

# Margaret Archer's Conceptualizations of educational centralization and decentralization

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## Foundational works

**Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975) (RTS)**  
On 'Transcendental Realism' – a philosophy for the natural sciences.

**Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences* (1979) (PON)**  
On 'Critical naturalism' – a philosophy for the human sciences

'Transcendental Realism' and 'Critical Naturalism' were later subsumed under the name 'Critical Realism'.

**Margaret S. Archer, *Social Origins of Educational Systems* (1979) (815 pages)**  
On education in four European countries from the Middle Ages until the mid - 1970s. A historical-sociological comparative study of the emergence of 'state educational systems (centralized and decentralized)'.  
Practiced the *morphogenetic approach* without naming it.  
Identified *morphogenetic cycles*.

**Margaret S. Archer, *Social origins of educational systems (The College Edition)* (1984)**

*A shorter version of 'Social Origins', presenting two of the countries from the original study (England and France).*

**Margaret S. Archer, *Realist Social Theory: the morphogenetic approach* (1995)**

A conceptual framework for 'the morphogenetic approach'

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## The intellectual climate of the late 1970s

- Bhaskar's '*The possibility of naturalism*' and Archer's '*Social origins of educational systems*' were published the same year, in 1979.
- Bhaskar and Archer did not know each other at that time.
- Archer describes her early work as 'a howl of protest' against the theoretical options for social scientists at the time, 'methodological individualism' and 'methodological holism'.
  - *methodological individualism*: only individuals cause social change
  - *methodological holism*: social structures transform themselves (the extreme version: 'autopoietic systems') – totally disregarding the people in the system.

Archer. 'Introduction' in '*Social Origins of Educational Systems*', republished 2013.

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## PON's meta-theoretical justification of 'Social Origins...'

- **Bhaskar (PON)**: Social ontology of emergence
  - the stratified nature of social reality
  - structure and agency designate different levels with distinctly different properties and powers

This social ontology justified Archer's structure- and agency approach in 'Social Origins...'

**Archer**: once state educational systems (structures) have *emerged* - from interaction/struggles among agents - they have acquired causal powers of their own.

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## Real versus nominal definitions

'The basic challenge in all scientific investigations is to establish *real definitions* of existing (social and natural) entities'.

*Real definitions* refer to something about the entity [its structures] that explain how it behaves – its causal powers and tendential behaviour.

(Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, p. 171)

'Real definitions are definitions of things, substances and concepts; nominal definitions are definitions of words.'

'Real definitions[...] may be true or false (not just [...] more or less useful).

(Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, p. 211)

Archer's definition of state educational system (SES) is a *real definition* of a social entity, which refers to its structure and explains how it behaves, i.e., mechanisms that tendentially produce certain types of change.

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## Archer's real definition of state educational systems

- '*a nationwide and differentiated collection of institutions devoted to formal education, whose overall control and supervision is at least partly governmental, and whose components and processes are related to one another*' (Archer [1979] 2013, p. 54).
- Two major aspects:
  - *The connection to the state*
    - state supervision and control, governmental decision-making affects the system
  - *The systemic form*
    - changes in one element lead to changes throughout the system - interconnectedness
- The system is also related to its environment - to multiple social institutions (multiple integration).

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## The structures and mechanisms of educational systems

Archer's definition of state educational systems is a real definition. It specifies their structures and inherent mechanism that tendentially produce certain types of change

- *Structures and mechanisms:*

a) the relationship with the state tends to produce increased *unification* and *systematization* of the system;

b) the relationship between the system and its environment tends to produce *specialization*;

c) the system's multiple integration with numerous social institutions in its environment tends to produce *differentiation* (*relative institutional autonomy*).

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## Mechanisms: *unification and systematization*

***Unification:*** standardized and uniform provisions

(the degree to which educational provisions are the same everywhere and in agreement with government policy):

*i) intensive* unification: provisions conform to central government policy

*ii) extensive* unification: local provisions are the same in all localities

***Systematization:*** different schools and programmes are related to each other in terms of level (primary, secondary, tertiary), bottlenecks in the system are removed, and previously isolated provisions are increasingly included in the system.

