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**Abstract**

In this article, HARM presents a small excerpt from Ernst E. Boesch's book "Von Kunst bis Terror - Über den Zwiespalt in der Kultur" [*From art to terror - On ambivalence in culture*], published in 2005. The editors of HARM want to draw attention to a psychologist and social theorist who saw himself as a *cultural* psychologist and, as such, wanted to show how much more complex, ambivalent, opaque and unpredictable human thinking, feeling, behaviour, and actions are than mainstream psychology — which models and primarily quantifies and measures — would have us believe. This, according to one of his convictions which continues to shape modern cultural psychology, is because it recognises humans not primarily as natural creatures, but also as cultural beings who, as beings gifted with special language, are entangled in an indissoluble network of meaningful symbolic worlds and thus are capable of manifold processes of sense-making. In order to depict and reconstruct these entanglements and to understand their significance for human experience, attitudes and actions, Boesch argues that hermeneutic-interpretative procedures are required which, we are convinced, also contribute significantly to refining the depiction and analysis of phenomena that are relevant in the context of HARM.

— Boesch's text is preceded by a brief introduction to his life, his thinking and the selected text.

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**Keywords**

enmity, terror, fear, polyvalence, psychological balance, human condition

**Introduction<sup>1</sup>***Ernst E. Boesch's Life and Work: A Biographical Sketch*

Ernst Eduard Boesch (December 26, 1916 – July 12, 2014) was born in St. Gallen, Switzerland, where he also spent his early school days. In 1939 he began to study medicine in Geneva, but changed his plans in favour of studying psychology, pedagogy and philosophy at the Jean-Jacques Rousseau Institute. The Institute was then managed by its founder Édouard Claparède and Pierre Bovet, two psychologists interested in the application of psychological methods and findings in education. One of Boesch's later teachers was Jean Piaget who was brought to Geneva by Bouvet and became one of the outstanding psychologists of his time. Boesch also attended lectures of André Rey and Richard Meili, two pioneers in psychological testing and diagnostics. His Geneva teachers' areas of interest were also to characterise Boesch's early work for some time.

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<sup>1</sup> The introduction was provided by Pradeep Chakkarath.

In 1942, Boesch had his first marriage, which lasted 18 years and out of which three children emerged. In 1943 he returned to St. Gallen as a school psychologist after he had refused an assistant position at Piaget's chair. In 1946 he received his doctorate with a thesis on challenges for school psychology.

In 1951, he accepted the position of chair of psychology at the Saarland University of Saarbrücken, which was founded in 1948 and became a German university after the Saarland was reintegrated into the Federal Republic of Germany in 1957. Until 1969, Boesch's chair remained the only chair of psychology at the university. Saarbrücken was to remain his permanent residence for the rest of his life and despite various calls to other universities (Brussels, Mannheim, Bochum, Geneva, and Basel) he has never given up his professorship at Saarland University. In 1955, Boesch went to Bangkok, Thailand, for three years, at the invitation of UNESCO and served as director of the International Institute for Child Study. He adapted well-known psychological tests for the Thai context and carried out various developmental and pedagogical investigations. In the same period, he began to learn the Thai language, which he mastered perfectly over the years. In his teacher, Supanee (1931 – 2020), he also got to know his great love and his second wife, with whom he spent the rest of his long life.

On Boesch's initiative, the University of Saarbrücken founded the *Institute for Development Aid* in 1962, which was later renamed the *Social Psychological Research Centre for Developmental Planning*. Boesch became director of the institute and held this position beyond his retirement until 1987.

