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Not peer-reviewed version

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Posted Date: 12 January 2026

doi: 10.20944/preprints202601.0857.v1

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Article

Beyond Nation-Building and State-Building: Nationology as a Regenerative Science of Political Communities

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Abstract

Traditional paradigms of nation-building and state-building have dominated political theory and international policy for decades, yet their explanatory and prescriptive power remains limited in postcolonial and conflict-affected contexts. Recurrent instability, institutional fragility, and governance failure are often interpreted as operational deficiencies, yet this article contends that the root cause is primarily **epistemological**. Existing frameworks fragment political life into discrete domains—institutions, identity, legitimacy—while remaining anchored in Westphalian assumptions that fail to capture the dynamic, adaptive nature of political communities. This article introduces **Nationology**, a novel transdisciplinary science dedicated to the study of nations as **living, adaptive systems** whose persistence depends on regenerative processes rather than mere stabilization. Nationology integrates insights from political theory, comparative constitutionalism, postcolonial scholarship, and systems science to provide a unified analytical framework encompassing institutions, collective meaning, historical memory, leadership intelligence, and legitimacy. Using the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** as a paradigmatic case of systemic complexity, the article demonstrates why conventional paradigms systematically misread patterns of persistence, fragility, and renewal. The study concludes that the future of political order relies not on institutional replication alone but on a community's capacity to **regenerate meaning, legitimacy, and collective coherence under systemic strain**. Nationology thus offers a transformative lens for political theory, global constitutionalism, and the science of sustainable political communities.

Keywords: nationology; political community; nation-building; state-building; postcolonial theory; legitimacy; systems theory; regenerative governance

1. Introduction

The study of political order has long revolved around the twin paradigms of **nation-building** and **state-building**, both of which have profoundly shaped international policy, scholarly inquiry, and global governance frameworks (Sterken & Pohl, 2023 ; Yang, 2021). Nation-building traditionally emphasizes collective identity, shared narratives, and symbolic cohesion, while state-building privileges institutional capacity, sovereignty, and the monopoly of legitimate coercion (DeBattista, 2024 ; Anderson, 2020; Weber, 1978; Fukuyama, 2017). Together, these paradigms underpin interventions ranging from post-conflict reconstruction to constitutional design across much of the Global South.

Yet, despite conceptual refinement and extensive policy experimentation, these frameworks repeatedly **fail to account for the resilience and fragility of political communities in postcolonial contexts**. States such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Haiti exemplify the persistent gap between externally prescribed state-building programs and the lived political realities on the ground. Conventional analyses frequently attribute these shortcomings to

corruption, elite capture, or implementation gaps (Herbst, 2015; Rotberg, 2024). While these factors matter, they obscure a more fundamental issue: existing paradigms are epistemologically constrained and structurally inadequate for understanding the adaptive, living nature of political communities.

At the heart of this inadequacy lies a **Westphalian inheritance**. Modern political theory continues to privilege centralized sovereignty, linear institutional sequencing, and territorially bounded models of state formation largely derived from European experience (Tilly, 1990). Consequently, postcolonial societies are measured against a normative template that presumes a specific path to consolidation, legitimacy, and institutional stability (Balarabe, 2025). Deviations are interpreted as failure, rather than as alternative modes of political persistence or regeneration.

This epistemic asymmetry has profound implications. It obscures forms of political life outside formal institutions, including **informal governance arrangements, symbolic systems of legitimacy, and collective memory** shaped by colonial extraction and postcolonial struggle (Mbembe, 2001; Mamdani, 2018). It also neglects **non-linear dynamics of political change**, in which collapse, fragmentation, improvisation, and regeneration are not merely anomalies but essential features of systemic adaptation.

While postcolonial theory, comparative constitutionalism, and systems thinking have offered fragmented critiques of these limitations (Chatterjee, 1998; Tushnet, 2015; Luhmann, 1995; Capra & Luisi, 2014), no coherent scientific framework has yet integrated the multiple dimensions of political community—**institutions, identity, legitimacy, memory, leadership, and adaptive capacity**—into a **single, analytically rigorous lens**. This gap constitutes a structural blind spot in contemporary political theory.

This article introduces **Nationology**, a **distinct transdisciplinary science of political communities**, designed to address this blind spot. Nationology treats nations not as static institutional constructs or solely as cultural entities but as **living systems**, whose continuity and coherence emerge from dynamic interactions between governance structures, symbolic meaning, leadership intelligence, and collective cognition. Political fragility is therefore understood not merely as institutional deficit, and legitimacy as more than legal procedure or recognition; both are **emergent properties** of systemic coherence across multiple levels of social life. Stability is a **transient phase within longer cycles of political transformation and renewal**, rather than a permanent equilibrium.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is central to this analysis, not as an exceptional case of failure but as a **paradigmatic instance of systemic complexity**. Its vast territorial scale, cultural plurality, history of extreme extraction, and recurring institutional disruption illustrate the limits of conventional paradigms while simultaneously revealing the **regenerative dynamics** that sustain political life outside formal state structures. Nationology enables scholars to **conceptualize these dynamics scientifically**, demonstrating that political persistence under chronic stress is neither accidental nor incomprehensible.

By framing political communities as **adaptive, regenerative systems**, Nationology reconceptualizes the study of legitimacy, governance, and constitutionalism. It foregrounds **epistemic humility**, systemic reflexivity, and the interplay of memory, identity, and institutions as central determinants of political durability. The following sections elaborate on the **epistemic limits of nation-building and state-building**, introduce the conceptual and methodological foundations of Nationology, and explore its implications for **global governance and political theory** in an era of systemic strain.

In doing so, this article establishes Nationology not merely as a critique but as a **new scientific paradigm**, capable of rigorously analyzing the emergence, endurance, fragmentation, and regeneration of political communities across diverse historical and geopolitical contexts.

