

# Exchange on Nick Onuf's 'Metaphoricizing Modernity,' Part I— Dangerous Beginnings, Peripheral (Re)Beginnings: A Reconfiguration of Nick Onuf's Constructivism

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**Abstract:** Nick Onuf's constructivism is one of the most important contributions to the field of international relations in what regards the interchange between social and political theories, and philosophy. In this text, I engage with Onuf's body of work taken as a whole. The guiding thread of the problematization I propose is woven through the attention to how Onuf's craft and creative undertaking sets certain beginnings in the construction of his framework, and how setting them has important implications for (the conception of) 'politics'. I would argue that Onuf's conception of politics is sustained on two central beginnings: the conception of humans as 'rational agents' and the framing of what has come to be called 'modernity'. This way, I emphasize what seems to me the most enduring contribution his body of work can provide not only to the field of international relations, but also to contemporary social and political theories more generally. The first section outlines the relation Onuf establishes between rules and rule, while the following two sections deal, in turn, with his conceptions of 'agency' and the 'modern world'. My goal in these first three sections is to reconfigure Onuf's constructivism. The fourth and final section moves ahead, giving a step further – perhaps too far, perhaps too radical –, paving a critical engagement with his work through peripheral (re)beginnings.

**Keywords:** Constructivism; modernity; rationality; centre-periphery; politics.

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‘There are many worlds... there are still many worlds’  
‘...we must call exploitation what it is, in all the ways  
that it is what it is’

Nicholas Onuf

## **‘In the beginning was the deed!’**

Nick Onuf’s constructivism is one of the most important contributions to the field of international relations in what regards the interchange between social and political theories, and philosophy. Even if Onuf himself has said once that his main text, *World of Our Making*, had not had a ‘great deal of substantial impact’, especially in comparison to other ‘foundational texts’ to constructivism in the same field (see Onuf 2013 [2002]: 29), at least in the last two decades his texts have been constantly reassessed, feeding reappraisals, and (explicitly or implicitly) substantiating important theorizations associated to international relations (see, for instance, Fierke and Jorgensen 2001; Debrix 2003; Zehfuss 2002, ch.4; Wight 2006, especially chs.2-4; Grovogui 2006, ch.3; Jackson 2011; Guzzini 2013, part III; Epstein 2013; Bartelson 2015; Kessler 2016).<sup>1</sup>

Among the wide range of themes and concerns present in Onuf’s body of work, it is possible to identify the recurrence of the following: law (for instance, in his earlier texts, as well as in Onuf 1989, 2013 [2012] and 2018, especially ch.2); language and speech act theory (Onuf 1989, part I, 2013 [1998]; rules and rule (Onuf 1989, 2002, 2013 [1998]); the cognitive powers of human beings (Onuf 2013 [2006/2009], 2016a); ethics (Onuf 1998, 2001a, 2016c, 2018, especially ch.12); metaphor (Onuf, 2010a, 2013 [2010] a, 2024); and the history of modernity and of modern thought (1991, 1998, 2012, 2013 [2005], 2013 [2012], 2018, 2024).<sup>2</sup>

My wager here is that Onuf’s ‘legacy’ is better appreciated if engaged with as a ‘body of work taken as a whole.’<sup>3</sup> With that in mind, the guiding thread of the problematization I propose is woven through the attention to how Onuf’s *craft and creative undertaking* (as he likes to characterize his scholarship, as in Onuf 2013: xiv) sets certain beginnings in the construction of his framework, and how setting them has important implications for (the conception of) ‘politics.’ Except perhaps for Zehfuss’ (2002, ch.4) and Guzzini and Leander’s (2017), there were not many engagements with Onuf’s framework concerned with its understanding of ‘politics’ so far, and even less so if one searches for engagements from a *peripheral* perspective, which is my purpose in this text.

This way, I will emphasize what seems to me the most enduring contribution his body of work can provide not only to the field of international relations, but also to contemporary social and political theories more generally. The first section outlines the relation Onuf establishes between rules and rule, while the following two sections deal, in turn, with his conceptions of ‘agency’ and of the ‘modern world.’ My goal in these first three sections is to reconfigure Onuf’s constructivism. The fourth and final section *moves ahead, more or less* with him, giving a step further – *perhaps too far, perhaps too radical* –, paving a critical engagement with his work.<sup>4</sup>

## *The paradigm of political society; or, 'a place to begin, however provisionally'*

As Nick Onuf (1989: 36) puts, '[c]onstructivism begins with deeds. Deeds done, acts taken, words spoken – These are all that facts are.' Being 'a social construction no less political than any other' (Onuf 2001b: 236), it does not, however, '[dictate] a particular political stance to anyone' (254; see also 2016a: 128-130). One of the strengths of Onuf's framework, according to the reconfiguration I propose, is to expose a conception of 'politics' that is never restricted to the act of positioning oneself for or against a particular political stance. More fundamentally, it is concerned with understanding how particular stances and, more generally, particular deeds are always inscribed in a political relation between rules and rule.

In *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, one reads that '[a]ctivities are political when members of a social unit construe those activities to be the most important ones engaging their attention' (Onuf 1989: 2; see also 2001b: 236). Yet, this relativity of politics 'need not be taken as capitulation to the position that everything social is political' (Onuf 1989: 3-4). Politics involve a relation between rules and rule, two 'general properties pertaining to political society in all its manifestations' (21). Rules guide, but do not determine, human conduct, thereby giving meaning to it. And '[w]henver rules have the effect of distributing advantages unequally, the result is rule' (21-22). The 'unavoidability of rules' is the fundamental feature of society, while the 'persistence of asymmetric social relations, known otherwise as the condition of rule', is the fundamental feature of 'politics' (22; see also Onuf 2013 [2002]: 29; 2018: 29). To understand how conditions of rule are obtained is the fundamental purpose of the 'paradigm of political society'.<sup>5</sup>

Decades later, we read the following definition of 'politics': 'We give meaning to our world so that we can make it safe for ourselves and provide for ourselves. In turn, taking care of our needs invests meaning in what we do. These processes are co-constitutive. None comes first; they work themselves out in enormously varied ways, and never fully. *This* is politics' (Onuf 2017c: 52, emphasis in the original). This definition reiterates that people and society constitute each other and that there is no dichotomy between material and social realities – or, as he had put in 1989, 'the material and the social contaminate each other, but variably' (Onuf 1989: 40; see also 2013[2002]: 35).<sup>6</sup>

The attention ascribed to the relation between rules and rule, as well as to the role of language in the co-constitution of people and society, is fundamentally related to Onuf's conception of politics, an 'inescapable feature of social arrangements' (Onuf 2001b: 236). By shifting the focus from 'the problem of order' to the making of 'social arrangements', Onuf's constructivism drives our attention to the following problematique: 'who benefits from any given set of arrangements?' (see Onuf 1989, ch.4, especially pp. 155-159);<sup>7</sup> or, phrased differently, how different conditions of rule, always-already different forms of exploitation, are constantly (re)constructed? (see Onuf 1989: 288). This way, the political problem of inequality in the distribution of benefits and privileges becomes irrevocably linked to Onuf's own intellectual effort regarding the relation between language and world.

