

# Thirty and Four, Reflections on Marvin Minsky's *Society of Mind*

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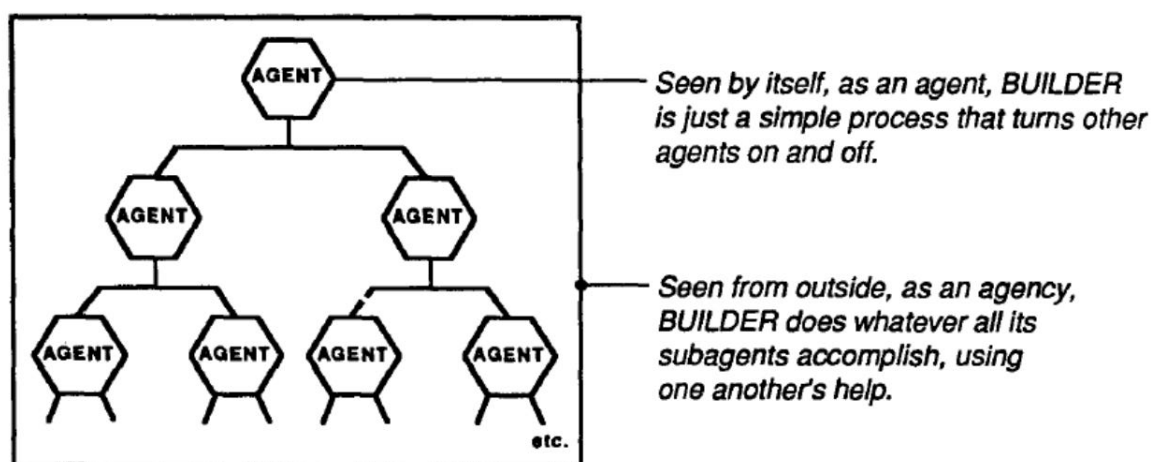
The pharmacy days I spent in Ankara over the past few months, helping my father with work, came to an end on Thursday when I suddenly decided to return to San Francisco.

Ankara is always packed, a district where barbers, jewelers, real estate agents, and all kinds of shopkeepers line up side by side without any gaps between them. The difference between Ankara and San Francisco, with its streets roamed by driverless cars, its ocean, and its occasional boutique shops, becomes even more pronounced in the quiet of the holiday season. Under these conditions, it is nearly impossible for me, after more than ten years here, not to compare myself with the version of me who, until last week, was living daily life in Ankara.

And I think it is astonishing that inside each of us, like computers, there are mini-operators specific to every city and neighborhood. The way these modes operate is so different: one waves angrily at drivers, foams with irritation, and forgets to use the turn signal; the other remains on edge, aware that if she fails to follow the rules, the police may pull her over at once.

We relate to every city in different ways, that much is certain. At first glance, this may look like a set of unified identities formed by geography, but underneath them all are similar habits and emotional reflexes.

And these city-identities are connected to one another in such a way that if the functioning of one breaks, the others are affected at least a little. The shy Ayşe who learned in Ankara not to keep customers waiting, for instance, can more easily find the courage here to ask, while ordering coffee, “Can you make it quick?” Because the knowledge of what Ayşe should do and how she should do it does not reside in the sub-identities capable of adapting to place, but in the relationships between those identities, and in the network of memory.

