OF SUBSTANCE, SIGNS, AND THE STATE:

A NEW READING OF ST. AUGUSTINE'S DEFINITION OF THE REPUBLIC [1]

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Abstract: This article provides a new interpretation of St. Augustine's concept of *res publica*, situating his political philosophy in terms of the distinction between *res* and *signum*, substance and sign, which runs across his work. The *res* of *res publica* is its governing power inasmuch as it is an object that commands the loving attention of the people, to which they conform gradually as a kind of facsimile the more they attend. The *populus*, as *signum* of this *res*, represents this power which might otherwise be invisible. This account of Augustine's political thought enables my intervention on two disputed points: on the status of Augustine's concept of 'state' as a stepping-stone to the 'modern' state (it is not, I argue); and on the autonomy or dependence of politics in relation to religion (there is no 'true' godly *res publica* on this earth and Augustine's definition allows for a spectrum of possibilities).

Keywords: Augustine, Cicero, Republic, Semiology, The state

Introduction

A PREVAILING MOTIF IN ST. AUGUSTINE of Hippo's writings is the distinction between *res* and *signum*, or substance and its sign, reality and its representation. Augustine gave both concepts fresh meanings; he brought each term into a new relationship with the other; and, from beginning to end of his prodigiously productive intellectual career, he put them to work in dialogues and discourses on an array of subjects. As Remo Gramigna has recently put it, 'the sign-object distinction is a metaphor for the Augustinian approach in its entirety'.[3]

It is curious, then, that Augustine's political philosophy has not been elucidated systematically in terms of this patterning of phenomenon and emblem, which is otherwise widely recognized as standing centrally in his work.[4] This is even more surprising given that the *locus classicus* of his reflections on politics, the 'microcosm of Augustine's social thought', is Book XIX, chapters 21-24, of *De civitate Dei* (*City of God*), the centrepiece of which is his

[3] Remo Gramigna, *Augustine's Theory of Signs, Signification, and Lying* (Berlin, 2020), p. 107.

[4] I gestured at this point in Ben Holland, *Self and City in the Thought of Saint* Augustine (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), esp. pp. 91-10. Todd Breyfogle, 'Citizenship and Signs: Rethinking Augustine on the Two Cities', in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Political Thought*, ed. Ryan K. Balot (Chichester, 2009), invokes the *res*/*signum* relation to Augustine's political thought, but ultimately makes a very different point about the rival significance of Cain and Abel in Augustine's narrative of political founding. Veronica Roberts Ogle, *Politics and the Earthly City in Augustine's 'City of God'* (Cambridge, 2020), argues that sacramentality—signs that point to God—dominates Augustine's worldview, but draws distinct implications of this for reading *City of God*, and stops short of assigning any special significance to the play of *res* and *signum* in the *res publica* as such.

definition of the term *res publica*.[5] The *res* has not often been so strongly showcased in his various analyses of things and their indices. Reading Augustine in translation is surely one reason for this lacuna. For *res publica*, most obviously translated as 'republic', literally means 'public-' or 'common thing', but these days denotes a specific kind of regime. *Res* in the Latin world could also signify 'substance', and therefore substance in the sense of property or wealth: hence 'commonwealth'. The temptation, though, is to restate Augustine's *res publica* by the less archaic 'state'. The 'thingness' of the *res publica* has been lost in translation and obliterated in paraphrasis—and with it all traces of *res* and that which might stand for its constant partner, *signum*.

The Latin world, though, had no real equivalent of our word 'state'. We have to wait for the sixteenth century, remarks James Alexander, until we register 'the shift from "the state of *x*", where *x* is the substantive'—'the state of the city (*status civitatis*), the state of the republic (*status reipublicae*)', and so on—'to "the state", where "state" is the substantive'.[6] We have, therefore, good reason to want to let Augustine's *res publica* stand, and not to let the watchword of modern politics, the state (the 'standing' itself), stand in for Augustine's own terminology.[7] *Res publica* is an open invitation to the scholar to proffer an interpretation of Augustine's account of political community in terms of the broader organising principles of his philosophy: that is to say, in terms of the opposition and connection of substance and sign.

[5] Oliver O'Donovan, 'The Political Thought of *City of God* 19', in *Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present*, eds. Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan (Grand Rapids, MI, 2004), p. 72.

[6] James Alexander, 'The State is the Attempt to Strip Metaphor out of Politics', in *Michael Oakeshott on Authority, Governance and the State*, ed. Eric S. Kos (London, 2019), p. 16.

[7] The etymology of 'state' leads back to its Indo-European root *sta*-, 'to stand'.

This article interprets Augustine's definition of *res publica* in the context of the wider *res/signum* relationship. The first part gives an overview of his use of the categories of *res* and *signum* and of the novelty of his handling of them. Following that, their conceptual work is highlighted with respect to Augustine's writings on epistemology, language and the Church. Then I turn to Augustine's political theory and put forward an alternative account to that sometimes found in discussions of *City of God*. In these, he is argued to have had something like the modern concept of the state, even if he did not have the word. I argue that Augustine's *res publica* is a composite entity, a combination of loving public and the object of its love, the former approximating ever more faithfully as sign of the latter the more it longingly attends, heedless of the justification of that object to act as a recipient of love. Augustine's *populus* is, accordingly, the sign of the objects of its love in the sense that it symbolizes them, inscribing often conceptual or immaterial things into concrete human practices and social relations. The Augustinian *res publica*, that is to say, comprises a people consolidated as a unity by a common love for a common object of esteem and reverence, a multitude bound together and transcended in virtue of the love of an object which gathers and concentrates them so that they conjointly become a kind of facsimile of that object. This new reading of Augustine's *res publica* means that I disagree with those writers who see Augustine as advocating an absolute distinction between political and religious communities. I argue that his definition of *res publica* allows Augustine to specify how it is possible for civic society and the visible Church to cohabit the same physical space at the same time—as overlapping communities different by virtue of their different objects. They can also be positioned along a continuum of *rei publicae*—as communities of essentially the same kind owing to their evincing the same relation between object and public, *res* and *signum*.

1. *Res* and *Signum*

The Latin word *res* rested on a number of concepts that the Greek philosophical lexicon had partitioned off from one another: *ónta*, signifying material or singular things; *prâgma*, meaning facts or states of affairs; and *ousía*, designating essences. The mode of being of *res* was in each case constituted in terms of a contrast, and given the rhetorical and forensic concerns of Roman intellectual life it is no surprise that *things* were contrasted with *words*. *Res* as substance or subject was juxtaposed with *verbum*, or what was said about it. *Res* as fact, condition or event was counterpoised to *verba*, or what was written about it. *Res* as essence signified the meaning of a word in contradistinction to *vocabula*, the term itself. When used to denote some specific thing falling under the general class of subject, fact or meaning, *res* 'acquired a clearly differentiated meaning only through the determinants that accompanied it'.[8] *Res publica* is only one of many Latin compound nouns where *res* is modified by an adjective which assumes almost the entire semantic burden. The Latin world had, for example, *res gestae* ('things done', so actions), but more peculiarly there were *res divinae* ('things divine', but meaning religious laws), *res naturalis* ('things natural', but in fact natural causes), *res adversae* ('adverse things', or bad luck), *res secundae* ('things announced', meaning 'success'), etc. All this goes to say, then, that *res* routinely meant something only by means of opposition or combination. *Res* was a single Latin term for discrete Greek concepts that continued their disconnected careers in an altered linguistic milieu. Before Augustine, it had not occurred to anyone to define or conceptualise *res* as a single concept.

[8] Jean-François Courtine, 'Res, Ens', in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin (Princeton, NJ, 2014), p. 897.

