REDESCRIPTIONS
Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory

Concepts We Transform by: Metaphorical Concepts in Post-COVID-19 Transition to Normalcy

SPECIAL ISSUE
RESEARCH

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HUP HELSINKI UNIVERSITY PRESS

ABSTRACT

This article tackles key terminology of the post-COVID-19 transition to normalcy from a conceptual and metaphor analysis viewpoint. Scholarship has covered the pandemic's linguistic ramifications, but the conceptual basis of its *aftermath* remains neglected. Which terms and underlying metaphors are used to conceptualize the transition from the societal crisis to normalcy and to assess its success? Where do these come from, and what are their key merits and shortcomings? How consistent are they, and what kind of future do they predict for us? I focus on *demobilization*, *rebuilding*, *resilience*, and *recovery*—key terms from the transnational regulative discourse manifesting on international, European, and national levels alike. By assessing these concepts' uses and connotations, my article highlights the post-pandemic transition's political nature and promotes a more aware normalization. I analyze resilience as a central concept in the European post-pandemic transition: it is open to alternative interpretations and typically carries forward-looking transformative power. This is aptly doubled by a transformative, rather than restorative, notion of *recovery*, which carries significant future expectations. Rather than merely regaining operational capacities, societies are expected to *improve* while recovering—an aspect reflected in the terminology of 'building back better' and in framing resilience as an exponentially increasing ability for better future recovery. Normatively, such transformative aims, however, clash with the underlying metaphor of society as a patient recovering from a disease. The article proposes a more moderate notion of nonmedical recovery of society as gaining a novel, adjusted self-understanding as a fully operative entity with a problematic past.

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KEYWORDS:
COVID-19; concepts; metaphor; resilience; recovery; European Union; governance

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Pankakoski, Timo. 2024. "Concepts We Transform by: Metaphorical Concepts in Post-COVID-19 Transition to Normalcy." *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 27(1): 6–25. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.425

DOI: 10.33134/rds.425

Let the accent of words be watched; and closely: let their meaning be watched more closely still, and fewer will do the work.

(John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*)

INTRODUCTION

Major global crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic, typically induce both creativity and inertia on the linguistic level. On the one hand, the pandemic popularized anteriorly unknown or marginal terminology ('social distancing,' 'superspreading event,' 'lockdown'). On the other hand, excessively rapid changes encourage terminological conservatism. Citizens first resorted to familiar categories like 'flu' or 'plague' to capture the unknown menace. From an administrative viewpoint, COVID-19, predictably, appeared as a 'crisis' demanding 'resilience,' and a global 'state of exception,' because such political-administrative vocabulary was at hand. In fact, transforming administrative vocabularies excessively would jeopardize the continuity and consistency of domestic policy reactions, let alone international coordination.

The pandemic also provoked numerous metaphors: already early commentators identified problematic depictions of COVID-19 as a 'perfect storm' and a 'war' against the virus, and several other metaphors have since been addressed critically (Brandt & Botelho 2020; Hanne 2022; Wilkinson 2020). Metaphors hover between the two aspects of crisis language mentioned: creativity and inertia. The invisible virus and the *sui generis* pandemic must be captured in more familiar categories, where metaphors come in handy. Especially the war framing reflected efforts to categorize the threat analogously with preceding disasters, including both world wars. Metaphorization, however, is also an effective way of producing new conceptual language by transferring ideas between different domains or policy sectors; it may equally serve linguistic renewal. Furthermore, politicians and public commentators often reactivate metaphorical layers inherent in ostensibly literal terms, thereby inducing novel implications.

This article exemplifies such mechanisms, analyzing a selection of concepts with metaphorical underpinnings. While pandemic-induced neologisms and the metaphors of COVID-19 have been studied extensively, the conceptual and metaphorical basis of the pandemic's *aftermath* have been all but neglected in scholarship. How do we conceptualize the transition from the societal crisis to normalcy? Which terms and underlying metaphorical depictions are used to assess the success of that transition? Where do these concepts come from, why are they employed, and what are their respective key merits and shortcomings? How well do they fit together, and what kind of future do they predict for us?

I focus on *demobilization*, *reconstruction/rebuilding*, *resilience*, and *recovery*. To comprehend them properly, we must acknowledge the global nature of the disease, crisis, and recovery—together with the transnational nature of the discourse they are discussed in. The largely similar vocabularies across Europe result not only from global public communication but also from the transnational coordination of crisis governance and recovery measures. Regulative discourse emerges on the international, European, and national levels alike. In Europe, the European Union (EU) and particularly the European Commission emerge as a creator and regulator of coordinative political discourse in the post-COVID-19 recovery.

DOI: 10.33134/rds.425

I proceed concept by concept, discussing their implications and assessing their merits and shortcomings with examples from recent discussions of the transition to normalcy. In harmony with the article's concept-oriented approach, the data is gathered in a snowball manner from national documents from several European countries, EU sources, and international organizations' outputs. In temporal terms, the COVID-19 crisis is as vague an entity as the switch from 'crisis' to its 'aftermath' or 'recovery.' I assessed material from 2020 to 2022, observing that normalization discourses emerged earlier than actual normalization. I focus on discourses, but in contradistinction to most discourse-analytical approaches to metaphors (Charteris-Black 2004; Musolff 2004), I perceive the borderlines of discourses as set by meanings and interpretations, not the parameters of a preconceived data set. Correspondingly, rather than assessing the frequencies of certain metaphors in a specific corpus and aiming at statistical representativeness, I use the data qualitatively to illustrate existing conceptual regularities and metaphorical resonances, critically assessing their aptness, coherence, and societal implications.