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## Mechanisms: *differentiation* and *specialization*

- **Differentiation:** the educational system is a relatively autonomous social institution with its own special work operations and role structure, and its internal operations are performed with considerable autonomy and little outside interference.
- **Specialization:** the system includes various types of schools and provisions with different recruitment bases, internal processes, and output competencies

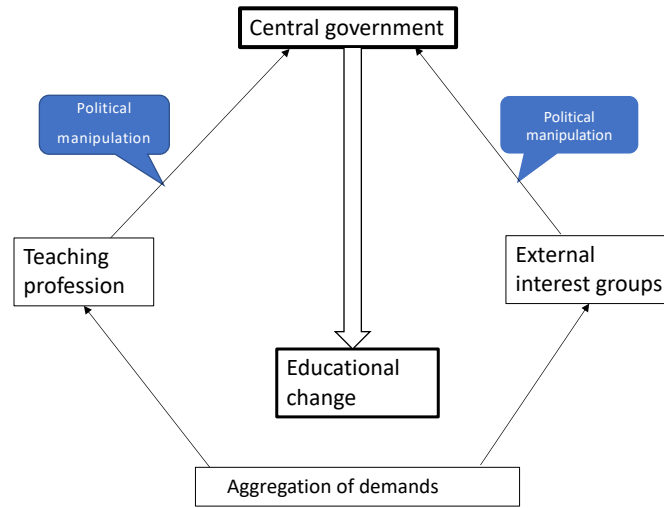
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## Archer: centralized and decentralized state educational systems

- In **centralized educational systems the state is the leading part**. Policy based on educational demands from social groups are negotiated at the political centre and implemented *top-down*.
- In centralized systems processes of *unification* and *systematization* dominate, caused by the structural relation to the state, which prefers uniformity (education is in line with central policy and is the same everywhere) and *systematization* (eliminates bottlenecks striving towards a smoothly functioning system)
- **Decentralized systems have no leading part**. Changes are initiated in various places in the system, spreading horizontally; thus, often interfering with state policy.
- Processes of *specialization and differentiation* predominate, primarily caused by external transactions; tailor-made provisions may be transacted by external groups.

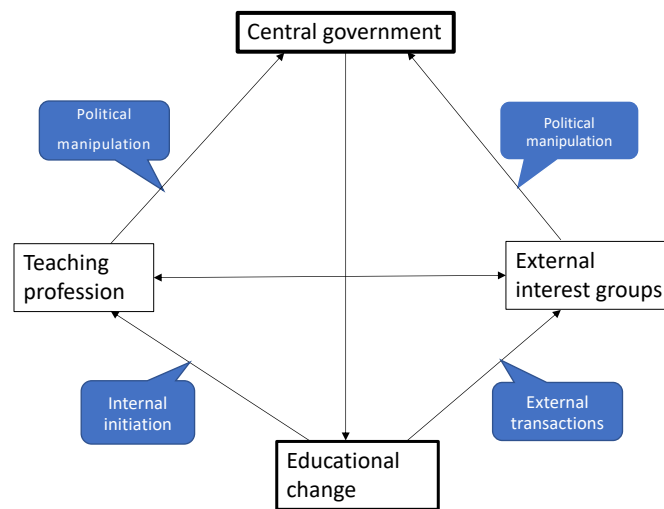
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Figure 1 Educational interaction in centralized systems



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Figure 2 Educational interaction in decentralized systems



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The educational  
policy of  
international  
organizations:

Decentralization

- The World Bank (WB)
- The International Monetary Fund (IMF)
- The Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

Since the 1980s, all have advocated *decentralization*, privatization and community financing of education.

Some made *educational decentralization* a precondition for financial assistance – The Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP).

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How do  
international  
organizations  
conceptualize  
educational  
decentralization?

and what is  
lacking?

Research on the implementation of decentralising reforms funded by international organizations (WB, IMF) defines decentralization as

*'the delegation of decisionmaking authority from the centre to the periphery'.*

The definition does not include the structures and mechanisms of the system, which precludes finding out whether *the system*, prior to reforms, is centralized or decentralized

- Educational decentralization has proved difficult to implement
- A possible explanation: central policy is more effectively implemented in centralized systems (Archer's model)

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The original basis  
of Archer's  
conceptualization  
of educational  
systems -

and its relevance  
for future  
research

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Archer studied four European countries, England, France, Russia and Denmark. The countries were chosen for their diversity:

their educational systems, educational history, national history, culture, and social structure differed.

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None of the countries had been subject to conquest, colonization or the imposition of a foreign educational system.

their different forms of national education developed in response to internal pressures.

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Currently, state educational systems, connected to the state and with systemic interconnectivity, exist in a majority of countries in the world,

which makes Archer's conception of educational systems widely applicable, but also open to further elaborations and modifications.