Augustine, who confessed his own ignorance of Greek, was the first person to give a general definition of *res*.[9] He did that by finding a single overarching point of contrast to it. 'What I now call things', he says in his *De doctrina Christiana* (*On Christian Teaching*), 'are things such as logs, stones, sheep, and so on, which are not employed to signify something'.[10] *Res*—'in the strict sense'—is anything which exists and is not used to mean something else. Logs, stones and sheep, as we might find them on countryside strolls, are things:

> but I do not include the log which we read that Moses threw into the bitter waters to make them lose their bitter taste [Exod. 15:25], or the stone which Jacob placed under his head [Gen. 28.11], or the sheep which Abraham sacrificed in place of his son [Gen. 22.13]. These are things, but they are at the same time signs of other things.[11]

This means, as Gramigna writes, that while in the rigorous sense the meaning of *res* 'rests upon a relation of opposition' to *signum*, *res* also has a secondary meaning 'based on a relation of inclusion' of *signum*.[12] This, I would argue, is one of the reasons that Augustine regularly uses *res* not only to signify 'thing', 'substance', 'fact' or 'reality', but also, more metaphorically, 'root', because *res* subtends—underlying so as to include—even those things which are things only secondarily.

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[9] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, 1992), I.13.20. When I refer to translations of works by Augustine, I adopt the standard practice of citing book, chapter, and (where this exists) paragraph number. For his 'pathetic' knowledge of Greek, James J. O'Donnell*, Augustine: A New Biography* (New York, 2005), p. 126; c.f. Robin Lane Fox, *Augustine: Confessions and Conversions* (London, 2015), p. 53.

[10] Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford, 1997), I.2.4

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Gramigna, *Augustine's Theory of Signs*, p. 119.

These secondary things are, as we have seen, *signa*. Again, Augustine innovated with the term *signum*. For the Greeks, 'signs are natural givens, which today we would call symptoms or indexes, and they entertain with that which they signify, or designate, a relation based on the mechanism of inference'.[13] Aristotle in the *Rhetoric*, for example, contrasted necessary signs, or evidence, with fallible signs, or indications.[14] If somebody is vomiting, that is evidence of their being unwell; if someone is pale, that is only an indication that they may be unwell; both, however, are still signs of illness, with different confidence levels. Aristotle's signs, then, shore up our knowledge in a world where wonder—the philosophical attitude that 'simply sees the world for what it is'—is met with doubt—which 'assumes that we can infer *what is* from *what seems*'.[15]

Cicero added to Aristotle's account of signs a properly Roman doubt that something could represent something else wordlessly. For him, 'a sign is something which falls under one of the senses and signifies something that is directly evident from it … [but which] nevertheless requires testimony or more secure confirmation'.[16] Like his Stoic fellow travellers, Cicero

[13] U. Eco, R. Lambertini, C. Marmo and A. Tabbaroni, 'On Animal Language in the Medieval Classification of Signs', in *On the Medieval Theory of Signs*, eds. Umberto Eco and Constantino Marmo (Amsterdam, 1989), p. 4.

[14] Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. John Henry Freese (London, 1926), II.25.8. See James Allen, *Inference from Signs: Ancient Debates about the Nature of Evidence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 29-36.

[15] James Alexander, 'The Four Points of the Compass', *Philosophy*, LXXXVII (2012), pp. 79-107, p. 85, p. 100. If this characterisation of doubt sounds odd, that is because Alexander (at p. 100) contrasts doubt with scepticism, where the only certainty 'is the certainty—if it is a certainty—that certainty cannot be known'.

[16] Cicero, *On Invention,* trans. H. M. Hubbell (Cambridge, MA, 1949), I.30.

contrasts signs and words, refusing to 'subsume semantics under semiotics'.[17] Origen, however, in third-century Alexandria, moved beyond doubt in the register of faith when he argued that the miracles reported in Scripture were not wonders but meaningful signs of God.[18] The gap between signs and words begins to close: for Origen's God, of course, is the Word. So, too, does Origen argue that sensible things might be intimations of higher things.

Augustine is the first writer to work on the basis of a distinction between *res* and *signum*, the thing itself and its token. Earlier authors had contrasted things and words, but none had said that words were signs.[19] Augustine is also 'the first in the ancient world to include in the category of *signa* … the expressions of [ordinary] spoken language'.[20] Words, that is, need not only stand in a relationship of definition to the things that they designate, which is all that the Greeks had been able to countenance. The traditions of the study of empirical inference and linguistic meaning held so far apart in classical antiquity come together in Augustine's account of words as signs.

Augustine provides a new definition of *signum*. A sign 'is a thing'—if it were not a thing, it would be nothing—of a very specific kind,

[17] Phillip Cary, *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine's Thought* (Oxford, 2008), p. 35.

[18] R. A. Markus, *Signs and Meanings: World and Text in Ancient Christianity* (Liverpool, 1996), p. 76.

[19] Names of characters in ancient theatre *were* signs, indicating typical traits, but words as such were not. See David Wiles, *The Masks of Menander: Sign and Meaning in Greek and Roman Performance* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 99.

[20] Giovanni Manetti, *Theories of the Sign in Classical Antiquity* (Bloomington, IN, 1993), p. 157.

> which of itself makes some other thing come to mind, beside the impression that it presents to the senses. So when we see a footprint, we think that the animal whose footprint it is has passed by; when we see smoke we realize that there is a fire beneath it; when we hear the voice of an animate being we observe its feeling; and when the trumpet sounds soldiers know they must advance or retreat.[21]

A thing is a sign, writes R. A. Markus, 'precisely in so far as it stands *for* something *to* somebody'.[22] That may be by nature, such as a cloud formation foretelling a storm, but also when animals intentionally warn each other of danger.[23] Or it may be by convention, such as a military flag, but also when the meanings of words derive 'their effects on the mind from each individual's agreement with a particular convention', so that when 'I say *lege* a Greek understands one thing by these two syllables, but a Latin speaker something else'.[24] It is this triadic 'invisible relation', says John Deeley, through which 'the sign is constituted in its being as sign'.[25]

2. Threading *Res* and *Signum* through Augustine's Philosophy

[21] Augustine, *Christian Teaching*, II.1.1.

[22] Markus, *Signs and Meanings*, p. 87.

[23] Augustine, *Christian Teaching*, II.24.37.

[24] *Ibid.* A Greek would understand by *lege* 'I say'. Here, as so often, Augustine engages in wordplay. A Latin speaker would understand an instruction to read. See also Susannah Ticciati, *A New Apophaticism: Augustine and the Redemption of Signs* (Leiden, 2013), p. 140.

[25] John Deeley, *Augustine and Poinsot: The Protosemiotic Development* (Scranton, PA, 2009), p. 69.

The *res-signum* relation runs like a thread through Augustine's work. Before we can expound its relevance to his political theory, we need to survey its manifestations in other aspects of his thought. Augustine's political thought runs along the same tracks that are also common to his writings on knowledge, language, the nature of God, and the character of the Church.

2.1. Epistemology

Augustine's *res-signum* relation has this in common wherever he employs it: that in addition to the fact that every sign is the sign of something, every sign points the way for decrepit, denatured creatures to begin to approximate and become more proximate to the 'single, supreme thing' (*summa res*) which is God.[26]

This comes out clearly in Augustine's discussions of truth and our knowledge of it. He describes truths as 'eternal things'.[27] Human judgment, he writes, must be superior to the states of affairs that it judges, but it should also be aware that the soul 'does not judge the looks and motions of bodies by the standard of itself', and that 'it is excelled by the nature according to which it makes such judgments'.[28] This nature is the truth, and it is judgment's superior; otherwise, 'we would make judgments about it rather than in accordance with it'.[29] Truth, he says, will be found to be unchangeable, so that it 'neither increases when we see more of it nor

[26] Augustine, *Christian Teaching*, I.5.5.

[27] Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (New York, 1991), XII.15.25.