The approach of the article is thus interpretative, exploratory, and critical, building on perspectives from conceptual history and metaphor studies. First, with conceptual historians, I understand *reconstruction*, *resilience*, *and recovery* as by definition ambiguous, multilayered concepts deriving their meanings from various contexts and the uses they are put into (cf. Koselleck 2011, 19–20). Often, this involves attempts to steer the society to a specific direction determined by worldviews and political inclinations. The above concepts are essentially contestable and mostly de facto contested, that is, loaded with dissimilar meanings and contrasted with various counter-concepts, which relativizes any notion of their single 'correct,' 'original,' or 'proper' use.

Second, I highlight the need to remain sensitive to both literal and metaphorical uses, including the metaphorical elements in key political, social, and administrative concepts. From their different perspectives, both conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) and philosophical metaphorology (Blumenberg 2010) have emphasized the presence of metaphorical categories in our cognition, thought, and argumentation. Explicitly addressing the parallels between conceptual history and metaphorology, Zill (2002, 228–229) has characterized the relationship between concepts and metaphors as 'symbiotic': metaphors precondition the formation of concepts, but the interpretations of metaphors correspondingly rely on the meanings of concepts. *Reconstruction*, *resilience*, and *recovery* clearly carry metaphorical aspects in their implicature and past uses. This preconceptual material enables more precise concept formation, but, as Blumenberg (2020, 236) has underscored, may also prevent concept formation or guide it toward misleading directions. The underlying metaphorical meanings are, obviously, activated only occasionally, and purely literal uses are therefore possible. The literal–conceptual meanings attached to key concepts like reconstruction, resilience, or recovery in concrete historical and political contexts then further affect which metaphorical meanings are politically persuasive, expedient, or even possible. Like concepts, the metaphorical identifications underlying them are effective tools for directing societal development—and therefore essentially contestable. Reading them in this light may clarify the political and administrative rationalities guiding apparently automatic processes, such as the post-pandemic return to normality. Earlier scholarship has indicated that political crises generally provoke metaphor use (Cammaerts 2012). This, I hypothesize, equally applies to normalization after a crisis.

DOI: 10.33134/rds.425

The article has a three-fold aim. First, I promote comprehension of the discursive situation to facilitate a more aware normalization. 'Living and governing in pandemics necessitates the exposition of organizing concepts, ontologies and terrains of meaning,' Pykett and Lavis (2021, 227) note, relying on Paul Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology. The task of self-understanding is not over when emergency measures are lifted; conscious of their leading concepts, European societies and communities may better comprehend what kind of societies and communities they are transforming into.

Second, I seek to capture this terminology's normative, regulative, and political aspects to highlight the purposeful nature of the post-pandemic transformation. The forceful, and saliently political, restrictions in spring 2020 have been discussed from both comparative politics and critical theory perspectives (Delanty 2021; Greer et al. 2021), but political aspects can easily be overlooked in the transition to normality, largely due to its graduality and seemingly automatic character. Yet many transformation concepts derive from European and global political-administrative discourses and reflect the EU's specific policy goals. The concepts we transform are significant for the eventual forms such transformation takes, as they condense contemporary experiences and future expectations—primarily those of policymakers and global leaders (cf. Koselleck 2004, 255–275). I read the terminology as a hegemonic discourse factually capable of influencing the distribution of money and other resources and thereby deciding what the normalization process encompasses in practical terms. This is a political question par excellence. We must not overlook alternative discourses or presume full congruence between the multilevel regulatory language and the mindset of European citizens. Nevertheless, the language of recovery and resilience clearly amounts not only to the 'coordinative discourse' of global professionals but also to a 'communicative discourse' targeted at the general public with the aim of justifying policy choices and something partially adopted on the civic level (for the distinction, see Schmidt 2008, 310–311).

Third, by analyzing their dissimilar interpretations and implications, conceptual analysis can highlight key concepts' strengths/weaknesses and assess their coherence and compatibility. From a linguistic perspective, a purely technical, nonfigurative political language would be as undesirable as impossible. Nevertheless, for governance purposes, a conceptually and metaphorically coherent, relatively neutral set of terms for the transition to normality is beneficial, as this enables systematic anchoring of policy measures on language shared by partners with differing interpretations of the pandemic. Further, consistent terminology enables international partners to coordinate their actions better, as was recognized early on by the World Economic Forum's founder Klaus Schwab and Thierry Malleret (2020, 15–16), who sought to provide a 'conceptual framework' and 'some coherent and conceptually sound guidelines about what might lie ahead.' This task must be extended to post-pandemic recovery. I refrain from prescribing a single correct way of using essentially ambiguous concepts, yet some uses are superior to others in terms of coherence.

The article proceeds by discussing each chosen concept and their background metaphors in turn, including their parallel concepts and counter-concepts (cf. Koselleck 2011, 12, 23–24). I first analyze *demobilization* and *reconstruction/rebuilding*, assessing metaphors of crisis management as war, COVID-19 as a natural catastrophe, and the pandemic's effects as physical devastation. The second section focuses on *resilience* as a central concept in European post-pandemic recovery. The third section tackles *recovery*, addressing its underlying medical layers, while the

DOI: 10.33134/rds.425

fourth section addresses its implicit future expectations. I conclude by proposing a more modest interpretation of recovering as regaining basic operational capacities and integrating losses and setbacks into one's self-understanding.