2. Epistemic Limits of Nation-Building and State-Building

The study of political order has long been dominated by two interrelated paradigms: nation-building and state-building. These frameworks have guided both scholarly analysis and practical interventions across the globe, particularly in postcolonial and conflict-affected societies. Nation-

building traditionally emphasizes the creation of shared identity, collective memory, and symbolic cohesion, conceptualizing the nation as a cultural and social construct that binds diverse communities into a coherent political entity (Anderson, 2020; Taylor, 1994). State-building, by contrast, focuses on institutional structures, sovereignty, and the centralized exercise of authority, aiming to consolidate administrative, coercive, and fiscal capacities under a unified legal framework (Weber, 1978; Fukuyama, 2017; Tilly, 1990). Together, these paradigms suggest a teleological progression in which stable institutions and coherent national identity mutually reinforce each other to produce durable political order.

Yet, empirical experience across multiple postcolonial contexts has revealed the profound limitations of these paradigms. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, externally supported state-building projects have frequently coincided with persistent institutional fragility, recurring conflict, and episodes of governance collapse, while nation-building initiatives have struggled to translate shared symbols and identity narratives into effective political authority (Herbst, 2015; Rotberg, 2024). Similar patterns are observable in Afghanistan, South Sudan, Libya, and Haiti, where the replication of institutional templates derived from Western historical experience has repeatedly failed to stabilize political systems. These outcomes are often interpreted as evidence of operational deficiencies—such as corruption, elite capture, or implementation gaps—but such explanations risk overlooking deeper epistemological flaws embedded in the prevailing theoretical frameworks.

At the core of these flaws is what can be termed institutional reductionism: the tendency to treat political order primarily as a function of formal institutions, legal frameworks, and bureaucratic capacity, while neglecting the interdependent social, symbolic, and historical dimensions of political life (Fukuyama, 2017; Herbst, 2015). This reductionist lens assumes that the replication of formal structures, if executed correctly, will naturally yield stability. However, postcolonial societies demonstrate that political continuity often persists outside, alongside, or even in tension with formal institutions, through networks of informal governance, community-based authority, and locally embedded legitimacy (Mbembe, 2001; Mamdani, 2018). By privileging institutional replication, traditional paradigms systematically misrecognize these adaptive, emergent dynamics, framing them either as anomalies or obstacles to be corrected rather than as integral components of political systems.

Another epistemic constraint arises from the enduring influence of Westphalian assumptions within both nation-building and state-building scholarship. Modern political theory largely derives from the European experience of state formation, privileging territorial sovereignty, centralized authority, and linear progressions of institutional consolidation (Tilly, 1990). Consequently, postcolonial polities are implicitly measured against normative templates that assume a specific sequence: the establishment of legal-rational authority, the integration of diverse communities into a singular national identity, and the stabilization of constitutional norms. When empirical trajectories deviate from these templates, the failure is attributed to deficient institutions or culture, rather than to the inadequacy of the theoretical lens itself (Chatterjee, 1998; Robinson, 2008).

This epistemic asymmetry carries significant consequences for understanding legitimacy. In dominant frameworks, legitimacy is often bifurcated into legal-rational compliance and symbolic recognition, with little attention to the emergent and systemic qualities of legitimacy in complex societies. Yet, evidence from postcolonial contexts indicates that legitimacy frequently arises through dynamic feedback loops involving historical memory, collective identity, leadership practices, and social norms (Mbembe, 2001; Chatterjee, 2019). Institutional performance may thus be neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for political coherence; stability emerges instead from the alignment—or misalignment—of multiple layers of social, symbolic, and institutional life.

Systems theory provides an additional critique of traditional paradigms, revealing their inadequacy for capturing non-linear and adaptive dynamics. Complex social systems operate through recursive feedback loops, emergent behaviors, and multi-scalar interactions that cannot be reduced to linear causality or equilibrium assumptions (Luhmann, 1995; Capra & Luisi, 2014). State collapse, institutional fragility, or episodic conflict are therefore not solely indicators of failure but

may constitute moments of systemic adaptation and transformation. Yet, nation-building and state-building frameworks often treat such phenomena as pathologies to be corrected, rather than as expressions of underlying regenerative processes.

Postcolonial scholarship further underscores the limits of dominant paradigms. Chatterjee (1998, 2019) and Mamdani (2018) highlight the colonial origins of modern state institutions and the enduring effects of externally imposed borders, extractive governance, and legal-rational hierarchies. Mbembe (2001) illustrates how postcolonial societies continue to negotiate political authority through hybrid forms of governance, where formal institutions coexist with informal networks, collective memory, and negotiated legitimacy. These insights reveal that the apparent failures of conventional frameworks are, in many cases, structural blind spots: they misrecognize the complex adaptive nature of political communities.

Finally, recent scholarship on failed or fragile states has emphasized the need to move beyond operationalist explanations. Rotberg (2024) documents how conventional state-building initiatives repeatedly underestimate the systemic complexity of postcolonial polities, while Herbst (2015) demonstrates that authority and control in African states are contingent on local conditions, historical trajectories, and social networks, rather than on the mere replication of Western institutional models. These studies collectively suggest that epistemological innovation—rather than incremental technical fixes—is necessary to understand and support the resilience of political communities.

In sum, the epistemic limits of nation-building and state-building lie in their combined reliance on institutional reductionism, Westphalian templates, linear causality, and fragmented conceptions of legitimacy. These paradigms fail to account for the adaptive, regenerative, and emergent properties of political communities, particularly in postcolonial and conflict-affected contexts. Addressing these limitations requires a new scientific approach—one that treats nations not merely as institutional artifacts or cultural constructs, but as complex, living systems capable of self-renewal. It is precisely this insight that motivates the formulation of Nationology, a transdisciplinary science designed to integrate institutions, identity, legitimacy, memory, and adaptive capacity into a unified framework for understanding political order.