[28] Augustine, 'True Religion', trans. Edmund Hill, in *On Christian Belief*, ed. Michael Fiedrowicz (New York, 2005), 30.54.

[29] Augustine, 'On the Free Choice of the Will', in *'On the Free Choice of the Will', 'On Grace and Free Choice', and Other Writings*, trans. Peter King (Cambridge, 2010), II.12.34.

decreases when we see less'.[30] Moreover, the timeless standards according to which a person judges are aspects of 'that unchanging Truth which is rightly said to be the law of all arts and crafts, itself the art of the almighty Craftsman'.[31]

Augustine calls the ascent of the mind to abiding truth wisdom. However, even in wisdom the changeable mind can only apprehend unchangeable truth as the 'transitory thought of a non-transitory thing'.[32] The mutable mind moves on and immortal things are lost to sight. Truth, nonetheless, leaves in the memory images or signs (*signa*) of itself, though the mind can only ever return to this particular truth, the *res* itself, by the mediation of this visual, conceptual, or linguistic image. The 'non-bodily and unchanging idea of a square body', for instance, 'may abide for ever the same; but a man's thought does not abide in it in the same way, if that is to say he could ever attain to it without a spatial image'.[33] Signs are external in relation to the object signified but not necessarily external in the sense of being out in the world. And they may be 'corporeal' in the attenuated sense in which shadows are corporeal: they may be features of souls when the soul has been touched by their objects and when these traces are the only way through which the mind may attempt to return to their Maker.

Truth, for Augustine, is a 'common public property', simple and eternal, 'sensed by all who sense it without destroying or transforming it'.[34] The eternal things we call truths are mediated by signs, which function to recall us to these truths. Mankind, however, turned away

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] Augustine, 'True Religion', 31.57.

[32] Augustine, *Trinity*, XII.13.23.

[33] *Ibid.*

[34] Augustine, 'Free Choice, II.7.19.

from the truth at the Fall, toward objects of veneration that do not answer our real human needs, and we are caught in a net of signification which often heaves us downward. Still, a hierarchy of things exists. That signs point us heavenwards as well as well as towards damnation; that things and their signs are ordered hierarchically; that we have no means of ascending towards the Godhead except by means of signs of the truth, which we must parse from signs of the perversion of truth—these Augustinian arguments about substance and signs will play a crucial role as well in his political theory.

2.2. Semantics

The crux of the *res-signum* relation in Augustine is in his theory of language. There are entities, he writes, that are clearly things, foremost among them the truths that abide. Signs are things which signify some other thing to some person. Foremost among signs are words, by means of which the speaker intentionally gives her hearer to understand something according to some conventional agreement on their meaning. Augustine considers that words are signs pointing to things by dint of the Fall.[35] We no longer enjoy a clearsighted vision of the immutable truths. The truths that reason occasionally glimpses are themselves signs of God, although they are usually further mediated to us by insignia of those truths, usually words. This indicates something about why communication, for Augustine, is so fallible. And then there is a contradiction about language. Things—including immutable truths—can only be made meaningful through the signs that connote them. *Res per signa discuntur*: things are learned through signs.[36] And yet 'nothing is learned through its signs. When a sign is given to me, it

[35] Augustine, 'The Literal Meaning of Genesis', in *On Genesis*, trans. Edmund Hill (New York, 2002), II.5.

[36] Augustine, *Christian Teaching*, I.2.2.

can teach me nothing if it finds me ignorant of the thing of which it is a sign; but if I'm not ignorant, what do I learn through the sign?'[37]

The clue to the resolution of the difficulties inherent in language, Augustine considers, is to be found in the first verse of John's Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (Jn. 1:1). This affirms the paradoxical identity and equality but also distinction of God the Father and God the Son (the Word of God). Augustine explains this verse by means of a psychological analogy for the Holy Trinity. The faculty of memory, he maintains, holds all the knowledge that we have ever attained, whether by deduction or induction. This knowledge in memory is dispositional: we are able to think with it, although we might not be thinking with it at a given moment. However, when we will to train the gaze of the mind's eye on some part of this knowledge, that same fragment is born as what Augustine called a 'word which we utter in the heart'.[38] This is, like its parent in the memory, a word 'not only before it is spoken aloud but even before the images of its sounds are turned over in thought'.[39] It is a word which is 'neither Greek nor Latin' but a true word from a true thing, having nothing from itself. Critically, this mental word is 'absolutely the same kind of thing as the knowledge it is born from', except that the word is 'formed' while the knowledge has only a disposition to be formed.[40] This pre-linguistic word deserves more

[37] Augustine, 'The Teacher', in *'Against the Academicians' and 'The Teacher'*, trans. Peter King (Indianapolis, IN, 1995), X.30.

[38] Augustine, *Trinity*, XV.10.19.

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] *Ibid.*

properly to be called a word than does a spoken word, for the 'word which makes a sign outside is the sign of the word which lights up inside'.[41] When we speak to others,

> the word which we hold in our mind becomes a sound in order that what we have in mind may pass through ears of flesh into the listener's mind: this is called speech. Our thought, however, is not converted into the same sound, but remains intact in its own home, suffering no diminution from its change as it takes on the form of a word in order to make its way into the ears.[42]

By analogy, Augustine argues, the Father, 'know[s] all things in Himself, [and] know[s] them in the Son; but in Himself as knowing Himself, [and] in the Son as knowing His Word, which is about all these things that are in Himself'.[43] And in the same way that words of the heart remain unchanged when articulated in speech, 'so the Word of God became flesh in order to live in us' while He still remained unchanged.[44]

Words are signs of things, and these things may be truths. Genuine communication, Augustine thinks, is a prompting to investigate those traces of Himself, those truths, that God has left on each person's soul rather than an attempt on the part of one person to convey something to another. As John Milbank puts it, words ultimately 'recall *res*, and finally recall

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[41] *Ibid.*, XV.11.20.

[42] Augustine, *Christian Teaching*, I.13.12.

[43] Augustine, *Trinity*, XIV.14.23.

[44] Augustine, *Christian Teaching*, I.13.12. Augustine's psychological analogy for the Trinity is treated in many places, but most systematically in Luigi Gioia, *The Theological Epistemology of Augustine's 'De Trinitate'* (Oxford, 2006).

spiritual *res* in the soul, where Christ speaks, wordlessly'.[45] The highest form of communication, for Augustine, is teaching, but it is the role of a teacher to help a pupil see those *signa* that her Maker has left on her soul, unblocking logjams to truth rather than imparting it (and indeed Augustine most systematically pursues his philosophy of language in the context of a discourse about education written as a sort of Socratic dialogue).[46] This is best undertaken, of course, in an attitude of love, when the intention behind the word's utterance is sought for the same reason that the Word became flesh. 'As a result of our [the teacher's] empathy with them [the pupils], the oft-repeated phrases will sound new to us also. For this feeling of compassion is so strong that, when our listeners are touched by us as we speak and we are touched by them as they learn, each of us comes to dwell in the other'.[47] It is no coincidence that Augustine pursues his thoughts about language in a dialogue about *Christian* education in particular.

2.3. Ecclesiology

Andrew Louth points to a parallel between language and politics for Augustine. 'Language (along with political society) is … a symptom [and therefore a sign] of man's fallen state, but itself functions so as to limit the worst consequences of that state'.[48] Before we can examine his theory of political society for ourselves, though, we must take an intermediate step, moving

[45] John Milbank, 'The Linguistic Turn as a Theological Turn', in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford, 1997), p. 90.

[46] Erik Kenyon, *Augustine and the Dialogue* (Cambridge, 2018), for Augustine's pedagogical intentions.

[47] Augustine, *Instructing Beginners in Faith*, trans. Raymond Canning (New York, 2006), XII.17.