Ernst Boesch is one of the most important pioneers of cultural psychology in the 20th century. Based on his experiences in Asian, especially in Thai contexts, in his manifold scientific contributions he dealt critically and constructively with mainstream psychology and its methodology. In the German-speaking world, he may be regarded as the nestor of a culture scientific psychology as it is laid down in his so-called *Symbolic Theory of Action* (Boesch, 1991). His work had a considerable and lasting influence on the continental European character of this alternative approach in psychology. At the same time, Ernst Boesch, with his strong focus on everyday psychological issues and phenomena, was one of the most important pioneers in ecological psychology. Although it was difficult in the decades of his professional career to attract the attention he would have liked for his scientific approach of an ecologically orientated psychology, his work has certainly been appreciated as can be seen in the honorary doctorates from the Universities of Berne, Switzerland, and Srinakharinwirot, Thailand; the Order of the Crown of Thailand; the Saarland Order of Merit; the Dr. Margrit Egnér Foundation Prize; and honorary memberships in various scientific associations. In memory of Ernst E. Boesch, the Society for Cultural Psychology, which is based in Halle, Germany, has been awarding the Ernst E. Boesch Prize for services to the promotion and dissemination of scientific cultural psychology since 2015. His scientific legacy is documented in the Ernst Boesch Archive, which is part of the Cultural Psychological Research Centre based at the Chair of Social Theory and Social Psychology at the Ruhr University Bochum, Germany.

#### *On Hostility and the Polyvalence of Emotions*

Ernst Boesch's extremely rich work is interdisciplinary, integrates theories and approaches from fields such as psychology, pedagogy, psychoanalysis, anthropology, ethnology and philosophy and is devoted to a wide range of topics such as identity, subjectivation, strangeness, language and meaning, narration, polyvalence, physicality, emotion, cognition, fear, stress, aggression, individual and societal development, art and aesthetics, longing, religion, rituals, etc. His collection of essays, published in 2005 in German under the title *Von Kunst bis Terror - Über den Zwiespalt in der Kultur* [*From art to terror - On ambivalence in culture*] is representative of his multi-perspective and extremely attentive observation of psychological processes. The following translation of a short excerpt is taken from the last essay in the book, in which Boesch — as in most of his works — explores the question of how the external and the internal interact in mutual dependence when people try to understand themselves and others, to place themselves in the world and society by distancing themselves from others, to give meaning to their own feelings and actions in such a way that they are in harmony with themselves. Perhaps even more than in most of his other books and essays, in this collection he shows the perilous environments in which people have to adapt and

“function”, the role played by enemy images and feelings of hostility, how circumstances resist our needs and how all this is incorporated into our sensitivities, motivations, efforts to find our bearings and actions. In this way, Boesch paints a picture of everyday human life that is far removed from the artificial and controlled laboratory worlds in which mainstream psychology arrives at its often overly simplistic findings. As Boesch put in the title of another of his later books, “chaos lurks” in every corner of our real human environments, where we move — as if in balancing acts — through circumstances and relationships that we often depend on, but which can also challenge, even threaten us. Harm, so to speak, is everywhere. However, identifying and understanding it in real human life and in its opaque complexity requires far thicker descriptions and finer-grained analyses than many of the human sciences produce.

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### Ernst E. Boesch on Enmity, Terror and Fear<sup>2</sup>

Enmity, as revealed in the previous considerations, has a profound impact on its victim, not only physically but in its essence. Such existential antagonisms, as we further observed, may have their real reasons, but behind them often lies the defense against an amorphous, opaque whole that is known less than filled with imaginations. These could be termed “phantom enmities,” shapeless and threatening, which, it seems, foster fears and hostile defenses.

This is understandable and, at the same time, perplexing. During the Second World War, the phrase “*Me mues halt rede mitenand*” (loosely translated: “Talk to each other!”) was ubiquitous in Swiss public discourse. This became, after the war, for several years, the political credo of UNESCO, which brought people of different nations together for various events. The belief was that knowing each other better would reduce antagonisms. However, it was overlooked that the tirelessly warring Europeans had always maintained diverse relationships, learned the language of their neighbours, interacted through scientific and artistic exchanges, commercial endeavours, and tourism. It was forgotten that anti-Semitism was rampant in Europe and America even before the Nazis, despite Jews being largely assimilated and, in various ways, useful fellow citizens. Daily coexistence, even friendships and marriages, one might add, did not prevent the war between Bosnians and Serbs or the massacres among African tribes. Therefore, one would have to conclude either that the amorphous is not as essential as I suggest here or that real familiarity is incapable of sufficiently mitigating matters.

