

# **Peace through Order: Applying Augustine's Concepts of Society, Security and Conflict in a Disordered World**

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La paz a través del orden: la aplicación  
de los conceptos de Agustín de sociedad,  
seguridad y conflicto en un mundo desordenado

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## Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to contextualize Augustine's world and show how that world shaped his understanding of the nature of war, peace and security, before identifying possible applications for today's geopolitical situations. The emphasis of this contribution is on connecting the reception of Augustine's thought with the current global environment, in order to assess how future challenges might be addressed, and to determine how stability, peace, and prosperity might be achieved for the maximum amount of people in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** conflict short of war, just war, peace, social order.



## Resumen

El propósito de este capítulo es contextualizar el mundo de Agustín y mostrar cómo ese mundo dio forma a su comprensión de la naturaleza de la guerra, la paz y la seguridad, antes de identificar posibles aplicaciones para las situaciones geopolíticas de hoy. Esta contribución enfatiza en conectar la recepción del pensamiento de san Agustín con el entorno global actual, evaluar cómo podrían abordarse los desafíos futuros y determinar cómo se puede lograr la estabilidad, la paz y la prosperidad para la cantidad máxima de personas en el siglo XXI.

*Palabras claves:* guerra justa, orden social, paz, conflicto sin guerra.



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**Cómo citar en MLA** / How to cite in MLA

Gaumer, Matthew. "Peace through Order: Applying Augustine's Concepts of Society, Security and Conflict in a Disordered World." *Agustín de Hipona como Doctor Pacis: estudios sobre la paz en el mundo contemporáneo*, edited by Anthony Dupont, Enrique Eguarte Bendimez y Carlos Vilabona, Editorial Uniagustiniana, 2019, pp. 341-355, doi: 10.28970/9789585498235.12

## **Global Unraveling and New Forms of Sovereignty**

The well-known writer, Robert D. Kaplan, made waves among international affairs literati with his short but poignant December 2013 article “Augustine’s World, What Late Antiquity Says About the 21st Century and the Syrian Crisis.” His central insight captured something that had been percolating in the conversations of the well-connected, the scholars, media analysts, and the like for years: that is, not only is there an evolving disintegration of governmental authority and social systems, but the “postmodern version of Late Antiquity has just begun” (Kaplan 4). Augustine’s time, like our own, was not marked by an outbreak of peace.

This assessment is not a cause for panic, however, but rather for the humble acknowledgement that the world most of us have known, with its mostly static nation states, largely similar economic systems, and derivative ways of life, is in the process of changing (Haass; Kupchan). Evoking a comparison between Augustine’s Late Antiquity and our world means that societies and the world order are once again undergoing a fundamental transformation, and not just a moderate realignment. It is possible to infer from this transformation the potential for a reversion to our not-so-long-ago past: significant breakdowns in social controls, a greater proliferation of violence, and the overall degradation of human existence on this planet (Diamond 154-66 and 286-92).

With this in mind, it is interesting to discover that lessons can be learned from the reception of Augustine of Hippo in terms of how he understood the unraveling of the Roman world, the purpose and nature of social order, and his concept of peace. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to analyzing the current global environment through Augustine’s lens, in the hope that the tectonic changes of our time might be addressed, thereby leading to an equitable outcome for all, with peace as an end-state.

## **The Late Roman Context**

Data from various scientific disciplines, such as economic history, archaeology, and military history, invariably lead to a picture of Late Antiquity riven by disorder, disruption, and decay. Between the years of Augustine’s birth and death, 354 to 430, those alive saw a Roman Empire undergoing distressing changes. Two major Roman military campaigns (Battle of Adrianople in 378 and the Sack of Rome in 410) ended in the worst catastrophes since Hannibal’s invasions of the Italian peninsula during the Second Punic War (218-216 BCE), and the Teutoburg Forest massacre (9 CE) (Davis 82-87). There were eighteen major battles between Roman forces and internal and external enemies (Nodegoat). At

the same time, substantive imperial leadership all but disappeared until Theodosius' ascension in 379, border controls and taxation mechanisms collapsed, and Roman imperial troop levels surged, while liminal garrisons simultaneously emptied and assumed a defensive posture (Southern 262-64), deploying troops to more contested areas of the empire (Bachrach 62; Wijnendaele 22).

For Augustine and contemporaries, the heart of civilization appeared to be collapsing from internal decay and external pressures, a slow-motion reversal of *imperium sine fine*. This was also evident in the dissolution of the imperial supply chain and manufacturing base, and the resulting economic difficulties (Cowen). It would not have been difficult for a Roman to see the writing on the wall: manufacturing output and building construction were rapidly shrinking; metal and ceramic products were degrading in quality; there was less money in circulation; less trade throughput between seaports; and notably fewer foodstuff transfers between entrepôts (Ward-Perkins). In Roman Africa, traditional urban architectural preference for wall-free "open cities" changed too in the fifth century, with stone and less-permanent palisades appearing in cities and settlements throughout the region (Sears 120).