[48] Andrew Louth, 'Augustine on Language', *Journal of Literature & Theology* 3, II (1989), pp. 151-58, p. 154.

from language to ecclesiology in terms of the *res*/*signum* distinction, in part because, as Markus puts it, Augustine's 'definition of *sacramentum* in terms of *signum* became classical'.[49]

Just as there can be no communication without signs, the sacraments, for Augustine, are integral to the communion of the Church.[50] More than that, the confession of one's faith in God within the institutional Church, that comes together around the sacraments, is essential to salvation. Salvation has its internal and external aspects, and these relate as *res* and *signum*: it is only for the *res* that the *signum* exists, but the *res* is only accessible through the *signum*. While not everybody who is in the Church will be saved—only God grants the grace that lets a person be a convert and persevere in faith—membership in the Church through baptism is a precondition of redemption, so that 'man's salvation is made complete through the two together', *res* and *signum*.[51]

Augustine defines the Church sacramentally: by 'the obligation of sacraments, very few in number', he writes, 'the society of His new people [*populus*] was fastened together'.[52] The *res* that the sacraments—foremost among them baptism—attempt to communicate through the

[49] Markus, *Signs and Meanings*, p. 71.

[50] Here and elsewhere, by 'Church' I mean the institutional church of this life, as opposed to what Augustine calls the 'true Church', namely the City of God understood eschatologically as the communion of saints seen from the perspective of eternity.

[51] Augustine, *On Baptism against the Donatists*, trans. J. R. King (London, 2014), IV.25.33. Sarah Stewart-Kroeker, *Pilgrimage as Moral and Aesthetic Formation in Augustine's Thought* (Oxford, 2017), p. 191, shows that Augustine was sometimes prepared to allow for 'extenuating circumstances' in which regeneration could be separated from the sacraments, as evidenced by the promise of salvation to one of the criminals who was crucified alongside Jesus.

[52] Augustine, *Letters*, trans. Wilfrid Parsons, 5 vols. (Washington, DC, 1951-6), 54.1.1.

ministers of the Church is God's reality, His power, His will. Through 'this power, which Christ kept for Himself alone and transmitted to none of His ministers, although He deigned to baptise through His ministers, through this abides the unity of the Church'.[53] And this power is described overtly as love or *caritas*. Commenting on 'the sacrament of anointing' the sick, for instance, Augustine says that it is a sign of the 'invisible power' which is 'the invisible anointing that is the Holy Spirit. The unseen anointing is that charity which, in whomever it is, will be like a root [*rem*] to him, and despite the burning sun, it cannot dry up'.[54]

The *res-signum* relation in respect of Augustine's ecclesiology continues when he writes about those individuals baptised into the Church, who partake of its sacraments but are nevertheless not saved. Where God has not elected to redeem them, 'they possess the outward sign [*signum*] of the Church, but they do not possess the actual reality [*rem*] itself within the Church of which that is the outward sign'.[55] The Church, he says in *City of God*, 'has in her midst some who are united with her in participation in the sacraments, but will not join with her in the eternal destiny of the saints. Some of these are hidden; some are well known, for they do not hesitate to murmur against the God, whose sacramental sign they bear'.[56] Carol Harrison makes a composite sentence of various of Augustine's statements to this effect: 'By the sacraments, He vivifies, unifies, and makes it [the Church] beautiful, so that if anyone should cut Himself off from Him, as from the root [*res*] of charity, even though he might

[53] Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, trans. John W. Rettig, 5 vols. (Washington, DC, 1988-95), V.6.1.

[54] Augustine, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, trans. Daniel E. Doyle and Thomas Martin (New York, 2008), III.12.

[55] Augustine, 'A Treatise concerning the Correction of the Donatists', in *Writings against the Manicheans and against the Donatists*, trans. Philip Schaff (Edinburgh, 1996), XI.50.

[56] Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London, 1972), I.35.

possess the exterior form of the Church and sacraments, he is a dead branch'.[57] As we shall see in the next section, Augustine's ecclesiology is significant not only because it provides further evidence of the patterning of *res* and *signum* in Augustine's ontology, but also because the Church is for him a political community.

3. *Res*, *Signum* and *Res Publica*

I have given an account of the meanings of *res* and *signum* in Augustine's handling of them and tried to show how they are woven architectonically into the fabric of his inquiries. We have observed the general shape of a *res*-*signum* connection, according to which *signum* symbolizes *res* understood as an underlying reality that itself is a kind of truth, power or root. The medium through which *res* is most effectively communicated as *signum* appears to be love. I now want to demonstrate how this framework of items and icons is important for understanding Augustine's political theory and its pivot, the account of the *res publica*, to which he twice addresses himself in *City of God*. He broaches the topic first in Book II, chapter 21, on Roman immorality, and returns to it in Book XIX, chapter 24, on the final good; on both occasions, he is commenting on Cicero's definition of *res publica* from *De re publica* (*On the Commonwealth*).

Cicero's introduction to the concept boasts rhetorical flourish but is notoriously equivocal. '*Est igitur*', he writes, '*res publica res populi*': *res publica* is the *res* of a *populus*.[58]

[57] Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford, 1992), p. 228. *Res* as 'root' is from *Augustine, Expositions of the Psalms,* trans. Maria Boulding, 6 vols. (New York, 2000-4), 54.25.

[58] Cicero, *'De re publica': Selections*, ed. James E. G. Zetzel (Cambridge, 1995), I.39.

As Malcolm Schofield holds, 'while *populi* draws out an implication of *publica*, the meaning of *res* and the analysis of *res publica* as a concept are left entirely undiscussed'.[59] Cicero, he goes on to say, 'does not attempt a formal account of *res*'.[60] However, Cicero does clarify what he means by *populus*, which names 'not any group of men assembled in any way, but an assemblage of some size [*coetus multitudinis*] associated with one another through agreement on what is just [*iuris consensu*] and community of interest [*utilitatis communione*]'.[61] And a little later, *res publica* is situated in respect of some other concepts: 'Now every people [*populus*] (which is the kind of large assemblage I have described), every state [*civitas*] (which is the organization of the people), every commonwealth [*res publica*] (which is, as I said, the concern [*res*] of the people) needs to be ruled by some sort of deliberation [*consilium*] in order to be long lived'.[62] *Res publica* is thus contrasted and brought into a relationship with *populus*, *civitas*, and forms of rule or government. *Res publica* itself seems to mean the common concerns or affairs of the *populus*, who have attained political organisation in themselves (*civitas*) and a form of rule over themselves (government); *res publica* is what pertains to them as a group of individuals with common interests and a sense of what justice entails.[63] '*Res publica* always remains a *res*', in the sense of the 'stuff' of the people, without form or power, precisely because it requires political leadership to organise and to act for it.[64] Schofield argues

[59] Schofield, *Saving the City: Philosopher-Kings and Other Classical Paradigms* (Abingdon, 1999), p. 159.

[60] *Ibid.*, p. 162.

[61] Cicero, *'On the Commonwealth' and 'On the Laws'*, trans. James E. G. Zetzel, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2017), I.39a.

[62] *Ibid.*, I.41.

[63] Zetzel, in Cicero, *Commonwealth*, xxxvii, points out that sometimes Cicero deploys *res publica* in phrases such as *rem publicam gerere*, 'to perform the public thing', meaning to participate in government. Vagaries in Cicero's handling of *res publica* thus remain.

[64] Hans Drexler, 'Res Publica', *Maia*, n.s., X (1957), pp. 3-37, p. 4 ('Denn *res publica* bleibt immer eine *res*').

convincingly that Cicero uses *res* in such a way as to suggest that 'the affairs and interests of the people may be conceived metaphorically as its property'.[65] This is because Cicero wants to press a claim about the conditions of political liberty, namely that 'a *populus* has no liberty if its *res* is taken into the possession of a tyrant or faction'.[66] 'The notion', writes Schofield, 'that the *populus* should own its own *res* is not itself the point. What Cicero has in view is an idea about *rights* which the metaphor enables him to express'.[67] Political liberty, on this reading, consists in the ability of the people to exercise rights over its own affairs.