DEMOBILIZATION, RECONSTRUCTION, AND BUILDING BACK BETTER

At the outset of the pandemic, journalists and politicians typically invoked imagery of war—arguably the dominant early metaphor. General war metaphorics implied several more specific scenarios, such as politicians *declaring war*, the virus as an *enemy*, resources being maximally *mobilized* to receive *victory*, healthcare personnel as *soldiers fighting* on a *front*, or victims as *fallen soldiers* (Musolff 2022, 309). Politicians, like the Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, recruited popular support for restrictions with analogies to the First World War (Williams & Greer 2023, 91–92). The French President Macron declared that France was 'at war,' echoing similar statements by President Hollande after the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks (Or et al. 2022, 15–16). Several international organizations, like UNICEF (2020), the World Bank (2020), and World Vision International (2020), 'mobilized' personnel and resources to a 'fight' against COVID-19. However, scholars and journalists soon began criticizing such metaphors with unprecedented vigor: they were perceived as problematically normalizing wars, indirectly justifying violations of basic rights, contributing to authoritarianism, or unnecessarily opposing nations struggling with a common challenge (Hanne 2022, 90–91). From a more humane perspective, heroic war narratives might indirectly heap guilt on victims for not having 'fought' sufficiently, thus moralizing a medical phenomenon.

Such imagery has, however, waned since. While metaphors of societies mobilized into war were ubiquitous, metaphors of *demobilization* and *withdrawal* of troops remain neglected. Why? Would this not be a perfectly intuitive image for the transition to normalcy and one consistent with the earlier 'mobilization'? Although this finding is negative, the absence of war metaphors is revealing: this omission clearly relates to the asymmetrical structure of the crisis's intensity. The anti-COVID-19 campaign was forcefully promoted at the outset but has gradually faded away since. This is typical for metaphorical wars, such as those against drugs, poverty, or terror that are frequently declared but rarely end with a peace treaty, as the menace is permanent. Given how corona viruses will live with us, the war against them is interminable. Yet, 'real wars have a beginning and an end', and only metaphorical pseudo-wars are endless, as Sontag (2002) noted in criticizing 'war' on terror. The question of when, exactly, should demobilization in the war on COVID-19 take place is difficult to answer conclusively due to the vagueness of the metaphor it builds upon. The temporal dynamics of demobilization after the pandemic is simply more blurred than in literal wars—an effect enhanced by the experience of a continuing global polycrisis (geopolitical tensions, an energy crisis, inflation, and other economic challenges resulting partly from sanctions imposed on Russia for its attack on Ukraine).

While the demobilization perspective remains underutilized, several international organizations, however, capitalized on associations related to *reconstruction* or *rebuilding*. These ideas equally resonate with the semantic field of war but also belong to that of natural disasters like earthquakes or hurricanes. Although the latter interpretation dominates, there are also examples of the former. For instance, Sharan Burrow, the General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation,

DOI: 10.33134/rds.425

linked postwar reconstruction to post-pandemic recovery with a historical analogy: 'The Bretton Woods conference occurred while a war was still raging and helped form the basis of a postwar social contract. Similarly, we need to craft an ambitious reconstruction plan while working to end the pandemic' (Susskind et al. 2023). Correspondingly, Torero (2020), the Chief Economist of the United Nation's (UN) Food and Agriculture Organization, likened post-pandemic recovery to the Marshall Plan, urging politicians to treat the worst affected areas as 'conflict zones' in a 'war' and to appreciate 'the full scale of the wreckage and the challenge of the reconstruction'. These instances can be read as congruent with the general 'pandemic is war' frame and its applications in the transition to normalcy.

Mostly, however, the largely parallel natural disaster frame is activated. A report by the European Economic and Social Committee (2021, 11) called for 'sustainable reconstruction,' while the UN (2020a, 80; 2020b, 2, 22; 2020c) urged the world to 'build back from the COVID-19,' 'rebuild our systems,' and 'build back better.' Further, the OECD (2020) guided members to 'build back better.' As Hamann (2020, 41–42) observes, the phrase 'build back better' gained wide popularity in 2020; yet, problematically, the phrase originally emerged in discussions on tsunamis and earthquakes, particularly after the Asian Tsunami of 2004, where the physical rebuilding of society is central quite literally. In the COVID-19 context, that phrase and parallel expressions, by contrast, are clearly metaphorical for describing the pandemic as having destroyed the physical infrastructure of societies, although its effects have primarily targeted institutional effectiveness, social relations, and the economy. This 'even more metaphorical' use of the phrase risks 'vacuity, bias, or even intentional misdirection,' Hamann (2020, 46) aptly observes. Categories related to war or natural disasters might not directly apply to the pandemic as a new type of crisis. Interestingly, the OECD (2020, 4–5) explicitly notes the background and possible limitations of the 'build back better' phrase in that no physical damage is recorded and that the economic consequences are global rather than local.

Nevertheless, ideas of improvement and increased resistance toward similar future catastrophes remain in the build back *better* notion and link the reconstruction/rebuilding terminology inextricably with that of resilience. The OECD (2020, 4–5) considered the build back better notion appropriate precisely because post-COVID rebuilding provided a unique opportunity for 'sustainable recovery' and 'increased resilience.' The Swedish Public Health Agency similarly called for 'reconstruction [*återuppbyggnad*] into a more resilience and long-term sustainable society,' particularly emphasizing the social and public health dimensions in the 'reconstruction [*återuppbyggnaden*] after the pandemic' (Folkhälsomyndigheten 2021, 15). A committee report commissioned by the Finnish government discussed the exit from the crisis as 'reconstruction' (*jälleenrakennus*): 'When the epidemic is permanently under control and the crisis is over, it is time for reconstruction,' the group posited, referring primarily to 'structural changes' toward a carbon-neutral society, wide-ranging support for wellbeing, and sustainable public finance (Exit- ja jälleenrakennustyöryhmä 2020, 42–44). This was a national variant of the international 'build back better' notion, reverberating in the very name of the committee.