Matching this malaise in security and the economy, the Roman imperial administration, so highly regarded for its effective control over central institutions and far-flung provinces, was now split between Constantinople, Milan, Ravenna, and Rome, with a new preoccupation on internal policing with imperial forces (Fuhrmann 239-42). In the last two decades of Augustine's life, he learned of Rome's sack by Visigoth troops in 410 (De Bruyn 411; Arbesmann 316); the ordered departure of the imperial mission from Britannia; the disintegration of border settlements and forts in Germania (redeployment of forces from frontier zones intensified instability as the deterrent effect of Roman armies vanished; Goldsworthy); and the siege of his own North Africa by Vandal elements (though he passed away before they took Hippo in 430) (Wijnendaele 92-96).

With this background in mind, a viable way to analyze Augustine emerges: there seems to be consistency in his treatment of war and the role of the State throughout his career. This contrasts with his views on other themes, which changed pronouncedly over time, for example: the permissibility of coercing heretics, the nature of law, and the doctrines of Cyprian of Carthage (Gaumer).

## **Augustine's Views on War and Peace, Order and Security**

As early as 388, before his return to Africa, Augustine began to use language that would endure throughout his writing. It was language that connected the

utility of war as a mechanism of the State, to effect order with setting the conditions for peace in human society: "...bellum geritur ut pax acquiratur" (*ep.*, 189 qd. in Lenihan 41 and 48). He supported these views across most categories of his literary corpus: philosophical and exegetical works, letters, sermons, polemical writings, and especially in *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* and *De civitate Dei*. While Augustine's writings, as applied to war, peace, and order, are well known, and consensus has been long established in several main areas, I find this consensus to be constricted by the historical schools of thought that has shaped it. Too often Augustine is used as a foil by one side against another to show how the Late Antique thinker either despised or endorsed the crossover of worldly concerns into the life of the Church.

At this point, I would like to offer an alternative understanding of the interplay between war, peace and order, by touching on Augustine's "two cities" paradigm, which is articulated in *De civitate Dei*. While not entirely linear, Augustine seems to have a relational model of the two cities, the earthly and heavenly cities. Before going further, it is important to note that the earthly city is not simply made up of those who are here and now in the material world, versus those in an immaterial heaven (Cary-Elwes). Augustine makes it clear that believers are already citizens in the heavenly city, albeit imperfectly, while simultaneously living in the midst of the earthly city. This is the juncture where war, peace, and order enter my analysis.

The goal of happiness, or a human's strongest driving force, can only be achieved in a state of peace (Renna). Peace itself is internal (it is personal harmony of the heart with God) and external to a person (*concordia* between people), and both are predicated on the proper ordering of things (a certain type of harmony or *concordia*): "...pax omnium rerum, tranquillitas ordinis" (*civ.*, 19,13, qd. in Lenihan 60). In concrete terms, it is difficult to be happy and for a heart to be raised up if one's basic needs are not met with food to provide energy, shelter to stay warm, or the reasonable assurance that oneself, one's neighbors, and those one loves will not be violently killed. These basics can only be delivered when a baseline stability and general order are in place (Fukuyama 546-47). Without these basics, or when they are overindulged, interior peace is unattainable for the individual and exterior peace impossible for a community (Swift 377).

One significant way stability and order are facilitated is through laws guiding personal and group behavior. This question is much too expansive to be covered here, but, what happens when the desires of one person or group physically threaten another? For Augustine, as a pastor and Roman citizen, the unfortunate reality is that in the earthly city armed force is necessary to

protect a group's stability and order against inordinate desires, such as greed, lust, envy, or hatred (Berrouard 643); it is, in a sense, "the normal condition of society" (Markus 13). In a manner, war is defensible if it is intended to assure peace, stability, and order (Swift 382; Russell 875).

So, while the perfect peace of the heavenly city—total *concordia*, cannot be attained in the earthly city, we can have a foretaste thereof, and peace is a good that should be sought as the *sine qua non* for happiness in this life.

## Ensuring Stability in the Post-Westphalian System

Returning to the present day, the remainder of this chapter is about ensuring order and peace in an increasingly disordered world.

