easy to editorialize and express outrage over the appalling treatment of blind people during this period, but instead she scrupulously allows the scope of her documents to arouse the reader's indignation. Her excavation of obscure sources and her ability to synthesize these sources into a coherent yet variegated narrative showcases the importance of the work that she has performed for historians of disability.

These talents are also on display when Weygand describes the merger of the *Quinze-Vingts* with *Institution des Jeunes Aveugles* in October 1800. As a result of this transformation, the dialectic of charity and education that had historically been represented by the two institutions was synthesized into "the humanist theoreticians' old mercantilist dream of assistance" (p. 169). Thus, Haüy's objective to intellectually, morally, and professionally educate blind people was largely quashed. Instead, what emerged was a heightened emphasis on productivity and an eradication of idleness that far surpassed the similar impulses of the National Assembly when it formed the Institute for Blind Workers. Moreover, just as the blind youth were made inferior to the inhabitants of the Institute for the Deaf and Dumb during the time when the two institutions were integrated, so too were they placed in an inferior position when *Institution des Jeunes Aveugles* was housed in the *Quinze-Vingts*. During the sixteen-year period when the institute fell under the authority of the hospice, and after Haüy had been dismissed from the *Institution des Jeunes Aveugles*, the blind people in the newly merged institution were separated into two unequal classes: the blind residents from the old lodgings of the *Quinze-Vingts* were known as "the blind of the first class," while the blind youth were dubbed "the blind of the second class" (p. 164). Irrespective of which class the blind people of the hospice belonged to, though, they were all obligated to work within the factories in order to help the Republic realize a productivist utopian dream.

Weygand offers a two-chapter interlude from her narrative in order to describe the changing social conditions of blind people during the dawn of the nineteenth century. By way of accomplishing this goal, she turns her attention to the representations of the blind in the literature of the period. While this is an important maneuver in that it further embellishes the reader's understanding of what blindness signified in this time of con-

stant institutional restructuring, it also somewhat disrupts the careful chronology that she establishes. At bottom, the conclusion to be drawn from chapters 10 and 11 is that class and disability remained ineluctably intertwined. The image of the blind beggar still elicited laughter from French readers and audiences, and this reinforced the idea that the blind poor could not be integrated as citizens. Blind people belonging to the upper classes, in contrast, were often portrayed much more positively and they were typically offered as receptacles of virtue. Thus, there was not a tremendous amount of change between previous centuries and the first third of the nineteenth century in terms of the depiction of blind people in literature and theater. This is not to say, however, that the representations of blind people were entirely stagnant. The principle change that Weygand identifies is that blind people in general no longer served as images of malevolence. Instead they were either burlesque buffoons or sacrosanct saints. In either case, blind people remained unseen—as they had been in prior centuries—as themselves, and instead stood in for the moral dynamics of the day.

In part 5, which commences with chapter 12, Weygand begins to wind down her study by honing in on the eventual elevation of *l'Institution des Jeunes Aveugles* beginning in the 1820s. Prior to detailing the rebirth of *l'Institution des Jeunes Aveugles*, Weygand first explores the position of the *Quinze-Vingts*, which still housed the Institute for Blind Workers while it was in the grip of the empire. The pedagogical dreams of Haüy further atrophied during this period, as an increased effort was made to form the blind youth into effective laborers. During this time, it was now, for the youngest and oldest *Quinze-Vingts* members, a matter of *productive* work in combination with a requisite *profitability* (p. 229, emphasis original). Of course, where there is domination, there is also resistance, and here, as in other places, Weygand shows how the blind youth and their advocates sought to mitigate the amplified oppression that they faced. For example, she cites how some members of the first class of the *Quinze-Vingts* inhabitants signed a petition protesting the draconian measures that had recently been undertaken against them. This was a bold step, as they went so far as to present it to the First Consul. The retribution taken by administrators was both harsh and swift; not only did they order the reading room to be closed, but they also incarcerated one of the principal signatories, Citizen Claude Burard, for three days in the hospice's prison room before expelling him from the hospice altogether. While the outcome may not have

been what the blind denizens of the *Quinze-Vingts* would have hoped for, Weygand uses this example to demonstrate that, even when privations were greatest, the blind refused to remain passive.

With the return of the monarchy came the separation of the *Quinze-Vingts* from *l'Institution des Jeunes Aveugles*. On February 20, 1816, two years after Louis XVIII entered Paris, the tie binding the two institutions was formally severed. At this point, Weygand treats the institutions in two distinct chapters: the very slim chapter 13 describes the *Quinze-Vingts*, and chapter 14 deals with *l'Institution des Jeunes Aveugles* during the time of the Restoration. All in all, Weygand convincingly shows that life at the *Quinze-Vingts* somewhat improved under the Restoration. As for *l'Institution des Jeunes Aveugles*, the beginning of the Restoration was grim, but things improved by the early part of the 1820s. Students endured a fifteen-hour day, but unlike during their time at the *Quinze-Vingts*, the students were afforded greater opportunities for intellectual development. Nonetheless, discipline remained onerous and punishments included shackling and whippings. Part of what accounted for the dour and severe atmosphere at the institution was the attitude of *Sébastien Guillot*—an old ally of Sicard—who was installed as headmaster on April 21, 1814. Perhaps worse than the discipline meted out by Guillot were the ophthalmological experiments that he carried out on his blind charges. This is another area of the text that invites invective, but what Weygand instead decides on, quite rightly, is to let the documentation speak for itself. Eventually, Guillot, who Weygand characterizes as *â despot enamored of fame*, relinquished his post so that he could avoid a formal dismissal (p. 261). In his place came Alexandre-René Pignier, whose leadership and methods were the antithesis of Guillot's.