Augustine's observations on *On the Commonwealth* helped to rescue that text from oblivion.[68] Unlike Cicero, however, Augustine was not concerned to address political liberty. In Book II of *City of God*, Augustine faithfully reports Cicero's definition of *populus*, according

[65] Schofield, *Saving the City*, p. 163.

[66] *Ibid.*, 164. By 'political liberty', I mean the freedom of the commonwealth as a body of people. Cicero also conceived of *individual* liberty as security from domination. See Valentina Arena, *'Libertas' and the Practice of Politics in the Late Roman Republic*

(Cambridge, 2012).

[67] Schofield, *Saving the City*, p. 164. See also Jed W. Atkins, *Cicero on Politics and the Limits of Reason: The 'Republic' and 'Laws*' (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 120-54. Elizabeth Asmis, 'Cicero's Definition of *Res Publica*', *History of Political Thought,* XXV (2004), pp. 569-98, p. 579, argues that Cicero uses the genitive case—*res populi*—in his definition because it weakens the connotation of ownership so as not to imply 'a division between the thing owned (the state) and its owners (the people)'. But c.f. Oleg Kharkhordin, 'Why *Res Publica* is not a State: The Stoic Grammar and Discursive Practices in Cicero's Conception', *History of Political Thought*, XXXI (2010), pp. 221-45, the upshot of which is that Cicero's *res publica* exists as an act rather than as an object.

[68] M. S. Kempshall, '*De Re Publica* I.39 in Medieval and Renaissance Political Thought', in 'Cicero's *Republic*', special issue of *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, LXV (2001), pp. 99-135.

to which 'he did not mean any and every gathering of a crowd of men, but a gathering united by agreement as to what is just and by a common pursuit of interest'.[69] He continues:

> From the definitions which he had advanced already he inferred that a *res publica,* that is, the *res* of a *populus* [*rem populi*], came into being where it was soundly and justly governed, whether power rests with a king alone, or with an aristocracy, or with the *populus* as a whole. Suppose now, he continued, that the king is unjust (and he called him a tyrant, as did the Greeks), or the nobles are unjust (and their mutual agreement he called a faction), or the people itself is unjust (he could find no current description for such a people except to call it, also, a tyrant)—then the *res publica* is no longer merely corrupt, but, as the chain of reasoning from the foregoing definitions make plain, ceases to exist at all; for there is no *res* of a *populus*, he said, if it is in the hands of a tyrant or faction, nor is the *populus* itself a *populus* any longer if it is unjust.[70]

Augustine has left the category of *civitas* out of the picture, probably because he wants generally to reserve that term for his eschatological cities, the Earthly City and the City of God. And where Cicero had it that the *res publica* belongs to the people when it is governed in such a way that its interests are consulted, Augustine reports him as having argued that a *populus* becomes ('came into being') a *res publica* when it is 'justly and soundly governed'. The *res* of

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[69] Augustine, *City of God*, II.21.

[70] *Ibid.* Here I have adapted the translation in R. H. Barrow, *Introduction to St. Augustine: 'The City of God'; Being Selections from the 'De Civitate Dei', including Most of the XIVth Book* (London, 1950). Bettenson's rendition uses 'state' and 'commonwealth' so loosely to stand for *res publica* that its use in parsing this important passage is fatally compromised.

the people, for Augustine, seems to materialize as its proper and fitting government, so that the people have no *res* if they are lorded over by a tyrant or faction. For Cicero, then, the people lost their liberty if their affairs were alienated to a tyrant or faction; for Augustine, the *res publica* as a political society does not exist where government is tyrannical or factional.

Contemporary commentators have correctly seen Augustine as surreptitiously moving from the territory of reporter to that of productive political theorist in his own right.[71] Cicero traffics in sums of parts—*populus*, *civitas*, *res publica* and government (itself a compound of deliberation [*consilium*] and rule [*imperium*])—but does not name the entity to which they add up; at different times, each one functions as a synecdoche.[72] Augustine, by contrast, on the face of it appears to argue that *populus* plus (sound and just) government equals *res publica*. As Markus, in the single most influential scholarly monograph on Augustine's political thought, phrases this line of reasoning, 'in so far as there is some bond of common loyalty to unite people, they will, on this definition, constitute a society, which, given political form'—through the institution of a government—'will rank as a state'.[73] The common affairs of the people have

[71] E.g., Paul J. Cornish, 'Augustine's Contribution to the Republican Tradition', *European Journal of Political Theory*, IX (2010), pp. 133-48; Sun Hao, 'The Negative Politics in Augustine's *The City of God*', *Higher Education of Social Science*, XII (2017), pp. 49-54; above all, R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1988).

[72] 'And so, when the control of everything is in the hands of one person, we call that one person a king and that type of commonwealth [*res publica*] a monarchy. When it is in the control of chosen men, then a state [*civitas*] is said to be ruled by the will of the aristocracy. And that in which everything is in the hands of the people is a 'popular' state [*civitas*]'. Cicero, *Commonwealth*, I.41.

[73] Markus, *Saeculum,* p. 66.

been swallowed up in Augustine's reworking of Cicero's *res publica*.[74] There is addition as well as subtraction, however, because Augustine's *res publica* is no longer something that belongs to the people as their property; it transcends the people, incorporating them into the state.

I noted at the outset of this article, however, that we should be suspicious of the attribution to Augustine of anything like the concept of the modern state. And as I have begun to suggest, Augustine's real contribution to the history of political thought becomes clearer—and emerges in a somewhat different form—when we choose to be attentive to the play of *res* and *signum*. We can formulate a hypothesis on the basis of the foregoing analysis of the *res-signum* relation: that for Augustine a *populus* symbolizes or represents its *res*, and its *res* is its directing power or root. 'All things', he writes in *City of God*, 'with symbolic meaning'—and that means all signs, for signs are special kinds of things—'are seen as in some way acting the part of the things they symbolize [*rerum, quas significant*]'.[75] According to this supposition, Augustine should maintain that *populi* make outwardly visible, by conforming to and taking the shape of, their root, that reality to which they in some sense approximate. This, in a manner of speaking, will be their governing power, but it is unlikely to be their government.

[74] In a letter written in 412, the year before he began to write *City of God*, Augustine reproduces Cicero's categories much more closely: 'For what is the commonwealth [*res publica*] if not the common property? Therefore, the common property is the property of the people [*populus*]. And what is the people but the generality of men united by the bond of common agreement?' Augustine, *Letters*, 138.

[75] Augustine, *City of God*, XVIII.48. As with other patristic writers, Augustine reserves the term *symbolum* to refer to the creed, e.g., Augustine, 'Faith and the Creed' [*de fide et symbolo*], trans. Michael G. Campbell, in *On Christian Belief*, ed. Michael Fiedrowicz (New York, 2005).

And this postulate is indeed borne out: *populus* is to *res* in politics what *signum* is to *res* in epistemology, semantics and ecclesiology. In order to show how this is the case, I need to say a little more about Augustine's account of how subjects are forged by objects and how human beings, in particular, are fashioned by the nature of the objects to which they attend, how they thus become signs of those things.[76] That souls take the shape of or are 'conformed to' the objects to which they pay attention is something often professed by Augustine.[77] Since the Fall, the human soul has gone in search of the good which has withdrawn from plain sight, so that it may find the rest that has also vanished.[78] Such a soul has lost its internal sense of itself and of its place in the hierarchical order of being. It seeks instead to recognise itself in other things, the external things of the world. 'And by the very logic of our condition', Augustine argues, 'it is easier and almost more familiar to deal with visible than with intelligible things, even though the former are outside and the latter within us'.[79] The soul 'seeks to take its ease in the place where it caught its disease'.[80] Augustine thinks that souls attend to things which are beneath that which souls were created to be, and that they tend to be deformed as they seek an identity for themselves in those physical things, eroding the *imago Dei* in which God originally made us. The wider point he makes, though, is that human beings are formed by those things to which they become attached. As Margaret Miles explains, Augustine's prototypical individual is 'initially barely distinguishable from its cosmic, physical

[76] For a critique of Augustine's conception of subject-object relations in general, see Teresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: 'Pistis' and 'Fides' in the Early Roman Empire and the Early Churches* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 28-29.