Ontologically, neither people nor societies have precedence. By privileging the ‘deed’, constructivism ‘denies priority to either the word or the world’ (Onuf 1989: 43), or to either the self or the world (114). Nonetheless, as seen above, constructivism does mark ‘a place to *begin*, however provisionally’ (Onuf 1989: 40, emphasis added), or rather a ‘practical solution’ (Onuf 2013[1998]: 8). I would argue that Onuf’s conception of politics is sustained on two *central beginnings*: the conception of humans as ‘rational agents’ and the framing of what has come to be called ‘modernity’. The next two sections turn to each of these beginnings.

### *Rationality; or, ‘the gift of speech’*

Over the years, Aristotle and Immanuel Kant have gained more weight in Onuf’s constructivism.<sup>8</sup> With Aristotle, are reinforced: the postulate that humans are (naturally) social beings; the beginning with rationality; and the corresponding demarcation between nonhuman and human forms of life. Humans are said to be the only ones who have been endowed with ‘the gift of speech’ (Onuf 2013 [2006/2009]: 54; see also 2013 [2005]: 182), hence with the cognitive competence to be agents (pp.65-71; see also 2013 [2010]b: 134-140)).<sup>9</sup> Kant, in turn, marks his presence in how Onuf understands the cognitive operations of human sense- and world-making deeds (see Onuf 2013: xviii, 2016a: 116-120, 2018, ch.1). Kant’s philosophical stance is ‘radically constructivist’, to the extent that it claims that the operation of the mind makes the world a reality in humans’ heads, while it appears to exist outside the mind; and ‘radically incomplete’, since the Kantian subject is solipsistic and does not bring into consideration how beings are fundamentally social and situated in language – hence the necessity of taking the linguistic turn (see Onuf 2013[2009]b).

The privilege ascribed to deeds is inseparable from the beginning with rationality: ‘[b]ecause I start with deeds, I start with rationality’ (Onuf 1989: 259). This helps in understanding not only how Onuf positions his constructivism in relation to rationalist and positivist approaches in the field of international relations (and in philosophy and social theory more generally), but also – and most importantly for me here – how he demarcates his stance in relation to those he identifies as ‘post-moderns’ and ‘post-colonials.’ In this regard, it is telling that very often when Onuf contrasts his constructivism with ‘post-modern’ and, less often, with ‘post-colonial’ approaches, it is to the notion of ‘agency’ and ‘rationality’ that he turns.<sup>10</sup>

The play of contrasts operates as a *central* differentiation in the way the body of work is crafted. In the 1989 text, it is stated that constructivism cannot be ‘reconciled’ with Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction, ‘at least when that practice is carried *very far*’ (Onuf 1989: 42, emphasis added). Decades later, in a preface to a collection of his essays, he contrasts his constructivism with Niklas Luhmann’s ‘radical constructivism’, on the grounds that the latter’s is ‘*more radical*’ than the former; Luhmann’s constructivism would be ‘contra-Kantian and not just post-Kantian’, since it calls into question the very distinction between being and non-being, ‘a distinction that Western metaphysics has always insisted on’ (Onuf 2013: xxi, emphasis added to ‘more radical’).<sup>11</sup> Onuf’s constructivism does not go ‘that far’, it is not ‘that radical’.

But, more precisely, how are the *distance* and the *radicalism* that should not be transgressed being set?

On that, it is stated that the impossible reconciliation with deconstruction comes from the constructivist goal of 'reconstruction' (Onuf 1989: 42), accompanied by Onuf's confessed 'psychocultural penchant for logocentrism, rationalized as detachment and mediated by irony', which leads him to 'begin with a philosophical grounding for constructivism' (Onuf 1989: 46; see also 1994: 4). This 'post-Kantian' stance stipulates a (logocentric) combination: on the one hand, the distinctions between being and non-being and between human and non-human forms of life are set right from the *beginning*; on the other hand, this psychocultural penchant coexists with the critique of the priority 'Western culture' gives to 'structure or position over process and change.'<sup>12</sup> Language is central to both 'constructivist' and 'postmodern scholars', but in crucially different ways: for the former, it is 'indispensable to social construction', while for the latter 'there is nothing beyond language as social construction' (Onuf 2001b: 246). *The latter goes too far.*

The contrast with 'post-modern' and 'post-colonial' approaches is present in Onuf's discussion of 'identity'. These approaches are associated to a conception of identity understood as a 'process of reciprocal differentiation and not a fixed condition', whereas constructivists 'argue that identity is a process of social construction involving agents' choices for themselves' (Onuf 2013 [2003]: 75). While constructivists treat the self as 'an objective condition', taking into account that human beings acquire a 'coherent sense' of themselves as they 'mature in any society', 'post-modern and post-colonial' scholars are said to be sceptical of that condition, and of the relation between agency and the intentions it articulates (Onuf 2013 [2003]: 75). *They are too radical.*

It is plausible to say that Onuf's conception of the rational agent is placed at the *centre* of his framework through a *triple differentiation*: between human and the other forms of life;<sup>13</sup> between 'mature' or 'adult human beings' and 'children' (see Onuf 1989: 110-119, 2013 [2003]); and between 'rational' and 'instinctive' or 'reflexive' conduct (Onuf 1989: 259, n.2). Recall that making choices is a fundamental capacity for one to be defined as an agent, therefore as a rational human being capable of exercising powers and carrying forward goals in ruled settings, that is, in social arrangements. In this regard, the *triple differentiation* is, at once, the condition of possibility for the *identification* of the *central* place the agent occupies in the framework and that which is conditioned by the consolidation of the modern conception of agency (in the way Onuf reconstructs it). Put briefly: Onuf's beginning with rationality in the *centre* is also a beginning with an Aristotelian and post-Kantian conception of the modern subject. Modernity appears, for practical or epistemic matters, as the *central* place to begin with.

