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Zina Weygand, *The Blind in French Society from the Middle Ages to the Century of Louis Braille*. Translated by Emily-Jane Cohen. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009. \$60 (cl.). ISBN 978-0-8047-5768-3.

François Buton, *L'administration des faveurs: L'État, les sourds et les aveugles (1789-1885)*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009. 30€. ISBN-13: 978-2753508514

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The publication of Zina Weygand's *The Blind in French Society* (first appeared in France as *Vivre sans voir* in 2003) and François Buton's *L'administration des faveurs: L'État, les sourds et les aveugles (1789-1885)* are timely contributions to French history and the field of disability studies, which has grown considerably over the past decade. The work of Weygand and Buton invite us to analyze representations of disability and the role of the state in the care of disabled people from medieval period to the nineteenth century. Though there is partial overlap in information between the books, Weygand and Buton differ noticeably in their methodological approach to the study of blind and deaf people in French society. Weygand employs cultural analysis to reconstruct the history of blind people over several centuries. She wants to recreate some of the individual stories that show how blind people lived, what they thought, and how they interacted with sighted people. In contrast, Buton focuses on the institutional role of the French government and how the state intervened at crucial historical moments to affect the lives of blind and deaf people. He examines the "favors" or benefits that the state extended to these two disabled groups from the era of the French Revolution to the early Third Republic. For Buton, the state itself is the main protagonist in this history of blind and deaf people.

Zina Weygand's *The Blind in French Society* is divided into five main parts that cover the period from the Middle Ages to early nineteenth century. It is fair to say, however, that most of her book is devoted to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. From the outset, Weygand tells her readers, "When it comes to attitudes toward disabled people, it appears that our society remains, in many respects, a prisoner of a past that refuses to die." Weygand argues that the way society represented the blind and concurrently how the French actually treated blind people over a long historical period needs to be carefully studied (pp. 6-7). She identifies a "dialectic of assistance and education" for the blind that played a key role in social progress certainly from the eighteenth century onward (p. 8). By using different cultural sources, Weygand tries to piece together the varied representations of the blind that formed a negative social image: a short play entitled *The Boy and the Blind Man*, for instance, portrayed a blind beggar as "a hypocrite who feigns piety in order to better collect alms" (p. 14).

Another representation of blind people came from Catholic Church congregations that founded many *hôtels-dieu* (hospices) to aid the impoverished blind. One special Parisian hospice, the Quinze-Vingts, was officially created in 1260 under the auspices of King Louis IX, who had taken a personal role in caring for poor blind people. As Weygand points out, the poor blind of the Quinze-Vingts, who numbered some 300 persons, became a privileged group of beggars (sanctioned by the king's decree) whose collections went directly back into the hospice's treasury and supported the entire community (pp. 20-21). Weygand argues that the quasi-monastic rules of the Quinze-Vingts only reinforced the

more general social perception that blind people were naturally destined to be beggars and the French should view them with pity (p. 23). Yet neither of these representations, whether the blind were naturally duplicitous or pious, actually portrayed the social life of blind people before the modern era.

The blind were often center stage during the Enlightenment period when philosophers like Locke, Berkeley, Buffon, Diderot, Condillac, and Rousseau wrote about whether blindness was an innate characteristic or a defect of human sensation that could be altered. While surgery on the eye was rare (and even more rare that sight was restored), the new experiments of the eighteenth century suggested that blindness might not be a permanent condition. Weygand discusses the lives of noted blind people such as Mélanie de Salignac, Maria-Theresia von Paradis, and Johann-Ludwig Weissenburg who fascinated the *philosophes* of the era and prepared the way for Valentin Haüy's efforts to educate the blind.

The story of how Valentin Haüy became involved in educating blind people in the 1780s is a key part of Weygand's book. Inspired by attending the public demonstrations that Abbé de l'Épée held at his school for the deaf in Paris, Haüy spent the next twelve years saving his own money to start a school for the blind (Haüy was a teacher of Latin and other foreign languages and also had a family to support). He worked initially with one young blind man, François Le Sueur, and in 1784 presented him to the Academic Bureau of Writing, an educational society of the day. Épée, the noted teacher of the deaf, attended the meeting and witnessed how Haüy's student could read a book with raised letters, was able to complete dictated sentences, and completed mathematical sums on "a grooved board" (p. 97). On the eve of the French Revolution, both Épée and Haüy "offered Enlightenment society the spectacle of disability overcome, thanks to the happy combination of philanthropy and pedagogy" (p. 109). This was an important turning point in social representation for both blind and deaf people.