I am inclined toward the second. Humans continuously strive to strengthen and expand their potential for action. The amorphous and opaque unsettle them, prompting a desire to illuminate it, to explore the mysterious. However, this is never entirely successful. Ultimately, fellow humans remain inscrutable. As strangers, we acknowledge this, and all cultures have developed rituals and techniques to appropriately engage with the unfamiliarity of a stranger. Nevertheless, it happens time and again that even a person we have trusted for many years unexpectedly alienates us. What seriously threatens a hitherto unquestioned certainty of action also renders what we thought we understood puzzling. For this reason, the disappointment caused by a loved one is particularly painful.

Yet, it need not be their actual behaviour that surprises us. Gossip, intrigue, propaganda, and the like can breed distrust — and unsettle us as well. We view the previously familiar with “new eyes,” no longer knowing how to behave, and are quick to attribute this confusion to the other. Moreover, a deceived familiarity — whether real or perceived — can lead to more intense hostility than unfamiliarity. The willingness to assume hostility in the opaque seems to be greater than the willingness to understand it. Because the latter is the more challenging course of action.

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<sup>2</sup> The text is an excerpt from Boesch, E. E. (2005). *From art to terror - On ambivalence in culture*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht (pp. 241–252). The original German text was translated into English by Tamara Herz. The publisher Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht kindly granted permission to translate and reprint the text.

The hostile is the counterpart of trust, and like trust, it is a fundamental quality of our relationship with the world. The former is associated with caution and defense, the latter with devotion and risk-taking, and both are based on the experience that reality is ambivalent, sometimes benevolent, sometimes resistant, even threatening. Perhaps we should consider that even in simple societies, a person only becomes reasonably independent after a childhood of ten or more years. One must assert oneself in an antagonistic world, and the extent of its antagonism is demonstrated to the adolescent not only by everyday adversities but also by disasters and accidents, reinforced and deepened by myths, fairy tales, and true stories. Thus, from an early age, experiences of danger and hostility shape the mind no less than experiences of protection and trust. That is why humans continually strive to acquire and expand their capacity to act on the world to meet the challenges it presents.

Therefore, a child learns to categorise its environment into what is friendly and what is threatening, where the threatening can only be dangerous, and it can also be hostile. Many things are deemed dangerous, from steep paths to slippery rocks one attempts to climb, from wasps to biting dogs, from cigarettes to drugs, from belligerent boys to motorised speedsters. All these, though occasionally enticing, are experiences that young people become acquainted with, learning how to deal with them or how to avoid them. They further learn that dangerous and friendly are not fixed categories, that both can change, and that sometimes even new or previously overlooked things unexpectedly reveal themselves as friendly or dangerous. Thus, dealing with the dangerous becomes an ongoing learning process, enhancing not only their capacity for action but also strengthening their self-esteem. This explains the frequent allure that danger can exert on adolescents and many adults.

However, all of this is not yet enmity. Danger, no matter how one may individually assess it, fundamentally threatens anyone who approaches it or deals with it. Enmity, on the other hand, targets a specific victim or the group to which it belongs. This must also be further qualified: The butcher who slaughters a calf is not its enemy. Enmity requires an additional element: hatred. More precisely, though: Hatred characterises the hostility of the perpetrator; in the victim, it rather arouses terror. Active and passive hostility involve two different emotions.

Emotions? Pleasure or displeasure, excitement or fatigue, boredom or stress are “simple” emotions: They correspond to nonspecific moods, stimulations, or inhibitions and are not bound to fixed contents. Love or hate, longing or aversion, terror or horror, interest or disgust, and many more are, on the other hand, targeted; they express a specific relationship to an object. To understand such “complex” emotions, one must therefore not only consider their dynamics but also their contents. Simple emotions would be tied to specific sequences of actions or bodily states, while complex ones, such as hatred or terror, are linked to forms and contents of relationships.