### *Modern world; or, 'old ontologies never die'*

The return to Aristotle has become a fundamental part of Onuf's ontological turn, and its political and ethical propositions. With this return come the conception of the human as a rational social being (seen above), as well as a functional and Republican conception of society, coupled with a critique of liberalism (more below). Moreover, in the story Onuf

tells about modernity and in his approach to the conditions of possibility of the production of knowledge about the world one lives in, the figure of Michel Foucault has become increasingly frequent over the years.<sup>14</sup>

Onuf (2024) stresses that modernity is not produced through a rupture or a break in time, even if these are two of the most recurrent metaphors mobilized to understand it. But he is also certain that, in the history of modern thought, the French Revolution and the nineteenth century brought liberal ideas and practices to the forefront, making Republicanism recede ‘into the background’ (Onuf 2013 [2005]: 183; see also 2016c: 6; for the detailed story, see 1998). In Onuf’s (2013 [2005]: 183) periodization, Liberalism has since not only rivalled with, but also trumped Republicanism in the struggle to define the ‘road to moral progress’ (see also Onuf 1991: 438).<sup>15</sup>

Onuf opposes a Republican view of politics and society to a Liberal one. The latter tells that the contemporary globalized civil society is an outcome of a modernizing process that challenged and overcame the stratified society of the old regime. The new regime is then defined by state government and by rules that rationalize administration and stipulate individual rights and responsibilities, thereby replacing old rules conferring status (see Onuf 2013 [2005]: 187, 1991 and 2009). In Onuf’s view, this is an incomplete account of modernization. In his Republican story, stratification, however more subtle it may have become in the modern world, remains pervasive; and institutionalized status relations have not been superseded as the Liberal story tells. Instead of individuals acting freely and possessing rights and duties, one has agents located in a civil society, defined, with Hegel, as ‘an inclusive set of functional relations’ that ‘are structured, vertically forming the functional sectors, or columns, of civil society and laterally forming into ascending levels of institutional development’ (Onuf 2013 [2005]: 187; see also 1998: 263-266, 2013 [2012]: 205-212).

Moreover, ‘[o]ne of the innovations of the modern world is precisely the idea that ethical conduct need not depend on an internalized set of rules’, being dependent instead ‘on a general mandated procedure for discovering a few universal rules – rules applicable to humanity as a whole, rules that any reasonable person can satisfactorily apply to any possible situation’ (Onuf 2016c: 5). Inclusiveness and generalization should not be confused with a progressivist or teleological account of history (as the Liberal and certain Cosmopolitan stories do, Onuf would remind us). Also, if one recalls the relation between rule and rules discussed before, inequality and exploitation are permanent features, however historically variable.

The story of modernization being told is summarized in the following passage, deserving full quotation:

The Enlightenment campaign against inherited privilege and for equality of treatment is, of course, something that most of us admire a great deal. Yet it is wrong to think that, once dispatched, status ordering and stratification will never return, or that they can never matter very much in a society where modern institutions are fully functional. Indeed, I would suggest that we conceptualize

modernization in three steps. First, the old regime of status is dispatched, and then modern institutions are put in place. Finally, status markers are adapted to new circumstances, rules for participating in modern society are selectively broadened, and stratification resumes its place in giving society its structural integrity. (Onuf 2013 [2005]: 194; see also 1998: 18-23, 249-276, 2013 [2012]: 209-212, 2016c: 2-3, 12-16)

Onuf's Republicanism is attached to a commitment to (the promise of) Enlightenment and its alleged campaign for 'equality of treatment'; and it is built from a demarcation between 'traditional' and 'modern societies', with the subtleties he emphasizes in the transitional moments identified in the story, one in which 'old ontologies never die' (Onuf 2013 [2012]: 203; see also 2017c: 27).

Onuf's story is modernizing in its own way. A 'modern yet status-ordered world' (Onuf 2016c: 12) has been formed and become global in its reach; in the process, elements of 'traditional societies' have been adapted, or have been adapting themselves, to 'modern societies'.<sup>16</sup> Onuf's critique of, and opposition to, Liberalism is detached from an opposition to Enlightenment. Rather, it is attached to a certain Enlightenment, which includes a certain conception of knowledge: 'constructivism as presented is *not* post-modern because it does not challenge the Enlightenment belief in the possibility of meaningful knowledge about the world we live in' (Onuf 2013 [2002]: 29, emphasis in the original).<sup>17</sup> This 'world we live in', and about which one has the task of producing 'meaningful knowledge', is one in which status, selective participation and stratification are globally arranged, being anchored in 'material conditions that are only marginally susceptible to change' (Onuf 2013 [2005]: 194). No meaningful knowledge, no adequate ethics for the present world and the world to come.

Onuf is aware that telling the story of modernity from a constructivist framework involves a combination of philosophical idealism (articulated with Aristotle, Kant and the linguistic turn, as said above) with materialist statements referring to temporal markers or discontinuities, however 'unreflective' his materialism may sometimes be (see Onuf 2012: 112, 2010a: 260). Therefore, his constructivism does not preclude a periodizing definition of modernity that sets it apart from other epochs, even if this ontological stance is neither philosophically realist nor a progressist history, and is inseparable from the metaphors it puts at play (see Onuf 2024). It is through this combination that one should understand formulations such as the one above, proposing a story of modernization in three steps; or the following one: the 'modern episteme developed a discontinuity, first manifest in the theory of evolution and on full display by 1900' (Onuf 2017d: 22; see also 2010a: 273).<sup>18</sup>

In sum, if it is the case that discontinuities do not imply complete ruptures, it is also the case that, in Onuf's story, the modern episteme has been given a historical beginning, a 'tabular form' that 'spatializes time' into an 'ordered whole', that is, into an identifiable historical *centre*.<sup>19</sup> An elegant and powerful formulation of that, which I appropriate here to suit my own reconfiguration, puts it as follows: 'Seen from the inside, worlds have

horizons. Visualized from the outside, worlds are wholes composed of many parts, including people who see the world (the world in their heads) more or less the same way' (Onuf 2016c: 1). It is through this double gesture that one can conceive the world 'we' live in – 'the world we know, the world we have made' (Onuf 2013 [2012]: 196) – as the 'modern world', the 'world made modern' (Onuf 2013 [2005]).

