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Searching for Space

Georges-Emmanuel Gleize et Jean-Marc Olivier

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TEXTE

- 1 Space is not simple.
- 2 When we examine the word, we find a world. A strong, massive and almost poetic environment, whose complexity and nuances have been the subject of many studies by communities in the so-called “hard sciences,” which were the first to appropriate space. As a result, ‘space’ means nebulae, stars, phenomena, and great distances. It is both subject and question, a source of a permanent questioning, but deeply fascinating for those who devoted themselves and continue to devote themselves to its exploration. Space is one of those regions for which our perspective has taken on certain habits. And yet still today, space is most often seen as one of the rare places where concerns and practices are far removed from those of everyday life. Known to everyone, in its exploration and writing it remains, however the preserve of a handful; people out of the ordinary or simply passionate about the extreme singularity of space and the hopes it feeds.
- 3 But space is also complicated. It is an environment in which humans have introduced a complex society. Beyond the Moon and Mars, from Proxima Centauri to Betelgeuse, space is also GPS, Pleiades, Apollo, Voyager and Rosetta. It is a place of expedition and discovery, but also used for supporting civilization and developing societies. From that point, space has then become richer and established as a subject with immense possibilities.
- 4 Yet for all that, space is not only a succession of cosmic machines with vast and powerful achievements. It is not just a list of missions, rockets, probes, satellites, or artefacts that have ended up populating the horizons of humanity, sometimes with anguish. Space is a living environment, and yet terribly human. It is made of structures as well as strategies, of politics with varied ambitions, made of images and impressions on which cultures have been created and where imagination has become reality. It is an interplay of actors, of scientific and

budgetary decisions. It is a geography in which industries, universities, and political actors arm themselves, as stakeholders of operations. Finally, it is also a result, often positive, sometimes of failure, where the progress of laboratories becomes real.

- 5 Space by humans does not evolve in a vacuum. It is rich, vast, and complicated. And this very complexity makes it an object of historical study, whose issues go beyond mere description to constitute a complete historiographic field. In its traditional definition, the history of space is anchored in the recent, profoundly contemporary period of the Space Age, whose beginnings appear in the twilight of the nineteenth century, but whose history really begins in the second half of the twentieth. Yet in trying to understand it, one might point out that it does not have all the qualities of older, more established periods. The reproach could be made that the extreme “youth” of the history of space, as well as not yet having reached the conclusion for many missions, constitute so many limits that we must relegate its study to future decades.
- 6 Writing the history of space is a challenge. The variety and the mass of the sources, the confidentiality of certain details, the importance of a neutral approach since the subject is reputed to unite imagination and hope—these are all dangers that mobilize the qualities all researchers require. Yet although there are challenges, they must be met. Today space is a major part of our societies, and its ramifications are increasing in depth and complexity every day. Space has become an essential tool which, like aviation, has moved beyond the first pioneers’ sparks of brilliance to settle in as a lasting part of our daily lives. Bringing the view of a humanities researcher to the study of space has thus become quite vital, both for grasping the stakes at hand and for improving our knowledge of the contemporary world.
- 7 For several decades now, a whole body of research has arisen on this subject, profiting from the variable richness of sources and subjects. This literature reflects a dispersed research field fully in the throes of becoming organized, but with a certain vitality, and whose first results have largely helped construct our vision of space. For the journal *Nacelles*, we do not believe in envisaging space through the lenses of segregated disciplines, but as a field of research in which all the sciences, whether social or human, are already at work and can comple-

ment each other. In these pages, it is not only a matter of practicing space through history, but also through political science, law, geography, and so on.

- 8 A question arises therefore: what are the contours of this research and, by extension, which theoretical frameworks do they adopt? This is the subject of this thematic section: to explore some of these frameworks and studies that have shaped our academic vision of space today, without being limited to the discipline of history; to understand their scope and classify their qualities; to highlight some local aspects to this research questioning the relationship between space and our societies; and also to construct, elaborate and debate our conception of space.
- 9 To this end, we approach these issues in a group of three articles. Guilhem Penent explains the work, the stakes, and the justifications for research and publications on space by the humanities. Then, Catherine Radtka questions the strengths and directions of European humanities space research, a field under construction. Lastly, Georges-Emmanuel Gleize describes the peculiarities of research on the most remote space activities. We believe these historiographical questions are necessary for bringing to light the debates which are traversing this growing field of research.

AUTEURS

Georges-Emmanuel Gleize

Doctorant en histoire contemporaine Université Toulouse 2 Jean Jaurès
Laboratoire Framespa UMR 5136 georges_emmanuel.gleize@orange.fr

Jean-Marc Olivier

Professeur d'histoire contemporaine, Vice-Président en charge des relations internationales Université de Toulouse - Jean Jaurès
Laboratoire FRAMESPA (UMR CNRS 5136) / Labex SMS jm.olivier@univ-tlse2.fr