Now this applies differently to active enemies, or “perpetrators,” than to passive ones, or “victims.” Hatred is both aggressive and defensive — it could be defined as the sthenic response to a threat that is not simply assessed as situational but as fundamental. This may spring from a rational assessment, but more often from syncretic “perceptions,” such as xenophobia — an unspecific emotional feeling of being affected. Depending on how one perceives the threat and one’s own capacity for action, hatred leads to different behaviours. There is open, destructive hatred, but also the clenched, repressed kind, which, rather indirectly aggressive, even tries to feign friendliness. As we have seen, the hostile, therefore, does not always manifest visibly aggressive behaviour. Hatred *desires* destruction, but it does not always dare to act upon it. This is why haters tend to form alliances — shared hatred strengthens, dispels doubts about one’s own cause, and thus doubly solidifies self-esteem.

It happens, of course, that enmity is mutual. However, not infrequently — as seen in instances of bullying, xenophobia, or anti-Semitism — it manifests as unexpected aggression. Surprised and helpless in the face of overpowering attackers, the victim responds with terror. Terror is also a complex emotion. In the face of immediate, real danger, it is a reaction of helplessness that can escalate into panic, where the victim either seeks only to flee or is paralysed with fright. However, somehow, the terrorist threat evokes archaic images of the uncanny, of destructive

violence lurking behind the superficial reality, images of the fragility on which our security rests, the finitude of life, and the transience of creation. Although everyday experience imparts a sense of stability, the myths, fairy tales, ghost stories, apocalyptic warnings, disaster reports, personal accidents and illnesses, even fears of self-punishment — in short, the lurking menace to which all this points — collapses in the moment of terror. Terror, for the duration of the threat, destroys the individual's self-defense mechanisms.

However, those filled with hatred do not experience this. While they indeed encounter existential fear, it manifests itself in a form that seems combatable or avoidable to them. As long as they can harbour hatred, they believe they are maintaining their self-confidence. They have made the world manageable and understandable: They have condensed the shapeless threat into concrete adversaries, and the rest of reality, unless allied in the struggle for common values, holds little significance.

In essence, something similar occurs in phobias, whether they are of a hypochondriac nature or involve external objects such as spiders, mice, snakes, as well as fears of darkness, heights, or the many things that some people find threatening. The hostile element here seems to serve as a kind of preemptive protection — protection against a danger that cannot lie in the phobic object itself. Even more clearly than in the case of personal enmities, phobias appear to be a crystallisation of an uncanny quality that lies behind the objects.

Psychoanalysis sometimes seeks to explain hostile hatred through processes of transference. Similarly, in the case of phobias: the hostile feelings that should be directed toward a close person might be transferred onto spiders. However, under the pressure of feelings of guilt, this is then turned inward as fear of the self. Simpler explanations might attribute the cause of phobic aversions to early frightening encounters. While such explanations may apply in some cases, they are hardly universal. Only a few individuals with a phobic fear of spiders, mice, or snakes have ever been bitten by one of these animals, and often their aversion exists before any direct encounter. Likewise, it would not be at all more enlightening to attempt to explain anti-Semitism or xenophobia solely in terms of the transference of negative social experiences.

On these pages, I have often referred to the concept of the “resistant world.” However, the world in which we live is certainly not only “resistant.” It nourishes us with light, air, water, and all the fruits of the earth. Yet, it has never conformed to the biblical promise that humankind would subdue the earth. It resists in various ways our egocentric desires, imposes its laws upon us, and ultimately destroys us. This is the resistance that inevitably confronts us, and the pursuit of “inner-outer balance,” as discussed on these pages, seeks to either transform or suppress this resistance to achieve sufficient autonomy for self-determined action.