## Dangerous beginnings, peripheral (re)beginnings

Onuf's framework aims at crafting a better ontology of the human being as a 'rational agent' and a better historical ontology of 'modernity'. These beginnings have a purpose: to open up (speaking) conditions for a better (conception of) politics. The articulation of this purpose is not dogmatic or uncritical. As Onuf states (2017a: 190, emphasis added), '[m]y personal preference for republican arrangements has worked their way into my scholarship. I know my Aristotle, I recognize the dangers specific to republican rule, and I publicly advocate an updated virtue ethics to mitigate those *dangers*.' Onuf has constantly made explicit the way he sets his beginnings and the important implications of these *deeds* (after all, setting a beginning is fundamentally a deed) to his framework and his (conception of) politics. Actually, the permanent exposure of this awareness is another contribution Onuf provides to critical thinking.

In what follows, I will neither contrast alternative beginnings with his, nor will I tell a different story, one in which we have never been modern (or rational) or one pointing out that other existing peoples are not modern (or rational).<sup>20</sup> My purpose is, instead, to operate *from* his beginnings, *with and against* them, indicating *peripheral (re)beginnings* to that which occupies the *central* place in Onuf's constructivism, that is, 'modernity' and 'rationality'.

### (Re)Beginning with rationality

Onuf exposes a confessedly 'psychocultural penchant for logocentrism', which leads his constructivism to begin with the distinction between being and non-being.<sup>21</sup> 'Being', in turn, is submitted to the triple differentiation mentioned above. Ultimately, it is the 'rational being' that is privileged over any other form of being.<sup>22</sup>

Returning to Aristotle's *Politics*, from which Onuf takes the notion of 'the gift of speech', one reads:

Now, that man is more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animals is evident. Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and *man is the only animal whom she has endowed with the gift of speech*. And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals..., the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil,

of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state. (Aristotle 1995: 1988, emphasis added)

Aristotle's differentiation between 'speech' (*logos*) and 'mere voice' (*phônê*) is also a differentiation between the *nature* of 'man' and the *nature* of other beings. 'Man' is *naturally* a *political* animal, because *nature* has endowed 'man' with that quality.<sup>23</sup>

Being faithful to the constructivist *beginning with the deed*, there would be no ground to simply assume that *beginning with rationality* is not itself a deed. Had Onuf postulated that 'rationality' is an identifiable essence (or *noumenon*) of the 'human', he would have contradicted his philosophical idealist, post-Kantian stance.<sup>24</sup> Yet, being endowed with the power of speech does not imply in itself that every exercise of this speech will be a political activity. Sticking to Aristotelian terms, one has that, to be effectively engaged in political activity, the exercise of speech should be linked to the differentiation of the good and the evil, of the just and the unjust.

As previously discussed, to Onuf (1989: 2, 2001: 236), activities are political whenever members of a social arrangement consider them as 'the most important ones engaging their attention'. The distinction between 'rational beings' and other forms of life (including 'irrational beings') has been one of the activities human beings have been historically most attentive to in the so-called Western intellectual history. In face of that, one cannot neglect that *beginning with rationality* has been a fundamentally *political* deed among 'Westerns'.<sup>25</sup>

(To be clear: I am not disputing Onuf's beginning in order to postulate in its place that 'human beings' are *indeed* not 'rational' or not distinguishable from 'non-human' forms of life. My concern here is rather to call the attention to the way in which the triple differentiation Onuf relies upon has been historically part of the activities human beings have been most attentively engaged in, which is Onuf's definition for a 'political activity' in the first place.)

It was seen above how Aristotle differentiates humans from bees on the grounds that it is only the former that are 'endowed with speech', therefore being capable of political activity, and not only of gregarious coexistence. Jean-Jacques Rousseau also brings bees to the scene. According to him, '[t]hose who, among them [the animals], work and live in common, such as Beavers, ants, and bees, have some natural language in order to communicate amongst themselves' (Rousseau 1998: 293). However, to these animals, language is 'natural', given 'by birth', so 'they do not change them, nor do they make the slightest progress in them. Conventional language belongs only to man. That is why man makes progress, whether for good or bad, and why the animals do not at all' (293). Karl Marx, in turn, presupposes that labour is an exclusively human characteristic, in that it moves humans 'beyond animal instinct' (Blaney and Inayatullah 2010: 174): 'what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax' (Karl Marx cited in Blaney and Inayatullah 2010: 174). Purposive labour is constitutive of the possibility of progress, not only setting 'humans' apart from 'non-humans', but also 'capitalist societies' temporally apart from

societies placed in previous stages of development (Blaney and Inayatullah 2010). In sum, both Rousseau and Marx, in differentiating humans from other animals, are taking part in a certain way of sense- and world-making that has been a fundamental concern of human beings (at least in the so-called Western intellectual history) in the making of themselves as ‘rational beings’, as well as in the making of ‘modern world’.

Now, take the difference between adult and children. One could remind oneself here not only of the history of the very concept of ‘childhood’, including its mobilization by international organizations (see Tabak 2020), but also of how infantilization has been a crucial feature in the reproduction of colonial relations. Onuf is aware of that. For him, ‘infantilization’ is a ‘pathology’ of ‘our allegedly modern yet status-ordered world’; he even notices that it has been ‘an effective technique for colonial administration’ and that it remains present in ‘postcolonial settings’, as well as in ‘modern, and ostensibly liberal, societies’ (see Onuf 2016c: 15-16). That consideration does not lead him, however, to a more careful investigation of how this differentiation has been historically constructed. I would suggest that the appropriation of the adult/children differentiation, taken as an assessment about stages of cognitive development, by practices of infantilization, is a fundamental feature in the making of modernity. One should recall that the history of the vocabulary of cognitive development has been widely entangled with the history (and the philosophy of history) of progress linked to state and national development more generally.<sup>26</sup>

In sum, the *triple differentiation* constitutive of Onuf’s *beginning* with the ‘rational agent’ has been receiving a special concern by human beings, which means, in his terms, that it has comprised a *political activity* throughout the so-called Western intellectual history. Moreover, this political activity has been crucial to the making of what has come to be called ‘modernity’, and its relation to ‘non-modern’ worlds and agents.<sup>27</sup> To frame it differently, this triple differentiation has been part of a political activity that *centralizes* the ‘modern world’ and the ‘modern, rational agent’, while making ‘non-modern’ worlds and agents *peripheral*, conceived as *backward* or *excluded* from the *whole of humanity*.