3. Foundations of Nationology as a Distinct Science

3.1. Theoretical Motivation: Beyond Existing Paradigms

The preceding discussion has demonstrated that nation-building and state-building, as dominant paradigms, reveal persistent epistemic limits when confronted with the complexity of contemporary political communities. Their shared reliance on institutional replication, linear developmental sequencing, and Westphalian templates obscures the adaptive, emergent, and interactive qualities of political life in postcolonial contexts. What is required is not a refinement of existing paradigms but a new scientific framework capable of conceptualizing political communities as living, adaptive, and regenerative systems.

Nationology emerges at this nexus. It integrates insights from political theory, systems philosophy, comparative constitutionalism, postcolonial thought, and complexity studies. Its purpose is analytic and explanatory: to render intelligible how and why political communities endure, transform, fragment, and regenerate.

3.2. Conceptual Core: Political Communities as Living Systems

At the heart of Nationology is a reconceptualization of the nation and the political community. Influenced by Niklas Luhmann, who argued that social systems are constituted through recursive communication processes (Luhmann, 1995), and by complexity theorists such as Capra and Luisi (2014), Nationology treats political communities as complex adaptive systems. These systems cannot be reduced solely to formal institutions or cultural narratives; they comprise nested layers of interaction among normative orders, symbolic meaning, social cognition, institutional structures, and historical memory.

This perspective resonates with contemporary scholarship on relational ontologies and assemblages. Bruno Latour's conception of actors as relational networks (Latour, 2005) and Jane Bennett's analysis of vibrant materiality (Bennett, 2010) emphasize the entangled and emergent qualities of collective phenomena. In political contexts, these insights foreground the understanding that legitimacy, identity, governance, and institutional capacity are co-constituted in dynamic processes rather than compartmentalized.

Nationology begins with the premise that political communities are living systems whose continuity depends on regenerative interactions among governance structures, collective meaning, leadership practices, and historical memory. This premise departs from state-building assumptions that nations and states are either latent but undeveloped or merely misgoverned. Political life is instead systemically emergent and contextually adaptive.

3.3. *Distinctive Object of Inquiry*

The object of inquiry in Nationology is the political community conceived as an integrated phenomenon. Unlike political science, which often isolates institutions as the primary variable of analysis, or sociology, which focuses on social relations and identity as discrete categories, Nationology's object is the ensemble of processes through which political coherence emerges, persists, and adapts in relation to internal dynamics and external perturbations.

This integrative object distinguishes Nationology from related fields. It is distinct from institutionalism (Fukuyama, 2017; Herbst, 2015), which foregrounds formal structures, from culturalist paradigms (Taylor, 1994; Anderson, 2020), which emphasize collective imagination, and from postcolonial critiques (Chatterjee, 1998; Mamdani, 2018; Mbembe, 2001), which elucidate the colonial genealogy of state structures but rarely articulate a unified system-level integrative framework. Constitutional theory (Tushnet, 2015), while examining textual and normative architectures, does not fully capture the regenerative dynamics of political life. Nationology addresses this epistemic lacuna by providing a coherent framework for understanding political communities as adaptive systems.

3.4. *Core Components of Nationology*

Nationology's framework rests upon several conceptual pillars that are mutually reinforcing. Systemic integration posits that political communities comprise interacting subsystems of governance, identity, memory, legitimacy, and leadership, each influencing and being influenced by the others. Drawing on Luhmann (1995) and Capra and Luisi (2014), it emphasizes multilevel feedback rather than linear causality.

Collective meaning and symbolic coherence are understood as active components of political systems. Inspired by Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities (2010) and Charles Taylor's analysis of cultural identity (1994), Nationology treats symbolic meaning and collective narratives as generative forces of political coherence and regeneration.

Historical memory is recognized as a constitutive dimension of political communities. Legacies of colonialism, war, and marginalization shape collective orientation and legitimacy in the present, drawing on postcolonial scholarship to account for the intergenerational constitution of political subjectivity.

Leadership intelligence constitutes a further pillar. Effective adaptation requires leadership capable of synthesizing systemic information, strategic vision, and social legitimacy. Drawing on political psychology and leadership studies, Nationology emphasizes that collective intelligence and visionary agency emerge from social networks and practices, not only from formal elites.

Finally, regenerative dynamics are the hallmark of Nationology. The capacity of a political community to renew itself under stress and discontinuity represents a departure from stabilizing models that seek equilibrium. In Nationology, breakdown is understood as a potential source of systemic reconfiguration, and renewal as an emergent, non-linear process.

3.5. Methodological Distinctiveness

Methodologically, Nationology blends systems analysis, interpretive methods, and comparative inquiry. It moves beyond the positivist focus on variable isolation and cross-sectional analysis to emphasize longitudinal, relational approaches capable of capturing emergent patterns over time and across scales. Multilevel analysis, historical depth, comparative inference, and assessment of regenerative indicators constitute the methodological repertoire. These approaches allow Nationology to cultivate analytic sensitivity to local complexity, historical specificity, and systemic interdependence.

3.6. Rationale for Nationology as a New Science

Nationology's claim to scientific distinctiveness rests on three conditions. First, it identifies a unique object of inquiry: the political community as an integrated, complex system. Second, it proposes distinctive explanatory mechanisms, including regenerative dynamics, feedback loops, and emergent legitimacy. Third, it advances methodological innovation through systems-informed, historically grounded, and dynamically oriented analysis.

The necessity of Nationology is epistemic rather than rhetorical. Existing disciplines illuminate partial aspects of political life but cannot jointly account for the adaptive and regenerative character of political communities. Nationology fills this gap by offering a unified theoretical and methodological foundation, establishing a science of nations and political communities capable of understanding continuity, fragmentation, and renewal.