[77] E.g., Augustine, *Trinity*, X.6.8.

[78] Augustine's long prayer, the *Confessions*, opens with Augustine announcing his yearning to find rest in God. Augustine, *Confessions*, I.1.1.

[79] Augustine, *Trinity*, X.6.8.

[80] *Ibid.*

and spiritual environment', and 'comes to be cumulatively distinguished and defined by the objects of its attention'. It is differentiation, 'the construction of a centre which defines itself and determines the direction of its investment of energy', which is the pressing difficulty of human existence.[81] Augustine himself says that it is the executive faculty of the will in human beings 'which applies the appetite for seeing or thinking to the achievement of rest in the things from which sight [is] formed', and describes this will by means of a simile: it is 'like weight'.[82] This is significant, because in the *Confessions*, the weight of the soul 'is my love. Wherever I am carried, my love is carrying me'.[83] A soul is moulded by and conformed to the objects in which it seeks its rest and peace, through its attention to them, and that attention is also called will, which is the human part of the orientating, mediating and energizing relationship called love. That is why love can be said to 'have eyes'.[84]

Augustine believes that human beings who pay joint attention to something will likewise be differentiated and defined as a community by those objects to which they attend corporately. Indeed, as Jeremy Duquesnay Adams argues, Augustine uses *populus* to denote 'exclusively a gathering of attentive persons'.[85] Common focus and attention are necessary conditions for a group of persons to become a *populus.* A *populus* is almost always reported as being in a stance of listening or seeing. It is also relevant, as John von Heyking argues, that

[81] Margaret Miles, 'Vision: The Eye of the Body and the Eye of the Mind in Saint Augustine's *De Trinitate* and *Confessions*', *Journal of Religion*, LXIII (1983), pp. 125-42, pp. 129-30.

[82] Augustine, *Trinity*, XI.11.18.

[83] Augustine, *Confessions*, XIII.9.10.

[84] Augustine, *First Epistle of John*, VII.10.

[85] Jeremy Duquesnay Adams, *The 'Populus' of Augustine and Jerome: A Study in the Patristic Sense of Community* (New Haven, CT, 1971), p. 25.

Augustine compares a *populus* to a *cuneus*, a wedge-shaped military formation, pointing toward the object of its attention, and that he 'treats *cuneus* as a pun on *couneus* [conjoined] and *coitio* [coupling]', as well as describing it as a *concors*, a 'with-heart'.[86] *Populus* has clear visual and visceral dimensions. It is the collective noun for a group of people turned into a collectivity in virtue of combined attention and of common love passing into mutual love. For even in 'the theatre—that den of wickedness—someone who loves an actor and revels in his skill as if it were a great good, or even the supreme one, also loves all those who share his love, not on their account, but on account of the one they equally love'.[87] Augustine's *populus* is constituted by the fact that it refers to something else, as 'the association', as he puts in his corrective to Cicero, 'of a multitude of rational beings united by a common agreement on the objects of their love'.[88] These external objects of love (*rerum quas diligit*) are what bring a *populus* into focus. Augustine primes the concept of *populus* from the outset to indicate and reflect something other than itself: it is a label applied to a *significant* political entity.

A *populus*, according to Augustine, only exists in virtue of shared practices that bind it together in common contemplation of the same object(s) of attraction. An attentive *populus* progressively approximates such objects the more it attends. Its *res*, on this account, is not its government, if it even has one. A *populus—pace* Markus—does not become a *res publica* or state when it is given political form by its head. As an attentive and reverberating public by definition, a *populus* always-already has a *res*, of which the *populus* is a sign. It therefore follows, Augustine claims, that 'to observe the character of a particular people we must

[86] John von Heyking, *Augustine and Politics as Longing in the World* (Columbia, MI, 2001), p. 87.

[87] Augustine, *Christian Teaching*, I.29.30.

[88] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.24.

examine the objects of its love', if those objects are of such a nature as to be observable.[89] Some *populi* love better and others worse things, and 'the better the objects of its agreement' of its love, 'the better the people; the worse the objects of this love, the worse the people'.[90] We will learn a lot more about the *res publica*, Augustine thinks, by examining the objects of the public's care and attention than the particular form of regime by which it is governed. And we may learn more about those objects, especially when they are invisible, by scrutinizing the publics anchored to them.

The idea of better and worse *rei publicae*, along a spectrum, is at the heart of Augustine's critique of Cicero. In *On the Commonwealth*, the great rhetorician exploited to the utmost the trope of prosopopoeia, with the definition of *res publica* being voiced by the protagonist Scipio Aemilianus, the man who brought Rome its military victory at Carthage but famously wept with the foresight that one day the Eternal City itself would suffer the same fate. That day is coming, Cicero wanted to say, for he was writing at Rome in the 50s BCE, when the care of the public interest was being eclipsed by the overlapping private interests of the so-called First Triumvirate of Julius Caesar, Pompey and Crassus—christened by Augustine's favourite historian, Varro, in the title of a lost history of their pact, *Trikaranos*, a three-headed monster. A republic ceases to exist, Cicero had Scipio pronounce, when the elements of agreement as to what is just and of a common pursuit of interest no longer exist.[91] Augustine's critical point against Cicero is even more deflating, since he maintains that, on

[89] *Ibid.*

[90] *Ibid.*

[91] Louise Hodgson, *Res Publica and the Roman Republic: 'Without Body or Form'* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 16-17, notes a general evolution of the meaning of *res publica*, from denoting 'civic business' to the 'historic state [condition] of the political sphere', and Cicero's definition seems to capture both meanings at the same time.

Cicero's own definition of justice, Rome had never been a *res publica* at all. For 'if justice is that virtue which assigns to everyone his due', as Cicero had it, then pagan Romans had never been just because they failed to render to God His due.[92] 'And if there is no justice in such a man, there can be no sort of doubt that there is no justice in a gathering which consists in such men'.[93] 'I consider', he continues, 'that what I have said about "agreement on what is just" is enough to make it apparent that by this [Cicero's] definition, people amongst whom there is no justice can never be said to have a commonwealth' or *res publica*.[94]

And yet, Augustine will go on to expound, the Roman *populus* is a *populus* and its *res* is indubitably a *res publica*.[95] In all times the Roman people have been united in agreement about what they love, and they have been shaped corporately by the picture that holds them captive, by that *res* of which they are the *signum*. There is no sense here that the *res* of the *populus* is either its affairs, interests, property or liberty (c.f. Cicero), nor that the *res* of the people is its government (an implication of Markus on Augustine's 'state'). The *populus* of Rome has ever been shaped by the objects of its loving attention, so that it is their simulacrum; the *populus* is the sign of the things to which it attends. The objects of Roman attention have all been objects of Roman pleonexia: the *res* of the people fractured into as many fruits of Rome's imperial possessions as it could manage. And since Rome's beginnings, gods multiplied frenetically—'indigenous and foreign, celestial and terrestrial, gods of the underworld and gods of the sea, of the springs and of the rivers, gods, according to Varro, "certain and uncertain"'—and the *populus* likewise became the 'symptom [*significatum*] of an

[92] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.21.