### (Re)Beginning with modernity

In my reconfiguration of Nick Onuf’s constructivism, I emphasized that it sets its beginnings not only in ‘rationality’, but also in the ‘modern world’. However, it seems to me that the practice of periodization that is the condition of possibility for the distinction between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ societies requires further problematization.

In Kathleen Davis’ (2008: 3) definition, periodization is ‘not simply the drawing of an arbitrary line through time, but a complex process of conceptualizing categories, which are posited as homogenous and retroactively validated by the designation of a period divide’. Periodization carries an ‘exclusionary force’ to the extent that this line-drawing imposes homogeneities in face of differences that sometimes evade that clear-cut divide. There seems to be a double move of inclusion and exclusion at play. On the one hand, there is the exclusion of certain societies from the spatiotemporal position that includes

other societies. On the other hand, there is a scaling of societies according to a single historical time, relying on a certain diffusionist perspective of history.

Onuf's periodization relies on a distinction between 'traditional' and 'modern' societies, linked to a diffusionist story that erases the political dimension of the periodizing act itself. By arguing that 'modernity' is now 'global', Onuf homogenizes different modalities of coexistence – different 'social arrangements', to keep with his terms – into variations upon the 'modern world' in which 'we' supposedly live. In this sense, his story reproduces a frame that Dipesh Chakrabarty called 'historicist'. In the latter's words, '[h]istoricism is what made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but rather as something that became global *over time*, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it' (Chakrabarty 2000: 7, emphasis in the original).<sup>28</sup>

Onuf's Republican stance, coupled with his commitment to Enlightenment, is almost completely silent on the relation between both and colonialism. The Enlightenment campaign 'against privilege' and for 'equality of treatment', 'something that most of us admire a great deal' (Onuf 2013 [2005]: 194), is not brought to the table with a careful discussion of its coexistence with colonial and imperial relations. It is true that Onuf (2004) outlines a short story of the 'Eurocentric' definition of 'civilization' formulated by 'Enlightened Europeans', but considerations such as this one often come in pieces, not deserving the same systematic reconstruction that Republicanism and Liberalism *within* Europe and the United States are made to deserve. As Siba Grovogui pointed out in relation to Onuf's story about 'modernity', its confessedly limited historical and geographical reach in terms of the intellectual tradition under scrutiny coexists with the postulation of a generalized 'we' referring to a 'collective present' (see Grovogui, 2006: 110-115). By being almost exclusively 'European', the story Onuf tells about the formation of 'republican ideas' (mainly in Onuf 1998) leaves a lot out of perspective, especially the 'complex processes and practices' played out in colonial settings, 'few [of them] republican in inspiration', through which 'Republicanism' came to be formulated in 'Europe' (Grovogui 2006: 115).<sup>29</sup> The main story is *centred* on a certain 'West', so that its *peripheral* settings are mostly neglected.

It is not my purpose here to tell a better, historically more accurate story, in order to contrast it with the Onuf's story of a globally-diffused modern world.<sup>30</sup> Rather, I want to draw attention to how, in Onuf's story, Enlightenment is submitted to an internal critique, which targets mostly Liberalism, salvages Republicanism, and preserves what is taken to be its *central* ground: modern rationality.<sup>31</sup> Not to salvage Enlightenment would imply, following Onuf's constructivism, *going too far, being too radical*.

So, one is almost put before what Foucault once characterized as a 'blackmail'. As a hub of cultural, institutional, social, political, historical and economic conditions, 'Enlightenment', Foucault says, remains a crucial site of interrogation, '[b]ut that does not mean that one has to be "for" or "against" Enlightenment' (Foucault 1997: 120). Actually, it means the need to refuse simplistic alternatives: 'you either accept and remain within the tradition of its rationalism...; or else you criticize and then try to escape from its principles of rationality' (Foucault 1997: 120). This refusal requires a 'limit-attitude',

that is, to move beyond an either/or logic, in order to be ‘at the frontiers’, ‘reflecting upon limits’ (Foucault 1997: 124).

Walter D. Mignolo’s notion of ‘colonial difference’ seems helpful on that. To him, ‘[y]esterday the colonial difference was out there, away from the center. Today it is all over, in the peripheries of the center and in the centers of the periphery’ (Mignolo 2012: xxv).<sup>32</sup> Colonial difference, in his definition, is ‘the space where coloniality of power is enacted’, where ‘*local* histories inventing and implementing global designs meet *local* histories, the space in which global designs have to be adapted, adopted, rejected, integrated, or ignored’ (xxv, emphasis in the original).<sup>33</sup> Or, as he puts elsewhere, it is ‘a connector that... refers to the changing faces of colonial differences throughout the history of modern/colonial world-system and brings to the foreground the planetary dimension of human history silenced by discourses centering on modernity, postmodernity, and Western civilization’ (Mignolo 2002: 61-62).<sup>34</sup> This encounter is at once physical and imaginary, material and social. Hence, colonial difference sets certain beginnings (also dangerous) that defy diffusionist stories of modernity and expose a ‘modern/colonial world-system.’

