Congratulations to those many anthropologists who have had a role in developing and maintaining City & Society as a respectable voice of the anthropological profession’s interest in complex societies—in urban, national, transnational systems—to use the modern phrasing for our organization that used to be, simply, “urban anthropology.”

I am proud to have had the opportunity to serve as the first editor of City & Society after having served a term as president of the Society for Urban Anthropology. Knowing that professional societies are notoriously bad at maintaining precise historical records, I will take this opportunity to remind younger readers that most of us then thinking about developing an official voice for the Society, simply considered the journal Urban Anthropology as “our” journal. It turned out, however, that Urban Anthropology was owned by Jack Rollwagen. After considerable discussion, our parent organization, the American Anthropological Association, decided that it was more efficient to establish a brand new journal than to purchase the rights and obligations of the one that carried the title that would have been natural for us. After more discussion, we chose the title City & Society but from the beginning intended that our new journal should have the broader coverage suggested by the terms now used in the Society’s name, national, transnational, global, and my personal preference, supranational.

I mention that my personal preference was not selected because that mention provides a segue to a point I want to make. While I am generally, and genuinely, happy with how well City & Society has done, I still feel that it has not made the significant contribution to theory in the area of complex social systems that I had hoped it would. We anthropologists ought to be more interested in understanding and
explaining the continuing evolution of hierarchical systems such as urban communities, nation-states, transnational and supranational formations through the use of network models of how new systems are generated in the course of complex interactions among components of subsystems. I had hoped that City & Society would have a greater impact in this kind of theoretical development. In fact, in an early editorial in City & Society (1987), I expressed my belief that network models would prove invaluable in enhancing our understanding of urban life, of metropolitan systems, and of complex societies generally.

Please understand that this is not a complaint about City & Society, which I enjoy reading. It is only that I had hoped for more along this one line of thinking—or several lines if one differentiates processes of generation, transaction, and evolution. A decade before we started City & Society, I published an article in the journal Social Networks, “The Rise of Network Thinking in Anthropology” (1978), expressing great pride in the role of anthropology in this regard and great optimism about the future. While “network thinking” has continued its “rise” in other scientific disciplines, including the physical and natural sciences as well as other social sciences, my expectations have not been met in our own discipline of anthropology. Perhaps that is to come and will yet be reflected in the bright future of City & Society.

References Cited

Wolfe, Alvin W.