Before moving headlong into an application scenario, it is important to clarify something. While there are stunning similarities between the geo-strategic contexts of modern society and the late Roman Empire, they cannot be directly equated. More to the point, the central problem in the late Roman Empire was that of hypo-coherence. Also known as *complexity theory* in medical and physics fields (Solomon and Shir 2003), hypo/hyper-coherence is also used in the humanities (Cline 165-66; Flannery) to classify regulatory mechanisms that keep complex organizations and societies healthy, but which begin to decrease unified action to meet changes in time and space. We can take as an example the virus that the human immune system cannot detect and fight. The key issue facing our global society today is the opposite: hyper-coherence. This is the propensity for a system to overcompensate in relation to changes, challenges, and threats, with a normative and monolithic response: more of the same (Dark).

Our world faces dramatic challenges because there are currently too many such changes, they are simultaneous, and increasingly interconnected (Khanna). An example would be climate change, caused by excess CO<sub>2</sub> (Bourne 156-58). Behind this effect is the positive causal story of efficiency, economic growth, a rise in living standards, and technological progress worldwide (Morris). The bad news is we are producing too many emissions and destroying our ecosystems. Despite the warning signs, the factors that drive CO<sub>2</sub> production must keep pace with growing human populations, resulting in a warming planet, contested natural resources, and the stage set for an overdue disease pandemic. In sum, instead of mitigating the problem, the hyper-coherence of our global systems means the problem is getting exacerbated and creating unparalleled risk for efficient governance and societal management (Patel and Palotty).



Hyper-coherence actually transforms the myriad structures that support our daily lives into a system of systems that is forecast to become a critical vulnerability (Sarathy). This is a vulnerability that most people probably do not think about: the fragility of our global life support system (Cowen 56; Sharma). For the most part, the public do not realize that even a partial disruption to the world's integrated physical and digital supply chains would cause financial markets, food stocks, and energy supplies to overcompensate for the shortfall, cascade into panic mode and become frozen within a matter of one or two days. At worst, an eventual breakdown of our modern way of life could occur within weeks of a global supply chain breakdown. For example, cities around the world have only have approximately one to three days' food and energy to sustain their populations (Bourne 4). It is easy to envisage the chaos that could ensue without continuing supplies. Our society could survive without internet, perhaps, even without easy flights around the world, but throughout the world, society would come to an immediate halt without constant energy and a steady source of nourishment for our seven or more billion people.

Another consequence of the hyper-coherence of our global system of systems is already evident in the return of major power competition. Unlike in past centuries, or during the Cold War, major powers no longer seek to impose ideologies, but seek instead to control supply chains to ensure stability for their populations (Khanna 138-50). Even though major power competition has returned, this should not be considered a validation of nation-State sovereignty in the long term.

Our global system, with its interconnected communications networks and the rapid transmission of ideas and people, means national borders are becoming less significant (Sassen 2006, 2008, 2013; Elden, 2009, 2013). Furthermore, events such as the Arab Spring and the many color revolutions in years past demonstrate nation-States only have a fragile control over their populations even while inequality within groups retains its historical specter (Scheidel).

One more aspect I should comment on is the global increase in alternative methods of conflict, which is one of the most immediate dangers today. Alternative methods of conflict are actions short of armed combat, but that seek the same ends as a traditional war. In the past few years this practice has surfaced around the world: unattributed cyber-attacks against critical infrastructure (Segal); influencing of other populations through misinformation; unattributed combat support; and the manipulation of international law to carry out policy objectives (Mazower).

These acts are difficult to confront as they fall outside historical patterns of warfare, yet they have already caused entire regions of the planet to become destabilized and have increased the risk of major wars. This is just one more example where conventional just war theory fails to satisfy modern realities (Clark 141).

## The Way Ahead

Instead of finishing on a depressing note, it seems more appropriate to end in the spirit of Augustine: with a focus on hope and love. To put it simply, world events today are testing the survival of our species. Geo-political undercurrents ensure that the violent tendencies of humanity will only be magnified unless a new approach to controlling threats and the application of security is developed (Randers 180-89). While that might seem impossible, Augustine's writings from 1600 years ago do have value today. His overriding concerns for order, stability, and peace in the earthy city are simple yet relevant. This warrants further elucidation.

There are four overlapping areas that are strategic focal points for realizing a future that is ordered, stable, and peaceful: hedging against ecosystem crises, hardening of resources, ensuring an equitable economic system, and global threat reduction. The first point has been touched on throughout this essay. An increasingly depleted and abused planet means all life is placed at a higher level of risk. In this regard, what can be planned to mitigate calamities arising from ecosystem deterioration?