The tracks paved by Davis’s approach of periodization as political acts, and by Mignolo’s discussion (after Quijano) of how the coloniality of power is constitutive of the ‘modern/colonial world system’, contribute to the problematization of stories such as Onuf’s, by emphasizing that the sense- and world-making of ‘modernity’ has been historically inseparable from the colonial difference it entails, including the acts of periodization distinguishing ‘moderns’ from ‘non-moderns.’<sup>35</sup>

I take no issue in principle with Onuf’s stance that ‘beginnings are unavoidable.’ I concede they appear to be so, and I am ready to save this appearance for its political force. That does not mean, however, that one must begin in a metaphysical, logocentric place defined *a priori*. Hence, I would make two propositions regarding what was previously discussed. First, human and social processes rely on acts of differentiation, including those making ‘the social’ and ‘the human’ themselves, not to mention the acts of periodization differentiating ‘modern’ from ‘non-modern’ social arrangements. Second, it is important to be attentive to how claims regarding the ‘rationality’ of the ‘agent’ are often mobilized exactly to the end of making and legitimizing an ‘agent’ that is conceived to be ‘rational’, as opposed to ‘irrational’, ‘immature’, ‘emotional’ and/or ‘non-rational’ beings.

That said, one can *move ahead, dangerously, with and against* Onuf’s beginnings: *with* them, one remains faithful to the assertion that ‘in the beginning was the deed’ and all the crucial implications this has to rethink the relation between rule and rules in politics; *against* them, one problematizes both the assumption that rationality itself is not constituted through political activities, and the historical statements erasing the political act of periodization in the differentiation between ‘moderns’ and ‘non-moderns.’ (Re)beginning with the deed is a way to tackle the political processes making these *centres*, while other forms of being are made *peripheral*. In that vein, *peripheral (re)beginnings* are a way to strengthen constructivism’s speech about politics, to refresh its (conception of) politics.

## Concluding remarks; or, re(beginning) with the deed

The metaphor of centre/periphery has been rejected by Onuf in a lecture given at PUC-Rio, Rio de Janeiro. Affirming this metaphor would imply reaffirming the ‘asymmetric relation of the two terms’, which ‘contributes to the social construction of the periphery as an unwanted state of affairs’, ‘perpetuates a division of labor in which scholars from the center produce theories and scholars from the periphery consume them’, and ‘devalues the lived experience of billions of people and not just a few scholars’ (Onuf 2013 [2012]: 195-196). In that vein, following Foucault’s insights in *History of Sexuality* (Volume 1), Onuf claims that the dispersion of power in the ‘modern age’ is better captured by a functional language that makes the talk of centre and periphery ‘empty’ (Onuf 2013 [2012]: 202-3), ‘atrophied’ or ‘irrelevant’ (212). In his view, place will dissolve into flows, functional differentiation will proceed and stratification will be verified in proliferating networks in a world of massive and growing inequality.

Back to Foucault’s book, however, one sees that his critique of the notion of a centre irradiating power does not require abandoning the notions of centre and periphery. One reads, for instance, that the nineteenth century witnessed the appearance of multiple forms of ‘peripheral sexualities [*sexualités périphériques*]’ (Foucault 1976: 54, 56, 58, 66). In this period, ‘regular sexuality [*sexualité régulière*]’ has been questioned anew, ‘through a reflux movement, from these peripheral sexualities’ (54). Actually, the case could be made that Foucault relies on a functional language coupled with the problematization of a dichotomous conception of centre/periphery, in which either side would be conceived as a given *beginning*.

My reconfiguration of Onuf’s craft, creative undertaking and framework has indicated tracks towards a refreshment of the centre/periphery metaphor.<sup>36</sup> Instead of reaffirming asymmetric relations, unwanted states of affairs, and divisions of labour; instead of devaluing lived experiences of various people, my wager is that the metaphor contributes to a critique of modernity that calls social exploitation in human affairs for what it is, for what it does, for how it does it. That includes the exploitative practices conducted in name of (the making of) the ‘rational agent’ and the ‘modern condition’.

I already mentioned that the notion of ‘rule’ (translated from the German *Herrschaft*) is *central* to Onuf’s conception of politics. Martin Heidegger (2000: 130, emphasis on ‘rule’ added) once posed the following question: ‘How does this *logos*, as reason and understanding, come to *rule* over Being at the beginning (*Anfang*) of Greek Philosophy?’<sup>37</sup> The German word for ‘rule’ in the question is *Herrschaft*. Moving ahead with Heidegger’s question, Jacques Derrida warned that a ‘founding event’ becomes ‘all the more irreducible and confusing’ (Derrida 2009: 333) when one abandons a linear history or an either/or logic cutting history into successive stages or epistemes. Stipulating an epochal change, a founding moment (even if the contours of this moment are said to spread throughout centuries), in sum, setting beginnings is an act that has no absolute, originary ground. The unavoidability of setting beginnings coexists with the ultimate impossibility of a pure beginning, a pure origin. Paraphrasing Derrida, this political act calls for a ‘greater vigilance as to our irrepressible desire for the threshold’ (Derrida 2009: 442).

Onuf, the figure here reconfigured, has always been explicit about his ‘psychocultural penchant for logocentrism’. He has been less explicit, however, about how this logocentrism has come to rule (*Herrschaft*), that is, how his logocentric *beginnings* have for long now become *central* to certain conditions of rule. The setting of beginnings is often a political act that manages life and death among ontological possibilities and potentialities, managing at the same time pasts, presents, futures. If, and only if, that is taken into account, then I subscribe entirely to the following duty: ‘There is no solution to the human reality of exploitation. Even in the absence of a solution, we must call exploitation what it is, in all the ways that it is what it is’ (Onuf 1989: 289).

## Deeds

*This text, a deed, follows what is taken to be the conventional rules constituting the prevailing conditions of rule in the academic social arrangement. It has also been crossed by personal gratitude, intellectual indebtedness, status cultivation, reproduction of privileges (of class, gender, and race), and (in)securities of many sorts. All that (and much more) have made this deed what it is, how it is crafted.*

*Onuf once said about his work that it was matter for readers of ‘taking it or leaving it’ (see Onuf 2017b: 30). I would rather inhabit its edges, where ‘metaphors refresh concepts’ (see Onuf 2024).*

*Statement one: deeds cannot be put into pre-defined kinds, no matter if into two, three or four of them. Two: beginnings and purposes are not fully understandable in terms of rationality, be it Western or modern – on that, I would take Antonin Artaud not a cartoonish figure, but an important reminder of the madness in any rational act. Three: I am not (so) sure self-control, supposedly acquired over time by cognitive development and maturity, should necessarily be the guide to responsibility. Four: although I would doubtless accept the crucial relevance of human beings in any framework interested in (the conception of) politics, I would not readily accept that humans must be conceived, to begin with, as rational modern humans. Peripheral disagreements?*