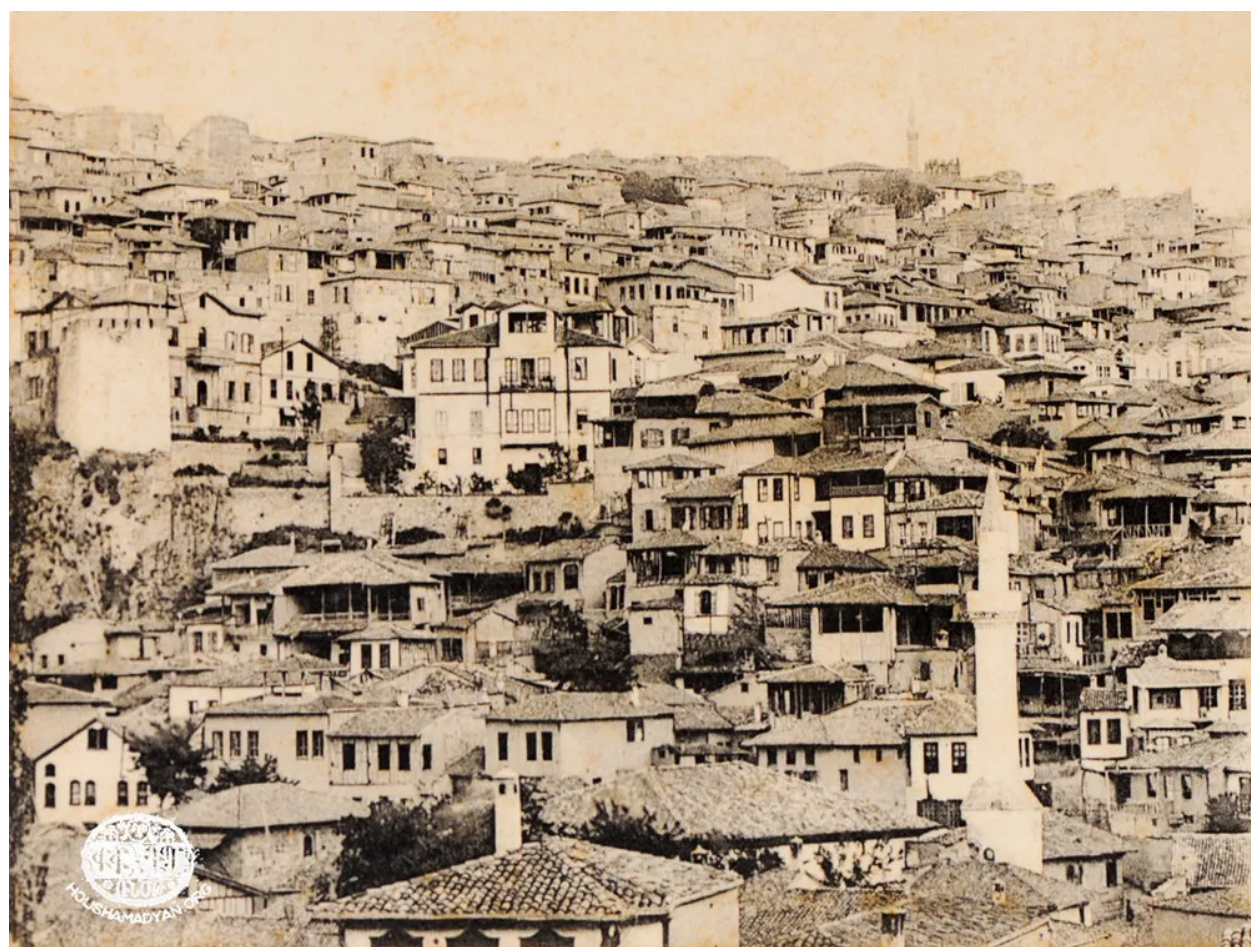


Marvin Minsky, *Society of Mind*, 1986

Because we humans cannot remember our infancy and childhood, when we first began forming our minds and these networks, we often reduce ourselves to our automatic operations. This is why all our metaphors for memory are shaped in such a separate, compartmentalized way; why we treat it like storage, an archive, a file.

But living memory is not like that. The person we were at four and the person we are at thirty-four are connected by an emotional continuity. Even when we change cities, neighborhoods, houses, we continue to carry in our bodies every significant feeling we have experienced since birth. As we move between different geographies and different ages, the parts of us that appear disconnected remain coherent through the wholeness of spirit between them.

This is precisely why what I want to say about living in a city where artificial intelligence has seeped into every part of daily life is not about “what machines will do to us,” but about how technology is shaped by these invisible networks. And now, at this new age, I understand much more clearly how looking at the past with a fresh awareness can help make sense of the future.



Ankara circa 1900, before the Great Fire of 1916 (Archive of the Mekhitarist Order)