4. Methodological Framework

To advance Nationology as a rigorous science of political communities, it is essential to articulate a methodological orientation that is consistent with its conceptual foundations. Nationology treats nations not as static entities reducible to institutional artifacts or cultural narratives, but as complex, living systems whose coherence and durability emerge from adaptive interactions among multiple layers of social life. Such an object of inquiry cannot be adequately captured through the linear, cross-sectional, or variable-isolating methods that dominate much of mainstream political science and development studies. Instead, Nationology adopts a systems-informed, historically grounded, and relationally sensitive methodology capable of tracing dynamic processes over time and across scales.

The methodological impetus of Nationology finds philosophical resonance in Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), which challenges disciplinary compartmentalization and invites scholars to attend to the agency of assemblages composed of diverse human and nonhuman actors. Implicit in Bennett's argument is the recognition that phenomena traditionally treated as inert or secondary—institutional routines, symbolic practices, material infrastructures—are in fact active participants in emergent patterns of social order. For Nationology, this means moving beyond the separation of structure and agency, or of formal institutions and informal practices, to a perspective that discerns the co-constitutive dynamics that sustain or undermine political community.

A methodological framework suitable for this enterprise must be capable of capturing non-linear, iterative, and feedback-driven processes. Donella Meadows's work on systems thinking, particularly in *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (2008), provides a powerful heuristic for understanding how leverage points, feedback loops, and accumulation processes shape complex adaptive systems. Meadows emphasizes that in complex systems, behavior emerges not from singular components but from patterns of interaction; small changes in one part of a system can lead to disproportionate effects elsewhere. Nationology inherits this insight and translates it into strategies for examining how governance practices, collective memory, symbolic meaning, and adaptive capacities interact over time to produce patterns of stability, fragility, or regeneration.

Methodologically, Nationology proceeds through longitudinal, relational, and multilevel analysis. Longitudinal analysis attends to historical depth, recognizing that current manifestations of

political coherence or breakdown are conditioned by historical trajectories, including colonial legacies, formative conflicts, and symbolic repertoires. This temporal sensitivity aligns with scholars such as Theda Skocpol, whose structural historical sociology emphasizes the importance of tracing state-society transformations over extended sequences rather than isolated snapshots (Skocpol, 1979). In the context of Nationology, longitudinal research designs enable the detection of regenerative cycles, wherein phases of fragmentation, crisis, and adaptation are understood as components of systemic evolution rather than as discrete failures.

Relational analysis, by contrast, foregrounds interdependencies among actors, institutions, practices, and meanings. Where conventional methodologies might isolate institutions from cultural identities or normative systems from material practices, relational approaches examine the co-evolution of these dimensions. This sensibility echoes the work of Elinor Ostrom, whose research on collective action and polycentric governance demonstrated that institutional complexity and overlapping authorities often generate robust outcomes where simple hierarchical models fail (Ostrom, 1990). For Nationology, relational analysis opens avenues to understand how state and non-state spheres of authority interweave to produce emergent patterns of legitimacy and governance.

Multilevel analysis complements these approaches by enabling scholars to link micro-level dynamics (such as everyday practices of meaning-making among citizens) with meso-level structures (networks of civil society, informal governance arrangements) and macro-level institutions (constitutional norms, legal orders). Such multilevel sensitivity is necessary because political coherence is rarely reducible to a single scale; instead, it emerges from cross-scale interactions that either reinforce systemic integration or produce disjunctions. For example, the disjuncture between formal legal frameworks and locally embedded practices of conflict resolution in the Democratic Republic of the Congo reveals patterns that only multilevel analysis can surface.

Comparative inference remains a central methodological strategy in Nationology, but one that is context-sensitive rather than universalistic. Where conventional comparative politics often seeks regularities across cases by controlling for variation, Nationology's comparative approach seeks to identify configurational patterns—that is, how particular combinations of institutional, symbolic, and cognitive elements produce distinct trajectories of regeneration or fragmentation. This approach draws inspiration from configurational comparative methods such as Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), which treat causal conditions as conjunctural and context-dependent rather than additive and independent.

Finally, Nationology advances regenerative indicators as analytical tools. Unlike conventional indicators that focus narrowly on institutional performance (e.g., bureaucratic capacity, rule of law indices), regenerative indicators assess a broader suite of phenomena: the coherence of collective narratives, the depth of symbolic resonance across communities, patterns of civic participation that bridge formal and informal arenas, and the capacity of leadership networks to integrate distributed intelligence. While operationalizing such indicators presents methodological challenges, emerging work on social network analysis and participatory measures of legitimacy provides a methodological basis. For instance, social network analysis can reveal how patterns of connection and influence contribute to systemic coherence or fragmentation, while participatory governance metrics can capture the degree to which diverse voices are integrated into collective meaning-making.

In advocating this methodological orientation, Nationology aligns with a broader epistemological movement in the social sciences that recognizes complexity, emergence, and historical contingency as central features of political life. It rejects reductionist templates and instead embraces mixed methods, narrative depth, and systems-level inquiry. By doing so, it offers researchers a suite of tools capable of explaining not just why political communities fail, but how they persist, adapt, and regenerate in the face of chronic stress.

5. Case Study: Democratic Republic of the Congo

Historical Overview: Colonial Extraction, Independence, and Postcolonial Institutional Disruption

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) provides a paradigmatic case of postcolonial complexity, illustrating both the limitations of traditional nation-building paradigms and the potential for regenerative political dynamics. From the late nineteenth century, the territory that became the DRC was subject to extreme colonial extraction under King Leopold II's Congo Free State (1885–1908), characterized by forced labor, resource plunder, and systemic violence (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002). Belgian colonial administration further entrenched extractive governance while deliberately limiting the development of local political institutions or civic capacities (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002; Young, 2012). These historical processes created legacies of centralized authority without popular legitimacy and a fragmented social fabric composed of multiple ethnic, linguistic, and regional identities.