## Notes

- 1 For Onuf’s account on the receptions of constructivism in different parts of the world, see Onuf (2001b: 242-5, 252-4; Schouten, 2015). But see Onuf (2016a) for a statement that constructivism has ‘slowed down’ and is currently ‘at the crossroads.’
- 2 The list is far from exhaustive and each text invariably deals with more than one of the themes or concerns mentioned. I have not considered in this list Nick Onuf’s intellectual partnership with Peter Onuf.
- 3 This formulation is a response to his own question: ‘Is my work since 1989 just a long coda to a singular, significant statement? Or is my legacy a body of work to be taken as a whole?’ (Onuf 2016b: 120).
- 4 By ‘reconfiguration’ I mean an interpretive act resembling what Onuf (2017d: 16) himself stated in relation to Michel Foucault: ‘I have configured him [Michel Foucault] – I should say, reconfigured it [the figure of Foucault] – to suit myself.’
- 5 ‘Rule’ is the translation Onuf proposes to the German term *Herrschaft* (see Onuf 1989, especially ch.6). I will get back to that term later.

- 6 According to Jens Bartelson (2015: 15), the concept of 'society' in *World of Our Making* carries a 'semantic baggage' linked to intellectual commitments, and political and scientific problems of legitimacy at the 'threshold of European modernity'. In my view, this is a selective interpretation, leaving out of the equation the Western, but non-modern, foundations of Onuf's constructivism.
- 7 This shift has been differently emphasized by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson (2017) and Oliver Kessler (2016).
- 8 For Onuf's own assessment of that, see Onuf (2016b).
- 9 For other engagements with Aristotle, see Onuf (1998, especially part I, 2013 [2006/2009], 2013 [2009]a, 2013 [2009]b: 102-103, 2013 [2010]a, 2013 [2010]b: 133-ff, 2016c, 2018, ch.1).
- 10 It is not my purpose to discuss whether Onuf's reading of either is accurate, but to understand how the contrast serves him as a way of demarcating his notion of agency. Charlotte Epstein has also noted how Onuf demarcates his constructivism in relation to 'poststructuralism', particularly in relation to Derrida (see Epstein 2013: 501, 512-513). See also Onuf (2010b).
- 11 It is worth mentioning that Onuf is referring here to the late Luhmann (2002), who is particularly indebted to Derrida, who Onuf considers, ironically perhaps, to be an 'intimidating figure' and, less ironically, a 'conceptual provocateur' (Onuf, 2013 [2009]a: 142).
- 12 Here is the quotation: 'The strong bias in Western culture grants structure or position priority over process or change. Being trumps becoming; every place has its time; things change only as things first and last; constitution is a state of affairs then subject to causation' (Onuf 2017e: 66-7).
- 13 For instance: 'Cats and infants do not act intentionally; they do not have goals and they do not make plans for their achievement' (Onuf 2013 [2003]: 85; see also 2018: 24).
- 14 The epigraphs to Parts I and II of the 1989 book come from Foucault. The epigraph to Part IV – 'Making sense of modernity' – of his 2013 collection of essays comes from Ian Hacking mentioning Foucault. Onuf (2017c: 20) has said that his first encounter with Foucault's thinking was in 1981, which made him '[see] the modern world in a new light' (see also 2012, and 2016b: 117-8). However, Onuf (2013 [2012]: 199, 2017d: 23-27; further elaborated in 2018) claims that law is a fourth body of knowledge that Foucault neglected in his discussion of life (biology), labour (political economy) and language (philology).
- 15 For another demarcation of 'modernity', centred on 'sovereignty', see Onuf (1991). Through the notion of 'transition', Onuf tells a story of 'modernity' and also speculates about some contemporary developments in 'the ontological space of Western culture' that are related to a possible 'epochal change' (see Onuf 2013 [2012]: 207-212, and mainly 2018).
- 16 Onuf (2018: 29) states that 'the modern world' is a 'society reaching across most of Western Europe four hundred years ago and now across the globe.'
- 17 Elsewhere, he articulates his position, as opposed to the 'post-modern' one, as one that 'takes the Enlightenment project of universal reason, individual moral autonomy, representative political institutions, technical rationalization and material progress as flawed, egregiously perhaps, but not beyond the possibility of reconstruction' (Onuf 1994: 4). The 'Enlightenment project' can and needs to be 'salvaged' (4).
- 18 The discontinuity in modern episteme is associated by Onuf to 'modernism', which he takes as a period *within* the modern epoch (see Onuf 2009, 2012, 2013 [2012], 2018).
- 19 All terms in quotation marks come from the final paragraph of Onuf (2012).
- 20 Although I think both kinds of stories are relevant.
- 21 In Patrick Thaddeus Jackson (2011: 197), a 'psychocultural penchant' is an 'an existential leap of faith' that would 'presume, at least provisionally, the validity of particular wagers about the mind-world "hook-up"'. I am treating this 'existential leap of faith' here as a *political deed*.
- 22 I take here a different route from the ones by Zehfuss (2002: 186-195) and Epstein (2013: 508-511). Zehfuss argues that, by assuming the existence of a certain 'reality' limiting social constructions, Onuf's constructivism is contradictory, unable to understand how the very definition of 'reality' as a 'limit' is a political deed (Zehfuss 2002: 186-95). In my view, there is no contradiction here. Even if there is something like a 'limit' put by materiality to human social constructions, it is not accessible in itself and does not operate in terms of cause-effect relations. By contaminating each other, the relation between them is conceivable only through deeds. Now, Zehfuss (2002) and Epstein (2013: 508-11) do bring an

important point in problematizing Onuf's assumption regarding the 'independent, "natural" reality of individuals as materially situated biological beings' (Onuf 1989: 40). One thing is to say that 'the material' and 'the social' condition and contaminate one another; another thing, related to, but by no means necessarily derived from, the former, is to stipulate an independent biological reality to human beings without considering how the 'biological body' has been historically inscribed in relations of power, or, in Onuf's terms, in conditions of rule. I would say that Onuf's constructivism comprises three aspects: (1) the relation between 'the material' and 'the social', conceivable only through social processes; (2) the definition of a biological human body independent from social processes; and (3) the definition of human being as the only rational being. I agree with the first; I would challenge the necessity of the second to his constructivism, but will not do it here; and I will problematize the third below.