While the above examples testify to a resilience-oriented interpretation of reconstruction, German and Austrian politicians employed a reconstruction-oriented reading of resilience: both countries called their 'Recovery and Resilience Plans,' commissioned by the EU in early 2021, *Aufbau- und Resilienzplan* ('Reconstruction and Resilience Plan'), wherein terms *Aufbau* and particularly *Wiederaufbau*

DOI: 10.33134/rds.425

connote rebuilding after a war or catastrophe (Bundesregierung 2022a, 1096; Bundesministerium für Finanzen 2021, 5, 13). The corresponding Belgian document underscored the aim of 'rebuilding [*aufbauen, reconstruire*] our coexistence upon a more solid basis' (NextGen Belgique 2023a, 2023b).

While building societal structures upon a quasi-physical basis is a ubiquitous basic metaphor, the connotation of rebuilding after a catastrophe makes it particularly intense in this context: the image encapsulates a mini-narrative of devastation, reconstruction, and increased durability in the face of future menaces. Already, the above examples suggest that the metaphorical juxtaposition with wars and physical catastrophes in 'reconstruction' is systematic and derives from international coordinative policy discourses. Arguably, the war in Ukraine also inserts war-related associations into 'reconstruction' and 'building back better,' which highlights the context-sensitive nature of key political concepts.

As the previous examples indicate, reconstruction and building back better are closely linked with the concept of resilience, to which we now turn. In closer scrutiny, resilience emerges as a centerpiece of the European conceptual edifice of pandemic recovery—a concept intrinsically linked with the very notion of recovery and co-constituting its temporal horizon and political thrust, as the last section argues.

RESILIENCE AS THE CENTERPIECE OF THE EUROPEAN RECOVERY DISCOURSE

'Resilience' has a rich metaphorical implicature due to the concept's genealogy: after the ancient senses of leaping, jumping, or bouncing back, it was used in physics and mathematics for an objects or materials capacity to regain its original shape or return to equilibrium after an external shock. The substance-related notion of resilience lives on in EU security debates: 'A resilient state is . . . one that is able to survive change by changing itself: just like a resilient metal it bends but does not break' (Tocci 2017, 71). In the early 1970s, ecologists adopted 'resilience' by metaphorical extension, wherefrom it moved to the analysis of human societies, both uses clearly deviating from elastic physical objects literally bouncing back (Alexander 2013, 2708; Rogers 2017; Norris et al. 2008, 127–128). Simultaneously, however, 'resilience' was further developed in psychology, bereavement studies, and related fields, which gives the term a strong connotation of an individual's postcrisis recovery, and applications to societies thus appear anthropomorphic and doubly metaphorical.

Rogers's (2017, 13) characterizations of 'resilience' as a 'polysemic' concept, 'embedding diverse, and sometimes contradictory, logics in the practices it informs' and amounting to 'complex interplay acted out in our everyday lives,' appear especially topical amid the pandemic. 'Resilience' has dominated the EU's security, crisis management, and sustainability policies since the 2010s, because it resonates with both security and development considerations (Tocci 2017, 70) and provides 'a perfect middle-ground between over-ambitious liberal peacebuilding and the under-ambitious objective of stability' (Wagner & Anholt 2016, 415)—one that harmonizes with the EU's idea of 'principled pragmatism,' or the promotion of interests *and* values (Joseph & Juncos 2019, 1001). Despite resilience's ubiquity in EU governance discourse, its institutionalization into the Union's decision-making remains limited, and resilience-based governance is more about '*projecting* a certain image of the

DOI: 10.33134/rds.425

EU as having a joint and comprehensive approach,' than actual substantive target-setting (Joseph and Juncos 2019, 996, 999).

Furthermore, resilience is a problematic concept as regards its theoretical, normative, and political implications. It has been criticized for 'naturalizing' catastrophes into inevitable occurrences rather than conceiving them as manageable results of political choices; according to critics, resilience thereby reflects and upholds social vulnerabilities, turns actors into accommodating subjects, and discourages investments in genuine empowerment (Wagner & Anholt 2016, 419). In political usage, 'resilience' has elective affinities with neoliberal commitments, such as emphasizing adaptive, self-organizing capabilities of communities and promoting a general market-based and entrepreneurship-oriented model of society, seeking economic growth; also the liberal core values in the EU's foreign and security policy are part and parcel of the Union's understanding of resilience in this field (Joseph & Juncos 2019, 997–1001 and *passim*.) The link with neoliberalism, however, is not watertight: 'resilience' is a politically contested concept precisely because community-oriented readings exist, too (e.g., Rogers et al. 2020). Crises, such as 9/11 or the global financial crisis, have turned 'resilience' into 'a battlefield of potential' and 'an unresolved project which may be aligned with different interventions depending on the worldview and subsequent policy portfolio within which it is mobilized' (Rogers et al. 2020, 5).

Arguably 'resilience' is also compatible with a social democratic approach, which sees social justice and efficiency as compatible values and favors a strong state intervention—a model Walby (2021, 24–25, 28) identifies as the main opposite of neoliberalism in Europe and as reflected in the World Health Organization's (WHO) pandemic policies. On the national level, such readings are identifiable in the Finnish recovery plan by Sanna Marin's Social Democracy-led government. The document identified various contributions to Finland's overall resilience, including investments in research and innovation infrastructures, educating the labor force, social and health services, digitalization, and training related to cyber security; resilience was jeopardized by social problems, unemployment, insufficient income, and COVID-induced impaired access to social services (Valtioneuvosto 2021, 113, 147, 152, 234, 278, 339). Such national interpretations give 'resilience' a different twist: for instance, suggesting extra capacity to healthcare to ensure operationality amid crisis rather than maximally tight budgeting conceptually distances 'resilience' from its parallel concept 'austerity' in the neoliberal discursive cluster. More broadly, this illustrates how the EU's generally 'neoliberal rationality' is, nationally, challenged by 'powerful counter-models and rival hegemonic projects,' including competing resilience concepts (Joseph & Juncos 2019, 1006–1007). Promoting increased resources to healthcare or culture in the name of resilience clearly aims at shedding the concept's neoliberal undertones and reoccupy it ideologically; for more debt-averse groups, this would rather *risk* resilience—'one person's resilience may be another's vulnerability' (Alexander 2013, 14).

