

Foreword

By Catherine Kudlick

In this erudite, sensitive, witty, and impeccably documented book, Zina Weygand draws from the rich tradition of the French *Annales* school, while also offering something completely new. Thanks to her energy and creativity as a researcher, we meet scores of people who might otherwise be “victims of the vagaries of existence,” from the first troupe of blind actors to the “individualist, dirty, noisy, and quarrelsome” residents of the Quinze-Vingts hospice, not all of whom were—to invoke her phrase—choir-boys. Weygand uses these stories and better-known figures such as Denis Diderot and Louis Braille to offer a new understanding of the Enlightenment and its legacy. This is not a case of overcompensating for the seeming marginality of her subject by making a bold claim. Rather, Weygand’s in-depth study of the reciprocal relationship between the social treatment and representations of blind people from the Middle Ages to the middle of the nineteenth century invites readers to reconsider the ocularcentric roots of modernity.

After all, what better place to think about the perverted power of the visual and visual culture than in an institution for the blind?

Until just a few years ago, historians wouldn’t have had the gumption or the analytic tools to pose such a question. And even today a wary few might still find the history of blind people a useless, if quaint, undertaking. But thanks to the emerging field of disability history to which Weygand has been a tireless and highly original contributor, scholars will find questions and resources that breathe new life into the study of the French past. Influenced by work in gender, sexuality, and race, this critical approach to disability invites us to rethink everything from ideas about physical and cognitive normality to the role of the senses in shaping

discourses of the modern. Provocateurs laboring in this young field assert that disability must take its place alongside these other groups to help us unpack what we take for granted and why. Thus, just as anyone hoping to understand what it meant to be European must engage with questions of how Europeans described the world beyond, so too scholars analyzing the power of visual culture need to grapple with the people who appeared anathema to it.

Like her forebears of the *Annales* school, Weygand ultimately offers a history of the present. “When it comes to attitudes toward disabled people,” she explains in the introduction, “it appears that our society remains, in many respects, a prisoner of a past that refuses to die.” Though largely spared the humiliation that made them buffoons of farce and the victims of trickery in the premodern era, blind people at the beginning of the twenty-first century remain misunderstood and marginalized, as evidenced by an unemployment rate of over 70 percent. They, like people with other disabilities, face rampant discrimination often disguised as benevolent paternalism or complete erasure from anything but maudlin, sentimental stories. In bringing a far richer and more complex world to life, Weygand has provided the golden hammer for driving nails into the coffins of old ideas and practices.

Catherine Kudlick is Professor of History at University of California, Davis. She is the author of *Cholera in Post-Revolutionary Paris: A Cultural History* and, with Zina Weygand, *Reflections: The Life and Writings of a Young Blind Woman in Post-Revolutionary Paris*. She is currently President of the Disability History Association.