What is a city? I do not mean “city” as a concrete urban area like Vienna, Washington, or any other city or town, but as a category for anthropological inquiry.

This question seems to puzzle everybody who tries to answer it. It seems as if many people do not immediately want to qualitatively describe the essential features of the place in which they live. On the contrary, research indicates that citizens define the term “city” only through quantitative measures like area (in square miles or kilometers), population size, variety of occupations (professional or entertaining), the length of streets or the height of buildings. Naturally, it is obvious that the city’s activity is determined according to these measurements. But quantitative and economic measures cannot answer a key question: What makes the city a powerful attractor? We suppose that the answer can be given by ethnographic, anthropological study, along with quantitative, economic study.

Since anthropology’s interest spans a variety of nations, education systems, and languages, its practitioners can take a kind of interdisciplinary cross-cultural approach. It reconciles contradictory views among other fields, like the natural science, liberal arts, and technics.

One of the key concepts in anthropology is culture and civilization. Tylor (1867) classically defined culture as “that complex whole, which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” As the city is a focus of all human “capabilities and habits,” it should be considered an anthropological category.

To illustrate my point, I turn to Mirror for Man, by Clyde Kluckhohn (1944), as a piece accessible to anthropologists and the general public alike. The author shows ways in which anthropology is a mirror that can help humans to look at themselves. The notion of a “city” is thus a reflection of human activity. Moreover, we can interpret national or historical cultures through a study of its cities.

The point that should be stressed is a city’s flexibility and diversity—its ethnic, cultural, and historical forms. For example, why did ancient people build cities circular or square in form? Why did people come back to a crumbling city after wars, earthquakes, or other disasters again and again (like Jericho or Jerusalem that rose from the ashes about 80 times)? Why do cities appear as places of both home and of sacred phenomena in different myths and legends? Why have some cities been ruled over by kings (as in the ancient East), and others by civil society (as in ancient Greece)?

Perhaps, answers may be found through anthropological inquiry. During anthropological research, different approaches are used: linguistic, social, biological, geographical, philosophical, archaeological, and more. Anthropologists even call upon geophysics to find out, for example, the structure of the ground upon which a city stands or once stood.

The etymology, or the study of the history of words, of the term “urban” comes from the Latin urbis meaning “stronghold.” In the Russian language, the etymology of “urban” (i.e. Russian ропё, which sounds like gnoi (griid)) is “enclosure place.” The term “city”—coming from the Latin civitas, means “state” or “unity of people in civil society.” Additionally, “membership into urban society” (in Latin urbānā) means the same as “to be cultural” or “to be courteous.” These examples display that ancient cities and urban areas valued the relationship to the place a person spends most of his or her life.

We should, therefore, understand that the idea of “city” does not have only a material basis and cannot be reduced to quantitative measures, but that a city’s value may also be derived from qualitative inquiry.

Let me describe the future of this column. Naturally, urban anthropology is a huge research area and cannot be explained in one or two articles. First of all, we are going to examine the urban as a specific human activity—it is our strategic line. I plan to examine:

- Distinctive processes in urban space and its influence upon population. Here, I will deal with urban processes such as urbanization, segregation, gentrification, pseudo-urbanization, among other things.
- Historical, social, and cultural forms, and types of urban phenomena. I plan to look at the variety of urban forms in human history and cultures; it is also important to examine the difference between urban and rural space.
- Specific states of urban areas in correlation to its citizens. For example, we will try to examine how visual elements of city architecture determine activity of citizens.

I am open for dialogue among all interested parties—groups as well as individuals. All ideas will be taken into consideration, so please send them my way.