Upon independence in 1960, the DRC experienced immediate political turbulence, including the secession of Katanga, the assassination of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, and subsequent cycles of authoritarian consolidation under Mobutu Sese Seko (Gondola, 2002). Postcolonial governance was characterized by personalist rule, institutional fragility, and recurring crises of legitimacy (Gilbert, 2025). Conventional state-building analyses attribute these outcomes to corruption, elite predation, and the failure of externally imposed institutional templates (Herbst, 2015; Rotberg, 2024). However, a Nationology perspective reframes these phenomena as manifestations of systemic dynamics shaped by historical memory, social identity, and adaptive capacities that operate outside formal state structures.

Failure of Traditional Paradigms

Traditional paradigms of nation-building and state-building often fail to capture the DRC's enduring complexity. Standard approaches emphasize institutional replication, linear development trajectories, and sovereignty as the primary axis of legitimacy (Fukuyama, 2017; Tilly, 1990). Applying these models to the DRC produces a paradox: while formal institutions appear weak or ineffective, political and social order persists in localized, adaptive, and sometimes informal forms. For example, customary authorities, civic networks, and regional alliances provide governance functions in contexts where state presence is limited (Mamdani, 2018; Mbembe, 2001). These phenomena demonstrate that resilience in political communities may emerge from decentralized, networked, and culturally embedded systems rather than from top-down institutional consolidation alone.

Analytical frameworks that disregard historical extraction, collective memory, and postcolonial legacies systematically misinterpret both fragility and regeneration. The DRC's history reveals that institutional failure is not equivalent to societal failure. Indeed, emergent forms of governance—ranging from community dispute resolution mechanisms to local development initiatives—illustrate adaptive strategies that maintain collective coherence (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002; Chatterjee, 1998). Traditional models fail because they abstract political order from these dynamic, contextually grounded processes.

Evidence of Regenerative Dynamics Outside Formal Institutions

Across the DRC, numerous examples demonstrate how political communities regenerate coherence in the absence of fully functioning formal institutions. Ethnic and communal networks maintain dispute resolution and resource management functions, while local councils and civic associations articulate collective priorities and negotiate with state actors (Mamdani, 2018; Gondola, 2002). Religious institutions and faith-based networks play a particularly salient role in fostering social cohesion and legitimacy, providing education, health services, and moral guidance in both urban and rural contexts (Fobih, 2015; Chatterjee, 2019).

Importantly, these regenerative dynamics are neither static nor isolated; they function as feedback loops connecting identity, memory, and governance practices. For example, local rituals and historical commemorations reinforce collective memory, which in turn informs contemporary leadership legitimacy and social contracts. Such processes illustrate the living system logic at the

heart of Nationology: political communities endure and adapt through recursive interactions across symbolic, institutional, and behavioral dimensions (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Luhmann, 1995).

Application of Nationology Framework

The Nationology framework provides a coherent lens to integrate the multiple dimensions of Congolese political life. Within this framework, four interdependent domains are central:

1. **Legitimacy:** Derived not only from formal law but also from social recognition, historical memory, and moral authority. In the DRC, traditional chiefs and faith leaders often wield legitimacy that complements or substitutes formal state authority (Mamdani, 2018; Mbembe, 2001).
2. **Identity:** Multi-scalar and relational, encompassing ethnic, regional, and national dimensions. Nationology accounts for the ways identity is continuously negotiated and mobilized, rather than assumed to be fixed or singular (Anderson, 2020; Chatterjee, 1998).
3. **Institutions:** Encompasses both formal state structures and informal governance arrangements. By mapping interactions between these layers, Nationology identifies emergent mechanisms of adaptation and resilience that conventional paradigms overlook (Fukuyama, 2017; Rotberg, 2024).
4. **Memory:** Collective historical consciousness shapes expectations, strategies, and norms. In the DRC, colonial and postcolonial histories inform both leadership practices and civic engagement, creating pathways for regenerative dynamics even in contexts of apparent institutional collapse (Mbembe, 2001; Gondola, 2002, 2019).

By analyzing the interplay of these domains, Nationology demonstrates that political fragility is not absolute. Instead, the DRC exemplifies systemic adaptation, in which political order emerges from dynamic, multilevel interactions rather than solely from formal institutional consolidation.

Comparative Insights: African and Asian Perspectives

The patterns observed in the DRC resonate with postcolonial experiences elsewhere in Africa and Asia. In Somalia, decentralized clan structures have provided continuity and adaptive governance in the absence of a functioning central state (Menkhaus, 2014). Similarly, in Afghanistan, local jirgas and shuras have historically mediated conflict and distributed resources despite recurrent state collapse (Barfield, 2010). These cases underscore the broader relevance of Nationology: across contexts, political communities sustain themselves through a combination of adaptive institutions, collective memory, and socially embedded legitimacy.

Asian postcolonial states also illustrate regenerative dynamics beyond formal institutions. In India, the interplay of caste, community governance, and regional identity has historically shaped political order, revealing continuities that standard state-building models fail to capture (Chatterjee, 1998; Varshney, 2002). In Indonesia, traditional adat systems and regional councils interact with national governance frameworks, allowing decentralized problem-solving and resilience in contexts of rapid social transformation (Benda-Beckmann & Benda-Beckmann, 2001). Comparative analysis thus confirms that Nationology is not only applicable to the DRC but also offers a generalizable framework for understanding political adaptation across postcolonial societies.

Implications for Political Theory and Global Governance

By foregrounding regeneration over stabilization, Nationology challenges core assumptions in conventional political science and international policy. First, it reconceptualizes legitimacy as an emergent, context-sensitive property rather than a static legal status. Second, it emphasizes identity as a dynamic force that interacts with institutions and memory to sustain social coherence. Third, it demonstrates that political resilience frequently arises from decentralized and non-state networks, highlighting the need to integrate informal governance into analyses of state performance.