- 23 Around this passage just quoted, diverse thinkers such as Rancière (1995: 19), Agamben (1998: 2-3) and Derrida (2009: 348-349) have proposed reflections on the *beginnings of politics, of sovereignty, of humanity*.
- 24 I think Epstein does not do full justice to Onuf's framework when she states that the identification of 'competence' as a 'biological trait' implies relapsing into a 'naturalist fallacy' (see Epstein, 2013: 509). Two things on that. First. The Aristotelian language of reason as natural to human beings is just part of the story; as I suggested, Onuf's return to Aristotle is mediated by Kant and the linguistic turn. And Onuf is aware that his beginning is a deed. Second. To a certain extent, Epstein's critique identifies in Onuf's 'absent center' (that is, a materiality stipulated to be beyond the social world and functioning as the condition of possibility of his theorization) something that 'haunts constructivist theorizing' (Epstein 2013: 511). Although I appreciate Epstein's philosophical stance and its corresponding concepts of 'subject' and 'language', I think the critique being made is mostly external to the beginnings Onuf sets to his constructivism. This leads Epstein to think that certain statements 'haunt' constructivism when, indeed, they can be entirely compatible with the framework proposed by Onuf. See footnote 22, however.
- 25 In Robbie Shilliam's (2011: 2) terms: 'The attribution of who can "think" and produce valid knowledge of human existence has always been political.'
- 26 For how the idea of 'development' traverses 'developmental psychology', 'capitalism' and the 'modern state', see Lopez, Coutinho and Domecq (2017). For different critiques on the notion of 'development' in international politics, see Escobar (1995) and Kapoor (2017). Onuf (2018) notes that 'development' is a metaphor attached to affective and normative aspects, being affirmative for most 'beneficiaries of modernity', at the same time that it is an 'arrogant assumption' of superiority and 'the willful destruction of other ways of life', for some 'postcolonial critics.'
- 27 From a different angle, Kessler (2016: 62) notes that 'Eurocentrism' and 'colonial and imperial rule' are currently still explored in terrains other than constructivist ones. Moreover, Kessler makes an important contribution to the problematization of what I am discussing here as constructivist *beginnings*, even if, in my view, his discussion of 'the third' (see Kessler 2016: 58-63) does not move much ahead in relation to what Onuf frames as 'condition of rule.'
- 28 For more on 'periodization' and the 'denial of coevalness' in international relations theories, see Chamon and Lage (2015) and Lage and Chamon (2016), respectively.
- 29 See also Inayatullah and Blaney (2004), Blaney and Inayatullah (2010) and Shilliam (2011) for interventions concerned with the relation between 'West' and 'non-West' in co-constitutive processes of imperialism, colonialism and modernity.
- 30 Although this is possible, even desirable. I have been trying to unfold that myself elsewhere.
- 31 In the prologue of his 2018 book, Onuf (2018: 5) acknowledges, '[m]any readers will justly accuse me of Eurocentrism, for I make less effort than many of my peers to tell the story as if I were an outsider, an observer from afar. I do not postulate "multiple modernities" (Eisenstadt 2000), dwell on colonial barbarities, recapitulate theories of imperialism, or apologize for the modern world's ingrained racism and ritualized hypocrisies. Insofar as I stand in judgment, and in this book issue a verdict (Chapter 11), I do so with great sadness for what this community of mine has wrought'. Eisenstadt's text mentioned is: Eisenstadt, S. N. 2000. Multiple Modernities, *Daedalus* 129(1): 1-29.
- 32 Whether 'yesterday' colonial difference marked indeed a clear-cut separation between 'centre' and 'periphery' is another discussion altogether.

- 33 For a previous take on ‘coloniality of power’, see Aníbal Quijano (2000).
- 34 That does not imply an anti-modern position according to which particularities (should) trump universalities, non-moderns (should) trump modernity – this would be, indeed, my main resistance to some implications of Mignolo’s texts. See Domingues (2009).
- 35 This inseparability is by no means necessary or logically inherent to modernity, but I will not discuss that here.
- 36 ‘Refreshment’ being itself a metaphor, as Onuf (2018, Preface) recalls.
- 37 I have modified the English translation, which prefers ‘inception’ to ‘beginning’ for the German *Anfang*. In what follows, I am indebted to Derrida’s (2009: 317-49) take on Heidegger’s question.

## Acknowledgements

This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - Brasil (CAPES) - Finance Code 001.

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## About the author

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# Intercâmbio sobre ‘Metaphoricizing Modernity’ de Nick Onuf, Parte I – Começos Perigosos, (Re)Começos Periféricos: Uma Reconfiguração do Construtivismo de Nick Onuf

**Resumo:** O construtivismo de Nick Onuf é uma das contribuições mais importantes para o campo das relações internacionais no que diz respeito ao intercâmbio entre as teorias social e política e a filosofia. Neste texto, engajo-me com o conjunto da obra de Onuf. O fio condutor da problematização que proponho é tecido por meio da atenção ao modo como o ofício e o esforço criativo de Onuf estabelecem certos começos na construção de sua abordagem, e como essa definição tem implicações importantes para (a concepção de) “política”. Argumento que a concepção de política de Onuf é sustentada por dois começos centrais: a concepção dos seres humanos como “agentes racionais” e o enquadramento do que veio a ser chamado de “modernidade”. Dessa forma, enfatizo o que me parece ser a contribuição mais duradoura que seu trabalho pode oferecer não só para o campo das relações internacionais, mas também para as teorias social e política contemporâneas de modo mais geral. A primeira seção delinea a relação que Onuf estabelece entre *rules* e *rule*, enquanto as duas seções seguintes tratam, respectivamente, de suas concepções de “agência” e do “mundo moderno”. Meu objetivo nessas três primeiras seções é reconfigurar o construtivismo de Onuf. A quarta e última seção avança, dando um passo adiante – talvez longe demais, talvez radical demais –, traçando um engajamento crítico com sua obra por meio de (re)começos periféricos.

**Palavras-chave:** Construtivismo; modernidade; racionalidade; centro-periferia; política.

*Received on 20 October 2022 and approved for publication on 11 October 2023.*



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