However, the archetypal intuition of our fundamental vulnerability persists. The mythologies of many cultures concretise this intuition in various embodiments, from ubiquitous dragons, devils, and demons to the destructive Shiva or the bloodthirsty Kali. In prophecies of apocalypse, final judgments, and purgatories, fairy tales, and frightful figures of nightmares, even in literature and art, the destructive element persists, whether overtly manifested or lurking beneath the surface. Thus, innocent phobic objects, no less than other enmities, appear as proxies for something more general, namely the uncanny, the fundamental existential threat. They correspond to the urge to give shape to the amorphous, to localise it, and to specify its function and meaning. In the field of psychopathology, there is a common symptom known as “free-floating anxiety,” which, without a specific object, can attach itself to anything. Amorphous and perpetually threatening, it is experienced as more oppressive than concrete hostilities and phobias. Knowing what to guard against or how to defend oneself facilitates navigation in our world and impedes our self-confidence far less than “free-floating” anxiety.

### **Latent Enmity**

In the foregoing, we thought we had identified an irrational inclination toward hostility, which could only be ascribed to real causes upon superficial examination. Rather, we perceived that

the specific hostility, whether directed towards individuals or objects, functioned as a symbol, a representative of something more universally threatening that humans tend to fear, especially in the inscrutable. This became particularly evident in the phenomena of xenophobia and anti-Semitism, but we also identified deeper-seated insecurities in instances of bullying and gossip. The hostile reaction thus seemed to be a defense against an amorphous, unnamed peril that one somehow sensed behind the concrete object of enmity. Certainly, not everyone reacts hostilely to the unfamiliar. The self-assured may find it intriguing, while the self-doubting will soon be frightened or incited to aggression. Hostility, therefore, appears to be connected to a weakness in self-esteem.

However, there are various ways to deal with a threatened sense of self. One can timidly and fearfully withdraw or attempt to drown out one's weakness ambitiously or boastfully. Indeed, one can even derive affirmation from assisting others who are weaker. While it is inevitable that everyone will encounter hostility at some point, individuals are more likely to avoid it, seeking reconciliation. The inscrutable spares not even the timid; perhaps they experience it as particularly menacing. Yet, under what circumstances does it give rise to aggression?

Let us set aside the question of the self here, as it would lead us too far from our current problem (cf. especially Boesch 1975, 1991, 1995, 2003). Regarding aggression, however, a few remarks are warranted to counter the prevalent notion that hostility arises from an "aggression drive." While there seemingly exist naturally aggressive individuals, and people often speak of an innate propensity for violence that specifically seeks opportunities to "let off steam," the drive tension would thus be "cathartically" relieved, either through actions or violent fictions. This rationale is used to justify both aggressive displays or films and aggressive sports. It is argued that they reduce the inclination toward aggression and thereby create a peaceful — or at least more peaceful — individual. Youthful brutalities, according to this perspective, may be deviations but ultimately contribute to adaptive development. Blowing off steam is part of growing up, according to this theory, which is welcomed by some.

However, aggression is not a drive, neither in humans nor in animals. A drive pursues specific goals—hunger seeks food, mating seeks sexual satisfaction. Aggression, on the other hand, has no inherent goal but can be employed differently where deemed necessary. In other words, it is a "functional capacity," an ability to act that is available to us instrumentally, as a means, depending on the situation, rather than operating according to the internal drive dynamics of tension and discharge.