Although often used as parallel concepts, *resistance* and resilience can also be alternative, even conflicting terms. Resistance refers to the post-event functioning of the system (individual, group, or society) with respect to the original environment so that no major dysfunction takes place, whereas resilience implies the presence of transient dysfunction and a process of adaptation to an altered environment (Norris et al. 2008, 129–130). 'Resilience' thus underscores swift returning from crisis to normality, whereas 'resistance' captures the ability to avoid detrimental consequences in the first place. The differentiation between original and altered

DOI: 10.33134/rds.425

environments, however, is questionable in COVID-19: given the pandemic's *sui generis* nature, no country was sufficiently prepared to avoid serious societal consequences, and because both the menace and the countermeasures were global, each country's operating environment de facto changed. With respect to new waves of viruses, 'resistance' might usefully supplement 'resilience,' though.

Occasionally, scholars stretch 'resilience' to cover both aspects. There are actually three overlapping resilience concepts. Boin and van Eeten (2013, 442) define *precursor resilience* as the capacity to absorb sudden shocks so that emerging problems do not turn into crisis, thus bringing the term close to resistance in the above sense. In the international recovery discourse, the term is clearly used this way: for instance, the Austrian recovery plan calls for increased 'resilience of the small and medium enterprise against future pandemics' (Bundesministerium für Finanzen 2021, 44). *Recovery resilience*, by contrast, means the ability to respond to shocks by rapidly 'bouncing back to a state of normalcy' (Boin and van Eeten 2013, 431). When the French government, for instance, calls for strengthening economic resilience, it means the economy's ability to 'bounce back from the health and economic crisis,' that is, to recover from an already existing crisis (Gouvernement 2021, 4). The Dutch equivalent for resilience is *veerkracht*, wherein *kracht* is power and *veer* denotes both a bird's feather and a (mechanical) spring, thus containing doubly the idea of elasticity or bouncing back. These connotations reverberate in the Dutch recovery plan's calls for increased 'resilience [*veerkracht*] of the healthcare system' (Ministerie van Financiën 2022, 18).

If we use 'resistance' to cover the idea of precursor resilience, 'resilience' still remains a broad category. Duit (2016, 367), for instance, introduces *adaptive resilience*, the ability to learn from past crises and use them as resources in repelling future ones. Oftentimes, the term *transformative resilience* is used synonymously: whereas recovery resilience covers any system's ability to regain its original shape, like material objects bouncing back, the latter term refers to the ability to assume novel forms after a crisis (Shen, Cheng & Yu 2022). By further capitalizing on the metaphorical potential in the term's history, scholars have also expressed this idea in terms of resilience, implying not so much 'bouncing back' as 'bouncing forward' (Manyena et al. 2011).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic recovery clearly have characteristics of all these resilience forms. A Finnish expert group (Exit- ja jälleenrakennustyöryhmä 2020, 59) defined resilience as 'the ability to . . . anticipate, survive, and learn from changes,' thus implicitly invoking precursor resilience, recovery resilience, and adaptive/transformative resilience alike. The group also actively revitalized metaphorical layers by promoting a 'predictable, yet agile' strategy, describing the core idea under the heading 'out of the crisis with an agile triple jump performance' wherein the three jumps referred to maintenance, aftercare, and reconstruction (Exit- ja jälleenrakennustyöryhmä 2020, 8). This was fully in line with the international uses of the resilience concept in the post-COVID-19 context. For instance, the European Economic and Social Committee (2021, 8) notes that the ongoing recovery 'can encourage a "bounce forward"' toward sustainable development goals,' whereas the UN (2020a, 14; 2020b, 19) called for 'transformative changes' rather than unambitious 'business as usual' and perceived an opportunity to 'leapfrog' in education matters.

Resilience has two dominant counter-concepts or counter-metaphors, indirectly supporting the imagery of elasticity and bouncing forward: *vulnerability* and *fragility*. For instance, the UN (2020c, 8) explicitly evoked 'vulnerability' in calling for regional

DOI: 10.33134/rds.425

integration to facilitate increased resilience of supply chains and addressing possible deficiencies that might 'impede recovery or recreate old vulnerabilities.' Particularly in the EU's security sector, resilience has been conceptually opposed with 'fragility' (Wagner & Anholt 2016, 416) or breaking apart under stress, which indirectly supports the association of resilience with elasticity and bouncing back/forward. Manyena et al. (2011, 417) consider the 'bouncing forward' interpretation of resilience useful precisely for liberating the concept from its counter-concept of vulnerability.

RECOVERY: MEDICAL PARALLELS

What about the concept of recovery? How is it used in the threefold regulative framework of domestic, European, and international norms? While economic considerations dominate, the recovery called for transcends mere economic reinvigoration. Given the centrality of 'resilience' in European recovery discourses, it is unsurprising that the future-oriented transformative elements of resilience also leak into 'recovery,' and the two concepts thus come functionally close to one another.

Many international organizations promote their own normative vocabulary to channel post-pandemic development, including the International Monetary Fund (2020) promoting a 'green recovery.' The UN (2020c) through its regional commissions, has particularly promoted an 'inclusive, resilient, and green recovery,' whereas the International Labor Organization (2021) calls for a 'human-centered' and, more specifically, 'inclusive, sustainable, and resilient recovery.' In May 2020, a massive petition by over 350 organizations addressed G20 leaders, calling for a 'healthy recovery'—here health not only refers to the proposal's subject matter, but also the very process of recovery is, by metonymy, described as 'healthy' (HealthyRecovery 2020).