The majority of chapter 14 is devoted to two individuals: Pignier and Braille. One gets the impression from Weygand's treatment of the subject that Pignier developed the foundation on which Braille built his castle. Under Pignier corporal punishment was eliminated at *l'Institution des Jeunes Aveugles* and a greater emphasis was placed on effective pedagogy. Not only did Pignier increase the instruction time devoted to music, but he also introduced the organ, which allowed successful students opportunities to work in congregations and parishes. He also added lessons in tuning, which afforded enterprising students opportunities to gain employment. But, as Weygand asserts, what distinguished Pignier was his openness to novel forms of intellectual instruction, and in particular his attunement to the need for a more

adequate writing system for blind people. He therefore expressed interest in, and eventually adopted, Nicolas-Marie-Charles Barbier de La Serre's system of *écriture nocturne* (night writing).

Although Barbier had appealed to Pignier's predecessor, Guilliard, his advances were rebuffed. Pignier, however, seized on its potential benefits and in 1821 incorporated it into the *Institution des Jeunes Aveugles* pedagogy. *Écriture nocturne* was not without its deficits, however. Among its faults were the facts that it was sonographic rather than alphabetic, it was cumbersome to decode, it did not allow for calculations or musical notation, and its cells were of such a size that they exceeded the tactile dimensions of a single finger. These problems, however, were translated into successes for the young Braille, who, by 1825, had already developed the basic structure of his improved method. Interestingly, however, braille was largely suppressed at the *Institution des Jeunes Aveugles*; it was not formally adopted until 1854, two years after Braille's death from tuberculosis. While this section may prove interesting for scholars unacquainted with Braille and his legacy, those who are already familiar with the events will not find anything terribly new in Weygand's retelling. Moreover, this seems like a missed opportunity for Weygand. It would have been useful for scholars if she had embellished further on the suppression of braille and had more intricately showed the implications of this suppression for the blind youth at the institute. After all, the contest between Haüy's tactile type and Braille's punctiform system embodied the differing pedagogical approaches meant to realize the integration of blind people into nineteenth-century French society.

Although the scholarly merits of Weygand's monograph are many, there are also a few aspects that might leave the reader unfulfilled. For example, despite its title, Weygand devotes only the first chapter—which amounts to fourteen pages—to an investigation of blindness in the Middle Ages. As such, the reader does not acquire a real appreciation for what blindness, in all of its complexity, signified during the Middle Ages. To be sure, there are other studies that deal more extensively with blindness in this period—Henri-Jacques Stiker's classic *A History of Disability* (1991) and Edward Wheatley's recently released *Stumbling Blocks before the Blind: Medieval Con-*

structions of a Disability (2010) being the main examples—but it would have been refreshing, given Weygand's insightful treatment of later events, to have read her interpretation of medieval representations of blindness. In addition, Weygand's treatment of the *Quinze-Vingts* and the *Institution des Jeunes Aveugles* is finely wrought, but she occasionally veers into the "great man of the past" model of history. By this, I mean that she seems to install both Diderot and Braille as straightforward champions of the blind. In her treatment of these two pivotal figures she loses some of the subtlety and complexity that informs the rest of her study. Although she expresses a desire to complicate the story of Braille, who has obtained "cult status for blind people around the world," her depiction of Braille in some ways recapitulates his celebrity status (p. 281). In short, the text could have used less of Braille the hero, and more of Braille the man. Related to this is the feeling that there is a teleology at play in her narrative. One almost gains the impression that there was a nearly unavoidable movement from the isolation of the seventeenth and eighteenth century to the achievements of Braille.

Irrespective of these criticisms, though, Weygand presents a perspicacious treatment of a neglected area of study. She cogently offers a history of blindness that is marked by intense rivalries—those between charity and education, between the *Quinze-Vingts* and the *Institution des Jeunes Aveugles*, between Sicard and Haüy, and between embossed type and Braille's punctiform system. Furthermore, she resists the impulse to enshrine one side or the other as being superior, but instead she lets her exhaustive research perform the deed for her. In this way, she deftly articulates the validity of her conclusions while not lapsing into polemic. Ultimately, *The Blind in French Society* is a valuable contribution to the field and one that has been long overdue.

Notes

[1]. William R. Paulson, *Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Blind in France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 4.

[2]. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Mediations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 59.

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