However, aggression can become autonomous. When someone repeatedly experiences that pursuing a goal aggressively is more successful than other approaches, he or she will tend to prefer doing so. Moreover, aggression increases nervous arousal, providing not only pleasure but also repressing fears. If the enjoyment of pleasure, reduction of fear, and success in action are combined with social approval, aggression can indeed be sought repeatedly, akin to an addiction — where the aggressive "kick" becomes an independent goal. Nevertheless, aggression, in itself, is not a drive to discharge, as evidenced by the inhibitory reactions that nature has evidently linked to it. In the animal kingdom, conflicts among conspecifics often proceed without bloodshed, as specific gestures from the subordinate can cause the aggressor to pause. In chimpanzees, researchers have even observed genuine reconciliation rituals (see Boesch & Boesch-Ackermann, 2000). Aggression researchers have extensively examined this learning of the aggression motive (e.g., Kornadt, 1982), and their findings suggest an implication of practical importance: Since the inclination toward aggression is learned, tolerating it does not aid in discharging it but rather fosters it. This serves as a caution for educators, judges, and politicians.

Aggression, it is asserted, emanates from frustration; however, frustration is neither objectively measurable — disappointment being a purely subjective reaction — nor is it sufficient for explanation. Some profound disappointments inhibit aggression rather than eliciting it, and intense aggressions can emerge even without discernible frustrations. Whether and how an individual acts aggressively depends less on experienced frustrations than on the situation they perceive and the goals they pursue. Consequently, aggressions manifest in various ways, depending on whether they are expressed overtly or covertly.

Indeed, as we have previously observed, there exist hostilities without visible aggressive behaviour. This can be attributed to various reasons, such as the social, material, or physical superiority of the adversary. However, aggressive behaviour is often inhibited by the polyvalent nature of the fellow human being. Our perception of a person is influenced by a myriad of experiences — of achievement, failure, temptation, conflict, happiness, or betrayal, as well as of diverse hopes or fears. All of these factors shape how we encounter the other person, making us self-assured or timid, demanding or submissive. Even feelings of guilt with roots in the past can influence our interaction.

Thus, it can indeed happen that the shadow of past hatred subtly mixes into a new infatuation or friendship. In fact, opposing experiences can make us both hate and love the same person, fear and admire them. Typically, such hostile reactions remain “hidden,” overshadowed by positive emotions. However, at times, they may reveal themselves through pronounced vulnerability, exaggerated displays of affection, ambiguously suggestive and jocular remarks, as well as quick bursts of anger or exaggerated criticism — an intricate “alchemy” of such polyvalences that is all the more challenging to decipher, as it often cleverly justifies itself.

The polyvalence of feelings also pertains to ourselves. Self-love often intertwines with self-doubt, displeasure, and occasionally even self-hatred. Psychology recognises such phenomena by various names — feelings of inferiority, guilt, hypochondria, fear of success, for instance. Ambivalences toward the self can also be concealed behind drug addiction or recklessness. The manifestations of egocentric conflict are manifold. Whenever individuals, for whatever reasons, can no longer live up to their own values, they turn critically, even hostilely, against themselves.

But here the circle closes. To reject oneself means to split oneself, namely into a self that judges itself and a non-self part of the person, so to speak, a condemned self. Living with this would contradict the profound human urge for internal consistency. Therefore, individuals attempt to suppress this ambivalence, to defuse it with rational justifications, or to externalise it, as we observed in the case of doubts about faith. Combating doubt, hatred, greed, lust, lies, and so many other things on the outside promises self-gain. It detaches the inner discomfort from oneself, transforms it into an external goal and, moreover, reveals our opposition to unworthiness to ourselves and others.

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## About the Author

**Ernst E. Boesch (1916–2014)**, was a Swiss cultural psychologist who is considered one of the founders of modern cultural psychology. He studied in Geneva under Jean Piaget, among others, and worked as a school psychologist in St. Gallen after completing his doctorate. In 1951, he accepted a professorship at Saarland University. From 1955 to 1958, he worked for UNESCO in Bangkok. He became emeritus professor in 1986. His psychological analyses were based in particular on his “Symbolic Action Theory” for which he is internationally renowned.

For an introduction and overview, see Lonner, W. J. & Hayes, S. A. (Eds.). (2007). *Discovering cultural psychology: A profile and selected readings of Ernest E. Boesch*. Information Age Publishing.