In the EU, national strategies are guided by systematic EU regulation. The Council of the European Union (The Council of the European Union 2020) called for "sustainable and resilient recovery". The European Commission pushed member states to draft their 'Recovery and Resilience Plans,' a political instrument the Commission used to align national strategies with its own recoverypolicy underscoring 'green' and 'digital recovery' (Mišík and Oravcová 2022). Countries' ways of addressing the task vary, but the green deal, sustainability, digitalization, and increased societal resilience are cross-cutting themes in the national plans. The recovery fund arguably spelled a change vis-à-vis the EU's earlier austerity-based fiscal policy, an increase in social investments, a critical juncture in the EU's economic governance, and possibly a step toward a fiscal union (Luo 2022). Yet it also pursued the Commission's long-term policy goals and interlaced these with the notion of 'recovery' to begin with. Ultimately, the principles of recovery predate COVID-19, rather deriving from the European Council's 2019 strategy of building a 'climate-neutral, green, fair and Social Europe.' In Crouch's (2022, 43–44) estimation, these principles mark a turn from neoliberalism toward more social-democratic approaches.

The above invites two conceptual observations: first, the conceptual coherence of EU's central recovery vocabulary is secured by a medical background metaphor; second, the recovery notion at play is clearly transformative, implicitly calling for improvements. I develop the first observation in this section and the latter in the subsequent one.

DOI: 10.33134/rds.425

In the EU's recovery discourse, *recovery* is interlaced with *resilience* and their common counter-concept of *crisis*. All three concepts share medical connotations, occasionally perceivable in concrete uses. To 'recover' as an intransitive verb means to regain a normal condition, get better, or recuperate from adverse events (illness, economic depression) (OED 2023, entry 'Recover'). Besides its concrete uses of materials' elasticity and capability of resuming original shape after compression, resilience carries the metaphorical meaning of recovering quickly from adverse events, such as crisis, shock, or illness (OED 2023, entry 'Resilience'). Conceptual-historical analysis of 'crisis' also reveals established medical connotations (Koselleck 2006, 358–360, 366–367). Naturally, merely the *possibility* of medical uses should not be overinterpreted into claims of primacy; purely economic uses of recovery are common, and resilience also refers to any kind of crisis. Yet the medical layers of meaning are particularly intuitive amid the COVID-19 recovery, given that 'recovery' features in two distinct semantic fields: one related to the pandemic's subject matter, another to how it is governed.

In closer analysis, subtle parallels emerge between the crisis's content and the conceptualizations of its societal and administrative consequences. A report commissioned by the European Parliament identified several '"shadow" pandemics of educational deprivation, domestic violence, unemployment, poverty, social-isolation and mental health crises' (Grogan 2022, 15)—an obvious metaphorical extension of 'pandemic' to nonmedical issues. Belgium's recovery plan described the country's economy as suffering from 'asphyxia,' the lack of oxygen (NextGen Belgique 2023b). An op-ed piece in the newspaper New Europe depicted European economies as having gone into 'an induced coma as shutdowns came into force' and having suffered a 'heart attack,' now necessitating 'some resuscitation to the damaged economic body's heart' and 'careful nursing' also after it starts 'beating again' (Urquhart Stewart 2020). Like actual patients, we perceive our societies as temporarily impaired and in need of recovery and heightened future resilience/resistance. Such voices were explicitly raised in academic blogs during the pandemic, for instance, describing governments, professionals, and science-based decision-making as the 'social immune system' of the 'body politic' (Hale 2020). Certainly, most instances are not this explicitly metaphorical. Yet, even in those cases, the underlying metaphorical reservoir guarantees more specific concepts' *coherence* so that these concepts 'fit together' without contradictions, and occasionally they also form a single *consistent* image of society as a recovering patient (cf. Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 43–45). Sometimes desired outcomes, too, are described in terms of health, that is, as 'healthy economy and civil society' (HealthyRecovery 2020).

Underlying metaphorical layers also guide our *narrations* of crisis and recovery. The UN's roadmap emphasized learning from earlier pandemics for the 'recovery process' and 'recovery period,' not the acute health response alone. Such improved knowledge would facilitate immediate 'recovery' but also ensure national health systems' 'capacity to recover' from COVID-related challenges (UN 2020a, 27–29). Such descriptions testify to an implicit adoption of the logic of disease and recovery into descriptions of COVID-19-induced societal changes: the acute crisis will be followed by a recovery period, our categories suggest. But what if the narrative logic is different, perhaps with general setbacks or different branches of government, or, say, the health system, recovering at different velocities? Further, economic recovery is a matter of finance policy decision-making, not the result of autonomous bodily mechanisms defeating viruses. Managing service backlogs in healthcare or courts

DOI: 10.33134/rds.425

of law depends on allocating scarce resources with opportunity costs. The *single* recovery paradigm, modeled after prototypical human recovery, might unnecessarily simplify multifaceted societal recovery and hide political liabilities.

The recovery period can also be divided into sequences. In June 2020, the Finnish Exit and Reconstruction Group (2020, 8–9) identified three overlapping phases: maintenance of abilities amid acute crisis, aftercare, and reconstruction. 'In the so-called aftercare phase,' states remedy pandemic-induced harms and reinforce public trust, thereby supporting 'safe recovery after the acute crisis phase' and 'preventing the emergence of long-term adverse effects' (Exit- ja jälleenrakennustyöryhmä 2020, 9, 42). In medical contexts, 'aftercare' refers to (domestic) post-operation treatment, but more broadly, it denotes any postcrisis management. In substantive terms, some post-pandemic measures come close to literal medical aftercare, such as further investments into mental health services or students' wellbeing. When broader institutional and administrative challenges are discussed similarly, medical connotations reverberate in these categories, at least potentially, although wider usages are also common.