For global governance, these insights suggest a shift from template-driven institution-building toward support for adaptive capacities within political communities. Policies should prioritize knowledge of local histories, social networks, and cultural practices, facilitating regenerative processes that maintain legitimacy and cohesion even under stress. This approach also aligns with broader theoretical developments in complexity science, systems thinking, and postcolonial theory (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Bennett, 2010; Mbembe, 2001).

6. Implications for Legitimacy, Constitutionalism, and Governance

Rethinking Legitimacy: Emergent, Adaptive, and Systemic

The concept of legitimacy has traditionally been framed through either legalistic or symbolic lenses, privileging formal constitutional procedures or the alignment of state authority with national identity (Habermas, 1996; Tilly, 1990). Legalistic approaches emphasize codified laws, institutional mandates, and bureaucratic compliance, whereas symbolic frameworks stress national narratives, collective memory, and identity formation (Anderson, 2020; Chatterjee, 1998). While both dimensions are valuable, they remain insufficient to capture the emergent and adaptive qualities of political legitimacy in postcolonial, conflict-affected, or globally interconnected societies.

From the perspective of Nationology, legitimacy is an emergent property of systemic coherence. It arises from the recursive interactions among institutions, collective meaning, historical memory, leadership practices, and adaptive social networks. In other words, legitimacy is not a static attribute conferred by law or narrative; it is produced, maintained, and renegotiated through dynamic processes. Empirical evidence from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, and Afghanistan demonstrates that communities often recognize authority and comply with governance norms even in the absence of fully functioning state institutions (Mamdani, 2018; Menkhaus, 2014; Barfield, 2010). These findings challenge classical Weberian conceptions of legitimacy centered on legal-rational authority or monopoly of coercion (Weber, 1978).

Moreover, legitimacy must be understood as contextually contingent and adaptive. In multi-ethnic, postcolonial states, local perceptions of justice, historical memory, and relational networks shape political authority as much as formal legal instruments. For instance, customary councils in rural Africa or shuras in Afghanistan often mediate disputes and distribute resources with higher perceived legitimacy than central state institutions (Benda-Beckmann & Benda-Beckmann, 2001; Barfield, 2010). Recognizing these dynamics allows policymakers and theorists to account for both the resilience and fragility of political systems, moving beyond simplistic dichotomies of “strong” versus “weak” states.

Constitutional Design: Flexibility, Systemic Coherence, and Regenerative Capacity

Traditional constitutionalism emphasizes the formal design of institutions and the codification of rights, often aspiring toward universal models of governance derived from liberal or Westphalian templates (Fukuyama, 2017; Tushnet, 2015). However, these models frequently underperform in postcolonial or pluralistic contexts because they fail to accommodate adaptive cycles, historical contingencies, and complex social networks.

Nationology provides a framework for regenerative constitutionalism, which prioritizes flexibility, coherence, and systemic adaptation. Constitutions are conceived not as static blueprints but as living instruments that interact with social norms, historical memory, and evolving governance practices. In this view, constitutional resilience derives from feedback loops that allow societies to renegotiate governance principles in response to internal and external shocks. This approach resonates with the work of Bennett (2010), Capra and Luisi (2014), and Luhmann (1995), who demonstrate that social and ecological systems maintain stability through dynamic interactions and relational interdependencies rather than rigid top-down hierarchies.

Practically, regenerative constitutionalism entails the integration of multiple governance layers, including formal institutions, customary authorities, civic networks, and informal regulatory mechanisms. It also requires mechanisms for iterative learning, such as sunset clauses, deliberative

councils, and participatory review processes. Such provisions allow constitutions to evolve without undermining the coherence of the political system, addressing the challenge that postcolonial states often face: balancing unity with diversity, formal authority with informal legitimacy, and stability with adaptability.

Global Governance: From Prescriptive Replication to Contextual Regenerative Frameworks

Nationology also carries profound implications for global governance. Conventional approaches often advocate for prescriptive replication, promoting standardized institution-building, liberal-democratic templates, or externally imposed policy regimes across diverse societies (Rotberg, 2024; Herbst, 2015). While these interventions may achieve temporary stabilization, they frequently fail to account for local adaptive capacities or the emergent forms of political legitimacy that sustain social cohesion.

A regenerative framework for global governance emphasizes context-sensitive engagement, identifying and amplifying local capacities for adaptation rather than imposing rigid models. This approach aligns with postcolonial critiques of governance intervention, which stress the importance of historical context, indigenous knowledge, and socially embedded authority (Mamdani, 2018; Chatterjee, 1998). For example, development and peacebuilding initiatives in the DRC, Afghanistan, and India demonstrate that supporting community-based networks, hybrid legal frameworks, and participatory mechanisms yields more durable outcomes than top-down institutional replication (Barfield, 2010; Varshney, 2002).

Regenerative global governance also involves anticipatory systems thinking, recognizing that states and political communities exist within multilevel networks that span local, national, and transnational domains. Feedback loops between these levels can amplify or attenuate systemic stress, requiring governance approaches that are iteratively adaptive, reflective, and relational. Such perspectives challenge the universality of standard policy prescriptions, advocating instead for principled pluralism: the capacity to design governance systems that resonate with diverse social, cultural, and historical contexts while maintaining systemic coherence.

Policy Recommendations Grounded in Nationology Principles

1. **Prioritize Adaptive Legitimacy Assessment:** Policy frameworks should evaluate governance not solely on institutional capacity but on the degree to which authority is recognized and sustained across social networks, customary systems, and civic structures.
2. **Embed Flexibility into Constitutional and Legal Design:** Constitutions and laws should include adaptive mechanisms—periodic review, participatory amendments, and contingency planning—to accommodate emergent social dynamics and unanticipated crises.
3. **Integrate Formal and Informal Governance Systems:** Recognizing that legitimacy often operates outside formal institutions, governance strategies should leverage local networks, customary authorities, and community-based organizations to enhance coherence and resilience.
4. **Support Iterative Learning and Reflexivity:** Institutions should be designed to learn from outcomes, integrating mechanisms for feedback, evaluation, and corrective adaptation to maintain both stability and regenerative capacity.
5. **Contextualize International Interventions:** Global governance actors should move away from prescriptive replication toward facilitation, supporting local systems' regenerative potential while respecting cultural and historical particularities.
6. **Foster Cross-Scale Coherence:** Encourage policy designs that harmonize local, national, and transnational governance networks, ensuring that interventions at one scale reinforce rather than destabilize systemic adaptation at other levels.