In part three of her book, Weygand discusses how the national government first created a school for the blind and deaf in 1791. Although a victory of sorts for philanthropists, the school was far removed from Haüy's imagined goal. His forced collaboration with Abbé Sicard (Épée's successor) was strained and even hostile. Weygand argues that the school's strict regulations turned Haüy's educational mission into an exercise in *social control* (her italics) (p. 132). If Haüy thought that an independent school for the blind would produce a better learning environment, that reality proved illusive once the schools were separated in 1794. Haüy's Institute for Blind Workers lacked even basic necessities like food and firewood. Even in this sad condition, Weygand tells us about how Haüy created a theater of the blind at the school which was supposed to draw greater public interest (and possibly donations) to his educational project (pp. 148-49). These details about Haüy's cultural activities and his own association with a "cult of natural religion" offer readers fascinating historical context.

Unfortunately for Valentin Haüy, Bonaparte's Consulate would revoke his control over the Institute for Blind Workers and merge it with the existing Quinze-Vingts in 1800. Within a couple of years the interior ministry informed Haüy that his teaching position would be abolished. During the Napoleonic period, the blind institute became "a charity workshop" where productive work mattered more than any kind of basic education (p. 249). After forced retirement from his government post, Haüy became a private tutor to a small number of blind children from wealthy families at his new school in Paris. But in 1806, Haüy embarked on a new phase of his career when, at the request of Tsar Alexander I, he opened a school for the blind in St. Petersburg.

In the final part of Weygand's book, she looks closely at the transformation of the Institute for the Blind after the fall of Napoleon and its revival during the Restoration. In 1815, the school and Quinze-Vingts were officially separated from each other and a military doctor, Sébastien Guillié was appointed director of the new institute that housed sixty boys and thirty girls. Weygand describes Guillié as an "authoritarian and ambitious man" (p. 255) who conducted medical experiments on the children even though he had no ophthalmological training (p. 265). However, Guillié's tenure was short-lived (he was

dismissed for an affair) and Alexandre-René Pignier took over the school in 1821. Pignier made the school more into an educational establishment, though the workshops were never abandoned. In the 1830s, students had more opportunity to develop musical knowledge and even piano tuning became part of the curriculum (p. 271). The key change that came to the Institute for the Blind was due to the inventiveness of Louis Braille who entered the school in 1819 at the age of ten. By 1828, Braille was a tutor in the school and was soon teaching the alphabet in raised dots. In his brief lifetime (Braille would die of tuberculosis in his early forties), he drew praise from many educators who realized that Braille had developed a practical and effective system to instruct blind people. The material on Braille is important; Weygand could have expanded this section of the book to discuss the use of the Braille method further into the nineteenth-century.

François Buton's *L'administration des faveurs: l'État, les sourds et les aveugles (1789-1885)* takes a different approach to the study of disabled groups in France. While Weygand readily employs cultural sources to explain representations of the blind, Buton turns to sociology as his main tool to analyze how the French state formulated policies and developed an institutional framework that would affect the well being of many disabled blind and deaf people. To his credit, Buton mines a wide range of sources, including many government and school archives, to reconstruct this history. A weakness, however, is that Buton sacrifices the more individual accounts of deaf and blind history (and their cultural significance) to focus on the bureaucratic role of the state.

*L'administration des faveurs* is divided into three main parts: 1) the creation of "favors" during the late eighteenth century, 2) how the state's benefits became institutionalized in the mid-nineteenth century, and 3) how oralism (spoken language) affected the way that deaf education developed in the early Third Republic. The first part of the book is where readers will find the most overlap with Zina Weygand's study, if only in the basic facts. Buton explains how Abbé Charles-Michel de l'Épée became involved in teaching deaf children before the Revolution and argues that his development of "methodical signs" favored the diffusion of signed language in many French schools for the deaf in the nineteenth century (p. 36). He compares the philanthropic work of Épée and Valentin Haüy and, I think, successfully shows that both men were dedicated to humanistic principles that guided them in their educational mission. With the outbreak of the Revolution, the French state became the primary catalyst for change, according to Buton, and transformed the discussion of deaf or blind education into a state activity. For Buton, this means that individuals were less the focus of the state-run schools than defining a whole class of "sensory deprived" people. At the end of part one, Buton engages in some comparative observations about the treatment of blind and deaf people by mid-nineteenth century. He writes that "the deaf were not only more numerous [as a group], but also more interesting" because the "deaf were reduced to the level of a savage" in society's judgment (p. 81). Buton concludes that the blind (presumably because of their communication skills) were more easily integrated into mainstream French society. Does this mean that the government's attempt to lump deaf and blind people into one generally disabled group in the first half of the nineteenth century was a failure?