[93] *Ibid.*

[94] *Ibid.*

[95] *Ibid*., XIX.24.

untranquil spirit'.[96] An untranquil spirit is one which is 'tossed about and spilt, scattered and boiled dry', while only attention to the true God, Augustine thinks, can bring a person or a community peace: 'When You are poured out upon us, You are not wasted on the ground. You raise us upright. You are not scattered but reassemble us'.[97]

Not only is Roman restlessness an index of the people's 'dissoluteness in many different directions' with respect to the gods which they have worshipped, but the *populus*, through its joint attention to the human beings it has chosen to turn into heroes, further symbolizes a reality distorted and dilapidated.[98] Rome was founded in fratricide because both Romulus and Remus 'wanted to be the sole sovereign of the new city, in order that he would receive all the glory and possess all the power'.[99] Power became a means to the end of glory for the Romans, for 'through glory, they desired to have a kind of life after death on the lips of those who praised them'.[100] 'They were passionately devoted to glory; it was for this that they desired to live, for which they did not hesitate to die'.[101] And yet even such heroes could not take their rest in their achievements, which 'increased [their] glory less than [they] advanced [their] ambition', so much that the story of the Roman Republic is a narrative of *folie de grandeur*, as ever greater dominion leaves an endlessly swelling spiritual vacuum.[102] The Roman *populus* in turn became corrupted by such 'heroic' figures, set up as idols: transfixed

[96] Ibid., III.10; IV.16.

[97] Augustine, *Confessions*, II.2.2; I.3.3.

[98] *Ibid.*, II.3.8.

[99] Augustine, *City of God*, XV.5.

[100] *Ibid.*, V.14.

[101] *Ibid.*, V.12.

[102] *Ibid.*, XIV.2.

and manipulated by these whom Cicero had called 'gods among men', at whom they 'stare[d] … in amazement'.[103]

Res concerns existence and, as an alternative to Cicero's all-or-nothing republic based on the presence or absence of justice, Augustine posits a conception of better and worse republics, membership of which may overlap each other in time and space. Such a conception depends upon his prior theory of existence and of all existing things as more or less ordered.[104] This emphasis on order is part and parcel of Augustine's fundamental idea that Creation itself participates in God. God does not inhabit some transcendental realm; rather, 'everything that exists has its being because it participates in God's being'.[105] God is Being Itself, and all creaturely things have their continued existence by sharing something of Being Itself, 'which, however, continues to be itself and lose nothing' in the process.[106] And those things, Augustine writes, 'which tend towards being, tend towards order, and in attaining order, they attain being, insofar as it can be attained by creatures'.[107] According to the Book of Wisdom (11:20), God has arranged all things by measure, number and weight. And although God is neither measure nor number nor weight,

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[103] Cicero, *On the Orator*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA, 1942), III.53. See Andrew R. Murphy, 'Augustine and the Rhetoric of Roman Decline', *History of Political Thought*, XXVI (2005), pp. 586-606.

[104] I agree with Katherine Chambers, 'Augustine on Justice: A Reconsideration of *City of God*, Book 19', *Political Theology*, XIX (2018), pp. 382-96, p. 383, that, *contra* the dominant view, 'Augustine had nothing whatsoever to say about the impossibility of social and political justice among pagans in Book 19'.

[105] Michael Lamb, 'Between Presumption and Despair: Augustine's Hope for the Commonwealth', *American Political Science Review*, CXII (2018), pp. 1036-49, p. 1039.

[106] Augustine, *The Catholic and Manichean Ways of Life*, trans. Donald A. Gallagher and Idella J. Gallagher (Washington, DC, 1966), II.4.6.

[107] *Ibid.*, II.6.8.

> insofar as measure sets a limit to everything, and number gives everything its specific form, and weight draws everything to rest and stability, He is the original, true and unique measure which defines for all things their bounds, the number which forms all things, the weight which guides all things; so are we to understand that by the words *You have arranged all things in measure and number and weight* nothing else was being said but 'You have arranged all things in Yourself'?[108]

So 'all things are better to the extent that they are more limited, formed and ordered', and vice versa.[109]

Everything which exists has some order in itself and some place in the hierarchical order of nature. Justice, for Augustine, is an aspect of this same *ordo*.[110] More specifically, justice means putting one's loves—the weight of the soul—in the right order.[111] 'Let no debt remain outstanding', St. Paul had said, owe no one anything, 'except the continuing debt to love one another' (Rom. 13:8). For those favoured by God's grace, justice has again become a matter of loving God and neighbour correctly. Justice on this interpretation is, however, a

[108] Augustine, 'Meaning of Genesis', IV.3.7

[109] Augustine, 'The Nature of the Good', in *The Manichean Debate*, trans. Roland J. Teske (New York, 2006), §3. See the recent discussion in Amanda C. Knight, 'The Shattered Soul: Augustine on Psychological Number, Order, and Weight', *Augustinian Studies*, LI (2020), pp. 197-213.

[110] See Gregory W. Lee, 'Republics and their Loves: Rereading *City of God* 19', *Modern Theology*, XXVII (2011), pp. 553-81, p. 569; and Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago, 2008), p. 39.

[111] Augustine, 'Nature and Grace', in *Answer to the Pelagians*, vol. 1, trans. Roland J. Teske (New York, 1997), 70.84.

relative concept, so even when one's loves are out of order—when we love too much that which should not be so loved, or not enough that which should be loved more, and so on—the order that they exhibit still *is*, and is good to the extent that it is, even if it is debased and perverted.[112] Those *populi* loving better things are better: they more nearly approach the ideal community, a communion with God Himself. Whether Rome or the best of *rei publicae*, however, they are still all *rei publicae*.

The best of *earthly* republics, according to Augustine, is the Church. For Augustine, there is no absolute distinction between *res publica* and *ecclesia*. Like Rome, the Church is a republic; indeed, Augustine's 'first and primary polis is the Church, the republic of grace'.[113] The Church is the community of the faithful, a gathering of converts conjointly paying loving attention to God through prayer, ritual, liturgy and the sacraments, all of which train the desires of its members. Such practices, writes William T. Cavanaugh, 'are disciplines of bodies and souls which help form people into the habits, or virtues, necessary to perform the Gospel imperative'.[114] These disciplines, Talal Asad observes, are 'dependent on the institutional resources of organized community life', so that in some sense 'the body … identified as the

[112] Augustine, *Christian Education*, I.27.28; *City of God*, XV.22. For Augustine on goodness see especially Bonnie Kent, 'Augustine's Ethics', in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, eds. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge, 2001) and Samantha E. Thompson, 'What Goodness Is: Order as Imitation of Unity in Augustine', *Review of Metaphysics*, LXV (2012), pp. 525-53.

[113] Charles T. Mathewes, 'An Augustinian Look at Empire', *Theology Today*, LXIII (2006), pp. 292-306, p. 293.

[114] William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ* (Oxford, 1999), p. 58.

arena for that continuous labour of inspecting and testing' is the body of the entire Church.[115] Through grace, its membership has formed the best—the most just—of telluric *rei publicae*, according to Augustine, for its *res* is none other than the truth, will and power of God, which it makes visible as body and *signum*. While the *populus* of a republic such as Rome joins together individuals in mutual agreement on glorious objects in order to represent to itself an image of itself as glorious, the Church interprets itself as transcending itself through signification, as 'representative of something *beyond* itself'.[116]

Yet even the best of terrestrial communities remains imperfect through division. First, as mentioned above, not every member of the visible Church will have been chosen by God for citizenship of the Heavenly City. Second, even its saintly members are imperfect still with God's grace, struggling daily with temptation and frequently being caught short, living 'under pardon' until they die.[117] Justice itself 'is nevertheless only such as to consist in the forgiveness of sins rather than in the perfection of virtues', as evidenced in 'the prayer of the whole City of God on pilgrimage in the world, which, as we know, cries out to God through the lips of all its members: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" [Matt. 6:12]'.[118]

Mutual atonement and absolution are indeed the lifeblood of the Church for Augustine. It is the community of those who are reconciled by shedding sin and blame in the always unequal economy of clemency (for the effects of sin can still never be overtaken). This constant

[115] Talal Asad, 'Note on Body Pain and Truth in Medieval Christian Ritual', *Economy and Society*, XIII (1983), pp. 287-327, pp. 313-14.