7. Leverage Systems Thinking and Complexity Science: Governance analysis should incorporate insights from complexity theory, political ecology, and systemic intelligence, recognizing that political order emerges from multilevel interactions and feedback loops (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Bennett, 2010; Luhmann, 1995).

By applying these principles, Nationology offers a pragmatic, scientifically grounded approach for enhancing governance, constitutional resilience, and legitimacy across postcolonial and global contexts. It shifts the emphasis from externally imposed stability to internally generated, regenerative political order—one that acknowledges complexity, historical contingency, and emergent authority as central to sustaining societies in systemic stress.

7. Nationology as a Regenerative Science : Towards a Transdisciplinary Epistemology

Nationology emerges from a critical recognition: prevailing paradigms of nation-building and state-building are epistemically constrained. Political science, postcolonial studies, and constitutional theory have traditionally approached nations as either institutional arrangements, cultural constructs, or historical artifacts (Anderson, 2020; Tilly, 1990; Chatterjee, 1998). These approaches, while analytically rigorous, often fragment the study of political communities into discrete categories—governance, identity, legitimacy—thereby obscuring the systemic interdependencies that sustain nations over time. Nationology responds by proposing a regenerative epistemology, wherein the nation is conceptualized as a living, adaptive system, capable of sustaining, renewing, and reconfiguring itself in response to internal and external pressures.

At its core, Nationology integrates four epistemological pillars. First, it recognizes nations as historically situated systems, whose evolution is shaped by colonial legacies, social memory, and cultural pluralism (Mamdani, 2018; Mbembe, 2001). Second, it emphasizes the emergent nature of legitimacy, which arises through interactions between formal institutions, symbolic meaning, and civic networks (Bennett, 2010; Barfield, 2010). Third, it applies systems thinking, drawing on insights from complexity science and ecological perspectives to understand political communities as multilevel networks of feedback, adaptation, and self-organization (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Luhmann, 1995). Fourth, Nationology foregrounds adaptive governance, privileging processes that sustain coherence, resilience, and regeneration over static equilibrium or prescriptive replication (Rotberg, 2024; Fukuyama, 2017).

Methodological Innovation: Integrating Complexity and Context

Methodologically, Nationology departs from reductionist and linear models that dominate classical political science. Its approach combines qualitative and quantitative methods with systems-based modeling to capture the multidimensionality of political life. Case studies, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, demonstrate the utility of this approach: conventional analyses often label the DRC as “failed,” yet Nationology reveals persistent regenerative dynamics operating through informal networks, customary authority, and collective memory (Herbst, 2015; Mamdani, 2018).

Nationology employs multi-scalar analysis, tracing interactions from local governance networks to national institutions and transnational influences. This enables the identification of feedback loops that sustain legitimacy, distribute authority, and adapt governance structures to social realities. Comparative analysis with Asian contexts—such as India’s hybrid governance structures or Indonesia’s postcolonial decentralization—further illustrates the cross-cultural applicability of regenerative frameworks (Varshney, 2002; Hadiz, 2010).

Beyond case studies, Nationology advocates for adaptive modeling: simulations and scenario analyses that account for the non-linear, context-dependent dynamics of political communities. By integrating qualitative ethnography with computational systems modeling, Nationology bridges the

gap between historical specificity and generalizable theory, positioning itself as both a descriptive and predictive science.

Nationology as a New Scientific Paradigm

Nationology constitutes a distinct scientific paradigm by reframing the nation-state not as a static entity, but as a dynamic, living system. Unlike conventional political science, which often emphasizes institutional capacity or sovereignty, Nationology centers regeneration, adaptation, and systemic coherence as primary explanatory variables. Unlike postcolonial studies, which focus on historical critique and cultural analysis, Nationology operationalizes insights into systemic mechanisms, linking memory, identity, and governance into predictive frameworks. Unlike systems theory, which often abstracts social systems without embedding them in historical and cultural realities, Nationology situates complexity within temporal, spatial, and sociopolitical contexts, making the theory both empirically grounded and globally applicable (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Luhmann, 1995; Bennett, 2010).

Two dimensions highlight its scientific novelty: integrative ontology and methodological pluralism. Integrative ontology emphasizes the co-emergence of institutions, culture, legitimacy, and collective intelligence as mutually constitutive rather than separable domains. Methodological pluralism legitimizes multiple forms of evidence—from archival records and ethnography to network analysis and computational simulation—thereby creating a comprehensive toolkit for studying political communities across diverse contexts. In this sense, Nationology functions as both analytical framework and applied science, capable of guiding research, policy design, and governance innovation.

Comparative Perspective: Differentiation from Traditional Disciplines

To clarify the distinctiveness of Nationology, it is useful to compare it with related disciplines:

- **Political Science:** Traditional political science emphasizes institutional analysis, electoral behavior, and policy efficacy. Nationology expands this lens to include regenerative dynamics, understanding how political communities self-organize and adapt beyond formal institutional frameworks (Tilly, 1990; Fukuyama, 2017).
- **Postcolonial Studies:** Postcolonial scholarship foregrounds the historical and structural legacies of colonialism (Chatterjee, 1998; Mamdani, 2018). Nationology operationalizes these insights, integrating them into systemic models of legitimacy, memory, and governance rather than remaining purely critical or descriptive.
- **Systems Theory:** Systems theory offers tools for understanding complexity, feedback, and adaptation (Luhmann, 1995; Capra & Luisi, 2014). Nationology contextualizes these insights within political, cultural, and historical realities, producing a framework that is both empirically testable and normative in its guidance for governance and policy.
- **Constitutional Studies:** Constitutional theory often prioritizes legal codification and procedural legitimacy (Tushnet, 2015). Nationology reframes constitutionalism as regenerative practice, emphasizing adaptability, coherence, and resonance with emergent social norms.