The systematic resonance with medical imagery in terms like *aftercare*, *recovery*, and *resilience* is further supported by the use of parallel formulations, such as *resistance*—a broad term denoting in its medical uses the ability to withstand diseases or infections, whether natural or acquired via exposure or vaccination (OED 2023, entry 'Resistance'). For instance, the Swedish government sought to strengthen Sweden's 'economic, social, and institutional resistance [*motståndskraft*],' defined as the 'ability to meet economic and social shocks' (Regeringen 2021, 10, 14, 194, 200). By 'institutional resistance,' the document denoted security of supply and otherwise ensuring society's operational capabilities (Regeringen 2021, 15). Yet it is difficult not to read the term in analogy with medical resistance toward the virus. Germany similarly spoke of 'social resilience,' encompassing particularly the 'resistance' (*Widerstandsfähigkeit*) of the vulnerable groups, such as the unemployed (Bundesregierung 2022b, 1105). These equivalent expressions for resistance in Swedish and German were linked with both 'recovery' and 'resilience' in the EU-level strategy. The general aims were applicable to financial crises, natural catastrophes, and hybrid warfare alike, but the terminology was that of resistance toward diseases, borrowed from the current pandemic's medical content.

RECOVERY AS AN EXPECTATION CONCEPT

My second conceptual observation relates to the expectations attached to 'recovery.' When societal recovery is interpreted in analogy with medical recovery, one implication is that impairments will pass: patients recover earlier capabilities and become what they were. However, returning to the anterior condition might be neither possible nor desirable in societal recovery. For instance, the economist Stiglitz (2020, 5) noted how 'unhealthy' national economies were and doubted we could or should return to the pre-pandemic world. The Director-General of WHO, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (2020), noted, with clear analogy to humans, that 'societies need to protect themselves, and to recover, as quickly as possible,' yet concluded that 'we cannot go back to the way we did things before.'

Seldom, however, does surviving a medical crisis make us stronger or more capable, apart from temporary immunity toward the same virus. The physiological notion of

DOI: 10.33134/rds.425

recovery from an intense workout with increased capability of stimulated muscles carries this transformative connotation, but the medical does not (Balk 2004, 365–366). Yet precisely this aspect of *improvement* while recovering is the dominant rationale in international and EU-level recovery thinking. In this respect, the concept of recovery in question transgresses the limits of the medical analogy—even when expressed in quasi-bodily terms. For instance, the massive petition by health professionals particularly urged countries to learn from earlier mistakes and 'come back stronger, healthier and more resilient' (HealthyRecovery 2020). The improvement idea is identical to that reflected in 'build back better': an ambitious societal transformation in line with identified megatrends and preset political aims. Societies are not merely expected to avoid breaking apart and gradually regain anterior capacities but to recover into better societies. The recovery notion involved is clearly *transformative*, not restorative. Therefore, experts commissioned by the Finnish government specifically emphasized the transition to a novel situation: 'crises always provide an opportunity for renewal,' they noted, and recovery from the present 'disruption' should not mean 'a return to the pre-crisis situation, but a transition to a post-crisis state for society' (Valtioneuvosto 2022, 11).

This idea, however, comes with empirical, normative, and conceptual difficulties. Recovering into a better society might be too much to ask or otherwise suboptimal. As Hamann (2020, 44) notes, the time immediately after a disaster 'may not be the best time—morally or practically—to attempt longer term social change, given that many people are suffering immediate needs,' and fairness considerations and care for the most vulnerable may clash with long-term aims. Additionally, humans or societies under stress are probably not at their best in decision-making, and decisions may reflect pre-existing conceptions and potential biases (Hamann 2022, 44). Excessively ambitious goals amalgamated into the recovery process may thus produce suboptimal results.

There are obvious normative problems involved, too. Governance-level terminology may appear highly insensitive when put into practice. As one anonymous expert noted, it is difficult to sell disasters as an opportunity to 'build back better' for those who have lost their homes (Wagner and Anholt 2016, 420). Also, in human recovery from illnesses or life crises, such as losing a loved one, we would consider it ethically inappropriate to call for simultaneous improvement as a person. However, in European societies' post-pandemic recovery, this future-oriented aspect is codified into the very notion of recovery by interpreting it as coextensive, if not synonymous, with 'reform' or 'improvement.' The recovery concept's future-oriented transformative element apparently derives from the general resilience framework in European policy discourses. The normative expectations codified into 'recovery' arguably overstrain the concept; it joins 'progress,' 'emancipation,' and 'democratization' in the tradition of European 'expectation concepts'—concepts deriving from present experiences but primarily oriented toward the future, thus containing implicit prognoses and an inner temporal structure (Koselleck 2004, 251). This internal temporal dynamics ultimately guarantees such concepts' capability of steering history and their political effectiveness; indeed, as experiences and expectations depart, 'it becomes the task of political action to bridge this difference' (Koselleck 2004, 272).

Additionally, the notion of 'recovering better' implies a peculiar combination of first- and second-level recovery. This largely follows from the involved concepts' meanings: most dictionaries define resilience as the ability to 'recover quickly,' subsumable under the larger notion of recovery (Balk 2007, 86), whereas increased resilience is an

DOI: 10.33134/rds.425

integral part of the societal recovery called for. Thus, post-pandemic societies must, while recovering, also *become better at recovering* to facilitate subsequent recoveries. The call for recovering better (e.g., The UN 2020b, 22) has clear parallels with the idea of resilience as a transferable skill or 'technology of the self.' Unfortunately, this framing tacitly implies that those suffering crises have failed in learning the lesson and thus makes the victims co-responsible for their faith (Wagner & Anholt 2016, 419).