[116] von Heyking, *Politics as Longing*, p. 79; emphasis mine.

[117] Augustine, *City of God*, X.22.

[118] *Ibid.*, XIX.27.

exchange of 'sacrifices' and claims, however, produces the invigorating vascular circulation within the body of the Church. Creation from nothing necessarily entails that being just is receiving, and it is only through reiterated acts of both self-surrender and mercy that human beings both build each other up and make it possible to get themselves back.[119] To respond to the wrongs of others with compassion, by Augustine's lights, is to treat created things as signs of their Maker. Confession and forgiveness performed as acts of worship in the Church 'are perhaps our only means of maintaining our publicness to others and to God', and thereby of becoming a shared sign of God's justice.[120] And the ontology of pardoning is in the final analysis a *signum* of the *res* that is God for the Church. Augustine believes that 'only God means nothing but God', but that He has 'placed Himself in the order of signs' by sending His Son, 'the Word incarnate and crucified', who, to continue to quote Rowan Williams, 'represents the absence and deferral that is basic to *signum* as such, and represents also, crucially, the fact that absence and deferral are the means whereby God engages our desire so that it is freed from its pull towards finishing, towards presence and possession'.[121] If Christ Himself is ontologically the right kind of thing to be a sign, then so is a fellowship of rational beings in the Church—and the Church is a sign, as far as Augustine is concerned, to all other *rei publicae* of the remarkable possibilities of the right kind of 'republicanism'.

Conclusion

[119] See John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London, 2003), pp. 44-60.

[120] Brandon Morgan, 'Worshiping in Public: Theological Justice and the *Res Publica* in *City of God* 19', *Toronto Journal of Theology*, XXX (2014), pp. 225-34, p. 231.

[121] Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London, 2016), pp. 54-55.

R. A. Markus is the most influential academic interpreter of Augustine both on signs and on politics, but he did not connect these two strands of his scholarship. This is principally because Markus's argument about Augustine's political theory is that the Bishop of Hippo gradually came to write against those of his interlocutors who wanted to sacralize Rome, to identify its Christianization under Constantine and Theodosius with its redemption. Augustine thereby 'liberated the Roman state [*sic*], and by implication, all politics, from the direct hegemony of the sacred'.[122] Political society was secularized, becoming 'the sphere in which different individuals with different beliefs and loyalties pursue their common objectives in so far as they coincide'.[123] On this account, Church and State are most assuredly separate. The state is the site of 'a reduced, nonreligious, common ground', while the Church is not a *res publica* because it is committed to values and virtues which are ultimately cosmic.[124] The stark division between religious and political communities that Markus reads into Augustine is untenable, however, and there are much stronger grounds for maintaining that Augustine did indeed conceive of the Church as the superlative *res publica*, in part because he did not think that a *res publica* had to be anything like a modern 'state'.[125] It is, rather, a community brought into focus and given its character by the object(s) to which it attends, so that the *populus* is the public *signum* of its *res.*

[122] Markus, *Saeculum*, p. 173.

[123] *Ibid.*

[124] R. A. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame, IN, 2006), p. 7.

[125] Markus's account of Augustine's political philosophy has been the target of much respectful criticism, although along different lines from my own. See, e.g., Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (Notre Dame, IN, 1995), pp. 89-112; and Alex Fogelman, 'Augustine and Natural Law: Negotiating the Saeculum with Markus, Milbank, and Mathewes', *Political Theology*, XX (2019), pp. 595-612.

Markus writes that 'insofar as it is not actualized as *signum*, the Church is a *res*', but as *res* 'its mission is to be formless', 'to be "lost" in and identified with the "world".'[126] For him, 'the Church's essential being is concentrated in its business of becoming visible as a sign'.[127] He imagines, though, that he is extrapolating from Augustine's thought, for a 'theology of the Church elaborated in terms of its being a sign is not to be found in Augustine's work'.[128] My argument has been that, although it may be implicit, the play of *res* and *signum* is woven not only into Augustine's account of the institutional Church but also into the category of *res publica*. The exemplary *res publica* to Augustine's mind is not Rome but the Church, yet it is all the same a category applying to both, as well as to many other communities in between.

Augustine considers politics, as the name of the activity in which people seek to inaugurate, preserve, reform or reinvent some order of ruling-and-being-ruled, as an offshoot of Christian thought and practice. Augustinian politics is incomprehensible outside Augustine's theological framework. That same framework, of which one aspect is the dynamic of *res* and *signum*, is key to understanding just how strikingly different Augustine's account of the *res publica* is from modern constructions. For in modern political theory, the republic is usually considered as the sign of the people: the people are the *res* represented in the *signum* of the republic. A people, that is to say, channels a formless collective power into a formed and collected agency when it represents itself as a constituted singularity called a republic or state—when the people represents itself in such a way as to give itself a political standing. As one late eighteenth-century American, whose pseudonym harked back to ancient Rome, put it, 'the

[126] Markus, *Saeculum*, p. 185.

[127] *Ibid.*

[128] *Ibid.*

people are the thing signified' in the republic.[129] Augustine, though, has it the other way around: the people are the sign of their *res.* The *res publica* is a complex entity, a dynamic compound of a people and the objects that its members collectively choose to care about, so that the people is only brought into some kind of identity by those objects. Augustine is even further away from preparing for the modern 'state' than he is often taken to be.

And yet it was Augustine's definition of the *res publica* that United States President Joe Biden chose to paraphrase in his inaugural address on January 20, 2021.[130] The common objects of American love cited by Biden—opportunity, security, dignity, and so on—are certainly too wispy to capture the force of Augustine's own argument. Biden nonetheless appealed to an old way of thinking to call for democratic renewal. He finds himself in the company of contemporary political thinkers, seeking to revive republicanism by drawing attention to 'the *res* of *res publica*', to democracy's rootedness in 'common love for, antipathy to, and contestation of public things', which 'underwrite the signs and symbols of democratic unity'.[131]

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[129] Brutus, 'Letters of Brutus', in Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist, with Letters of 'Brutus',* ed. Terence Ball (Cambridge, 2003), p. 456. I am grateful to my colleague Adam Lindsayfor drawing this to my attention. For the republic as sign of the people as material *potentia*, see, classically, Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, 'What is the Third Estate?', in *Political Writings*, ed. Michael Sonenscher (Indianapolis, 2003). And for a history of this way of conceiving the relationship between people and state since Sieyès, see Lucia Rubinelli, *Constituent Power: A History* (Cambridge, 2020).

[130] Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 'Inaugural Address by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.', The White House, 20 January 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr/.

[131] Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (New York, 2017), p. 13, p. 4, p. 17. The relevance of Augustine to Honig's project is discussed more extensively in Lamb, 'Presumption and Despair', p. 1047.

Augustine's heightened standpoint and his grappling with determinacies put much of our own thinking in unflattering perspective. His focus not, as I have argued, on the state standing aloof and proud but instead on the people standing to one side might also help to puncture and chasten the narcissism of our modern representative politics. Augustine's political thought might just be made of such *stuff*, then, as modern political theorists might find it productive to build with.

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For the argument that there is a 'subterranean continuity between [the] Christian republicanism' of Augustine and the republicanism associated with the Italian city-states of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, since eclipsed, see Miguel Vatter, 'The Quarrel between Populism and Republicanism: Machiavelli and the Antinomies of Plebian Politics', *Contemporary Political Theory*, XI (2012), pp. 242-263, p. 250.