In part two, Buton correctly points out that the appointment of Désiré Ordinaire (in 1831) to direct the national school of the deaf and Alexandre-René Pignier (in 1840) to lead the national school for the blind marked a turning point in the government's plans for each institution. Both men were medical doctors and both were politically and socially conservative in their view of public assistance and education. (Weygand mentions that Pignier was a doctor only once in her book.) The era of philanthropy for these schools officially ended with the royal decree of 21 February 1841 when the state centralized the operations of the Quinze-Vingts, the deaf institute and blind institute as well as the Maison royale de Charenton (a hospice for the mentally disabled) under the Ministry of the Interior. The new classification was that each establishment was part of a system of "public assistance" institutions coordinated by the state (pp. 147-49). As a result, there were more state inspections to determine whether or not these institutions were progressing according to government plans. Buton devotes a large segment of part two to the state inspectors who catalogued a variety of details

(curricular and material conditions) about these schools/hospices. His one chapter entitled “Les sourds et les aveugles comme groupes sociaux” includes a few pages on Louis Braille and another few pages on deaf leaders like Ferdinand Berthier, Alphonse Lenoir and Claudius Forestier. In comparison to Weygand’s discussion of different blind students, Buton’s material is quite limited.

In part three of his book, Buton considers the debate over oral education (articulated speech) for deaf students and the implications of the Congress of Milan of 1880. There is no further discussion of the blind institute in this last part of the study. For Buton, the Milan Congress and the other congresses that quickly followed “not only marked the triumph of oralism, but also the entry on stage of representations of the State” (p. 269). Oscar Claveau, the inspector general of schools for the deaf and a staunch oralist, was a key advocate of the state’s authority. Buton explains how administrators in the Interior Ministry, especially Claveau, allied themselves with Catholic congregations in the debate over jurisdiction of schools for the deaf. There were many oralist reformers who favored universal and secular instruction for deaf children; they urged that all schools for the deaf be moved to the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Public Instruction. This call for reform was consistent with the Third Republic’s laws on free, secular and compulsory education for all French youth (known as the Ferry Laws).

In the end, however, the struggle for control over schools for the deaf resulted in a victory for the Interior Ministry with the proviso that oralism would now be the only state-approved teaching method. Buton points out that the more powerful role of the Interior Ministry by 1885 also meant that the state would exercise “authoritarian *normalization*” of deaf schools (p. 309). Although critical of the government’s role that outlawed any use of signed language in schools for the deaf, Buton does not consider the views of deaf educators (like Claudius Forestier and Victor-Gomer Chambellan) who denounced this oralist plan. Buton claims (not without some debate) that the few deaf teachers still employed at the national institute for the deaf in 1879 were now “agents of the state” and therefore made no attempt to fight the oral method (p. 313). While this conclusion may seem logical given the purview of Buton’s study, I doubt that deaf educators of the early 1880s saw themselves as mere conduits for a state policy that so negatively affected the cultural identity of deaf people.

Both Zina Weygand in *The Blind in French Society* and François Buton in *L’administration des faveurs* reveal how different types of methodology can uncover the history of deaf and blind people in eighteenth and nineteenth-century France. Although Weygand’s cultural approach gives us a more direct connection to blind people of the period, Buton’s study explains how the modern state established stronger control of charitable institutions for disabled people by the 1840s and had a substantial impact on the lives of deaf people (in the fight over language) well into the twentieth century.

## NOTES

[1] See Catherine J. Kudlick, “Disability History: Why We Need Another “Other,”” *American Historical Review* 108:3 (June 2003): 763-793 for an excellent review essay on disability history and how it opens up a new category of historical analysis.

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