CONCLUSIONS

European recovery from the COVID-19-crisis has been conducted in largely pre-existing categories, even buzzwords, such as those of recovery, resilience, building back better, or bouncing back. In scholarly, public, and political debate alike, it is essential to specify which meanings and expectations one intends to imply by using such concepts.

Particularly, the politically underpinned channeling of recovery into increasing 'resilience' has overstrained the concept of recovery with vague but extensive future expectations, turning recovery into a general transformative process. European recovery is thus not only loaded with high substantial expectations—green deal, sustainability, digitalization, and inclusiveness, as promoted by the Commission—but also with exponentially increasing resilience as ability for future recovery. This reading, desirably, transcends mere economic recovery as the reinvigoration of economic activity and societal recovery as regaining operational capacities. Yet society-level expectations may be too high. Just as excessively heroic war narratives may heap guilt on the non-survivors, the transformative notion of recovery or resilience, understood as a transferable skill of individuals, communities, and societies, may indirectly put the blame on the pandemic's victims (in medical, social, or economic senses) for not having possessed the required capabilities.

Further, such categories may inappropriately essentialize the results of political choices into the objects' characteristics and thereby conceal the political genesis of social vulnerabilities, including, for example, the under-resourcing of public healthcare and administration. The undeniable dominance of these terms in European recovery discourses does not, however, mean that the categories would not leave shares of defining power to domestic actors and political parties. Resilience is a sufficiently multifaceted category to allow for partisan reinterpretations, including the explicitly social-democratic reading of resilience as sufficient resourcing of public healthcare.

There might be a demand for conceptualizations of recovery that are simultaneously more ambitious than merely regaining economic and administrative functionality yet less demanding than the transformative idea of societies improving while recovering from one of the most serious global challenges. More moderate forms of transformation back to full capability are in fact available. Scholars discussing death, bereavement, and mourning recognize the need to avoid the medicalizing and potentially pathologizing aspects of 'recovery' from losing a family member, for instance. Recovery after such a trauma clearly invokes metaphorical meanings of the term, for no one is literally ill (Rosenblatt 2007, 7–8). For Corr and colleagues (2009, 234), the term 'recovery' implies that grief is a negative phenomenon, that there is a fixed endpoint after which grief would disappear, and that in 'recovery' one would return to an anterior situation. Such erasure of a traumatic event, like losing a child, from one's life narrative may, however, be both impossible and undesirable, as Rosenblatt notes (2007, 9). While acknowledging how problematic these assumptions are in individuals'

DOI: 10.33134/rds.425

life-courses, Balk (2004, 362; 2007, 85) has, nevertheless, promoted the use of 'recovery' in contexts of individual's bereavement in the transitive sense of our ability as mourning persons to 'redefine and reintegrate ourselves to life' or 'recover oneself, to recover one's humanity.' In this reading, recovery does not imply returning to the anterior condition or denying the original loss, but integrating that experience into a new mode of existence. Simultaneously, it is not primarily an externally imposed category, but due to the transitive element, the 'recovery' emerges in the recovering person's novel, adjusted self-understanding.

Could the post-COVID-19 return to normalcy be seen as such a transformative recovery, which is nonmedical and comes with moderate aims? While societies certainly cannot return to the *status quo ante* and erase the manifold social effects of the pandemic, they can regain their capacities and self-understanding as fully operative entities. This could be articulated in terms of a 'recovery,' and it could encompass aspects of healing and reconciliation that reach beyond mere economic and administrative effectiveness and legal prosecution of human rights violations. Procedures of transitional justice have been successfully applied in post-civil war situations but also in child abuse cases and increasingly proposed for environmental crises and, most recently, for the COVID-19 pandemic in the form of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Rodríguez Reveggino & Becerra-Bolãnos 2022). More specifically, an Italian legal scholar has promoted such a commission with institutional hearings 'to foster collective healing' in Italy, unattainably by criminal law measures alone (Mazzucato 2020). Similarly, calling for truth and reconciliation commissions, American medical anthropologists have suggested that 'a genuine build back better policy for COVID-19 includes tending to the nation's damaged psyche, lest unresolved trauma stunt the flourishing of both individuals and nations' (Schoch-Spana and Ravi 2023).

Temporary impairments in public administration, healthcare, the economy, and the legal system were *per se* understandable amid the sudden crisis. Yet the consequences for people's lives were serious: these include medical complications or even casualties due to inadequate healthcare resources, businesses going bankrupt due to restrictions, or individuals' basic rights (for instance those related to movement, assembly, or family life) being violated by governance measures. Being sensitive to these losses and learning from them to avoid similar outcomes is arguably an important part of the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside suppressing the pandemic, supporting economic revival, and possibly advancing the EU's long-term restructuring aims. 'Recovery' in the above refined sense might help expressing these intentions without overburdening the concept of recovery with unrealistic future expectations or unnecessarily medicalizing the crisis.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This work was funded by the Strategic Research Council (SRC) established within the Research Council of Finland, grant numbers 345950 and 345953. An earlier version was presented at "Politicisations of Pandemic Recovery: Knowledge, Justifications and Democratic Agency', organized by the research consortium "Just Recovery from Covid-19?", University of Helsinki, June 15–16, 2023. I thank all audience members, the editors of this special issue, and two anonymous referees for their feedback.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Pankakoski, Timo. 2024. "Concepts We Transform by: Metaphorical Concepts in Post-COVID-19 Transition to Normalcy." *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 27(1): 6–25. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.425

Submitted: 01 December 2023
Accepted: 24 May 2024
Published: 09 July 2024

Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press.

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