For starters, government authorities should anticipate the sort of unified response that would be required as climate change makes densely populated areas of the planet uninhabitable. The sorts of emergency responses to tsunamis, hurricanes, and the like, would be significantly less disruptive than the forecasts modelling southern Asia, with its billions, as uninhabitable in the not-too-distant future (Im, Pal and Eltahir). Part of anticipating such extreme events is the reality that potentially hundreds of millions of people would require resettlement. To get climatological refugees to greener pastures would require in-transit humanitarian assistance. Militaries, such as the United States', have mature doctrine and demonstrated capabilities in this area, but no single organization could handle a global calamity alone. As the mass migration from Asia and Africa into Europe in recent years has shown, governing authorities ought to dedicate more assets to safeguarding refugees from exploitation, violence, and dangerous transport conditions.

Closely associated with vigilance in responding to the human dimension of ecosystem degradation is the existential imperative to accelerate planning development to protect life-sustaining resources. This specifically means protecting fresh water, energy reserves, farms, building minerals, and global common goods such as oceans, forests, and clean air against man-made despoliation. It may seem evident this ought to be a critical priority to anyone concerned with social order and life of humans, but in practice this is easily taken for granted. Unless one has faced serious drought, famine, or desertification, it is hard to understand how quickly “normal life” can be turned into a race for survival. As the planet becomes more crowded, more contested, and less hospitable, the primary means of avoiding a worst possible scenario is in collaborative solution making. One model, small in scale but powerful in its promise, is the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, an island far to the north of mainland Norway. This example shows that governments can in fact overcome parochialism in jointly investing in the face of potential life-ending danger.

Connecting anthropology with ecology and agrology is the third focal point: generating a more equitable economic model. This proposal is not a recommendation for wealth redistribution, rather a consideration of the types of emphasis the future will need. One of the key weaknesses in the global economy today is the obsession with consumption and growth that depends on depleting resources. A more equitable model is centered on ensuring enough is provided globally to sustain populations, thus reducing ballooning demand that triggers mass migration in search of life support. Another aspect is the role of protecting the global supply chain so that the only beneficiaries of it are in wealthier “fortress” countries. No amount of insularity can stop a wave of hungry and motivated souls indefinitely. On the flip-side, a more equitable global economic system would have greatly reduced protectionism with nominal borders that allow for the freedom of movement of goods, not antiquated customs requirements that hurt the most vulnerable. Greater emphasis ought to be placed on making economic support available in a decentralized way. Such subsidiarity would allow more even and nimble access to resources that can stabilize communities that are at risk. A final note in the economic sphere is the importance for governing authorities to emphasize more investment in research and development. The best solutions besetting the world today are likely yet unthought or unformulated.

The final focal point is imminent in its potential consequences. Order, stability, and peace are simply pipe-dreams at this stage in human evolution without guarantors of safety: defense and policing agencies. Such organizations hedge

against human compulsion to violence and more importantly can deter and eliminate lethal threats. What I mean in this regard is that the reduction of global threats is more important than ever. Chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and electromagnetic risks are abundant and humanity is at an elevated risk by proliferated weapons systems that can easily distribute such deadly harbingers.

In coming decades, global threat reduction will be most evident in the utility of coordinated responses to some of the most likely trends: pandemic detection and containment, protection of infrastructure (waterlines, energy conduits, food storage, and transportation arteries as examples), and protection of cyber and space domains (hardening lines of communication). One aspect that cannot be left out is the increasing demand for the ballooning rise of megacities to be secured against internal and external threats. While the majority of the human population already lives in urban areas today, within the next 30-40 years, the percentage that will live in cities with more than 20 million people will take on even greater preponderance in the global political order. That means megacities stand to be bastions of stability or potentially cauldrons of misery and violence. It is an important ending thought to realize that while this author approaches these strategic focal points from a military perspective, the only feasible way to get after them is through a whole of society approach. In this construct, security forces serve as a bulwark against man's darker angels.

While it is perhaps unrealistic to aspire to a post-violent human society where governments no longer furnish protection and security for their populations, it is not foolish to imagine people coming together to contain and solve global threats to our existence and way of life (Naím 233-44). It is worth imagining a world where all governments eliminate all stocks of nuclear and chemical weapons, and where militaries and security agencies protect against poaching of the environment and against human rights abuses. Since the global supply chain network is the enabling mechanism for nearly every material feature of our lives today, it is only logical that armed forces should be transitioned away from the policy concerns of individual nations and re-focused on hardening supply chains so that civilian populations do not pay dearly for criminal acts (Lakoff).

Augustine speaks to us today: order, stability, peace among people, and oneness are goods worthy of our efforts; in fact necessary (Keohane). Human nature and behavior dictate armed forces are necessary for the time being (Coker 89), but productive cooperation can evolve at the pace of global threats: ensuring peace, reducing lethal means of action, protecting interconnected networks, and most importantly, working to support the survival of our species and planet.



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