By integrating these perspectives, Nationology not only addresses the epistemological gaps of conventional paradigms but also provides a coherent, predictive, and normative framework for understanding political communities worldwide.

Empirical Contributions and Validation

Empirical validation is central to Nationology. Case studies across Africa, Asia, and postcolonial contexts demonstrate its explanatory power. For example, in the DRC, informal governance networks, customary courts, and civic associations sustain political coherence despite chronic institutional fragility (Herbst, 2015; Mamdani, 2018). In India, hybrid governance structures, such as

Panchayati Raj institutions, illustrate how localized, context-sensitive authority can coexist with national frameworks, producing adaptive legitimacy (Varshney, 2002). In Southeast Asia, Indonesia's post-Suharto decentralization reveals how systemic regeneration emerges through negotiated power-sharing, customary law, and participatory mechanisms (Hadiz, 2010).

These cases collectively demonstrate that political resilience emerges from multilevel, relational dynamics rather than solely from formal institutional consolidation. By capturing these dynamics, Nationology provides tools to identify predictive markers of stability, fragility, and renewal, which can guide policy interventions, constitutional reform, and global governance initiatives.

Vision for Future Research and Global Applicability

Nationology's framework invites a new research agenda that is both transdisciplinary and globally relevant:

1. **Cross-Cultural Comparative Studies:** Investigate regenerative dynamics in diverse sociopolitical contexts, from African postcolonial states to Asian hybrid polities and Latin American federal systems.
2. **Integration of Computational and Qualitative Methods:** Develop simulations that model adaptive cycles, legitimacy feedback, and social cohesion, informed by ethnographic and historical data.
3. **Policy-Oriented Applications:** Translate insights into actionable frameworks for governance, constitutional reform, and peacebuilding in fragile states.
4. **Expansion into Global Governance:** Examine how regenerative principles can inform international institutions, multilateral interventions, and normative frameworks for transnational political order.
5. **Ethics and Social Justice:** Explore how Nationology can guide inclusive, equitable, and sustainable political practices that recognize marginalized communities, historical injustices, and cultural diversity.

In sum, Nationology constitutes a new scientific paradigm capable of bridging theoretical insight, empirical validation, and practical application. By foregrounding regeneration, adaptation, and systemic coherence, it offers a transformative lens for understanding political communities in the 21st century, providing scholars, policymakers, and global institutions with tools to navigate complexity, uncertainty, and systemic strain.

8. Conclusion

This article has advanced the argument that conventional paradigms of nation-building and state-building are fundamentally constrained by epistemic assumptions inherited from Westphalian political theory and institutional reductionism. By fragmenting political communities into discrete analytical categories—governance, identity, legitimacy—these paradigms obscure the systemic, regenerative processes through which nations emerge, endure, and adapt. Drawing on interdisciplinary insights from political theory, postcolonial scholarship, systems thinking, and comparative constitutionalism, this article has introduced Nationology as a transdisciplinary science capable of addressing these limitations.

Nationology reconceptualizes nations as living, adaptive systems, whose persistence depends on the dynamic interaction between institutions, collective meaning, historical memory, leadership practices, and legitimacy. Through a combination of theoretical elaboration and empirical analysis—most prominently the case study of the Democratic Republic of the Congo—this framework demonstrates that political fragility cannot be reduced to institutional weakness or elite failure alone. Instead, political resilience and regeneration emerge from the multilevel coherence of social, cultural, and institutional networks, often operating beyond formal structures. Comparative insights from African and Asian contexts reinforce the broader applicability of Nationology, illustrating how

postcolonial, hybrid, and complex societies produce adaptive legitimacy and systemic coherence in diverse ways.

The article has shown that Nationology constitutes a distinct scientific paradigm, integrating epistemology, methodology, and empirical observation into a unified framework. Unlike traditional political science, postcolonial studies, or systems theory alone, Nationology combines historical specificity with systemic analysis, producing both explanatory and predictive power. Its methodological pluralism—combining qualitative, quantitative, and computational approaches—enables rigorous study of political communities as adaptive systems, while its normative orientation provides actionable insights for governance, constitutional design, and policy in fragile and postcolonial contexts.

The implications of Nationology are significant. First, it challenges scholars to rethink legitimacy not as a static property or symbolic construct, but as an emergent, context-sensitive phenomenon shaped by the interplay of formal institutions, collective identity, and historical memory. Second, it urges policymakers to prioritize regenerative governance, designing constitutions, legal frameworks, and institutional interventions that are flexible, adaptive, and resilient to systemic shocks. Third, it calls for global governance approaches that move beyond prescriptive replication toward contextualized, regenerative frameworks, capable of supporting sustainable political order in postcolonial, fragile, and complex societies.

Ultimately, Nationology offers both a scientific contribution and a practical roadmap. It establishes a foundational lens through which political communities can be studied, understood, and supported, while simultaneously providing a framework for generating predictive insights and policy guidance. By foregrounding regeneration, adaptation, and systemic coherence, Nationology positions itself as an indispensable paradigm for addressing the challenges of political fragility, postcolonial complexity, and global systemic strain in the twenty-first century. Its adoption by scholars, practitioners, and policymakers can reshape how nations are conceptualized, studied, and nurtured—transforming our understanding of political order from one of mere survival to one of dynamic, regenerative flourishing.

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