

BREAKTHROUGHS IN CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY

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BREAKTHROUGHS IN CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY

Edited by Jaan Valsiner
and Marek Tamm

TLU Press
Tallinn 2024



ACTA Universitatis Tallinnensis

Acta Universitatis Tallinnensis. Humaniora
Breakthroughs in Cultural Psychology

The editing costs of the book have been supported by the
research fund of the School of Humanities at Tallinn University

Language editing and proofreading Daniel Allen
Layout: Sirje Ratso
Maquette: Rakett

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ISSN 2228-026X
ISBN 978-9985-58-962-5

TLU Press
Narva mnt. 25
10120 Tallinn
www.tlupress.com

Printed in Estonia by Grano Digital

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS A *BREAKTHROUGH* IN A NEW FIELD?

Marek Tamm and Jaan Valsiner

Throughout human history, the evolution of ideas has not been a steady stream but rather a series of bursts and plateaus. Periods of rapid intellectual innovation often align with times of significant social upheaval. For instance, the Renaissance was a time of extraordinary artistic and scientific breakthroughs, coinciding with profound changes in religious and political structures in Europe. Similarly, the Age of Enlightenment brought about a swift advancement in philosophical thought amid the political and social changes leading up to the French Revolution.

Conversely, innovation can stagnate during prolonged periods of socio-political stability, where prevailing ideologies are preserved, and the status quo remains unchallenged. The Pax Romana, for example, was a time of relative peace and order in the Roman Empire that lasted over two hundred years. Although there were cultural and architectural achievements, there was less emphasis on radically innovative thought, as stability was prioritised. Similarly, the long reign of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) in China was marked by an adherence to traditional Confucian principles and a resistance to outside influence, leading to a slower pace of internal innovation.

These patterns suggest that the tempo of intellectual advance is frequently linked to the broader societal context. However, this dynamic is bidirectional, as Juri Lotman has pointedly noticed: landmark advancements in the realms of science and technology can themselves catalyse significant transformations in the sociocultural fabric.

A fast-moving explosive process in the field of science and technology unsettles customary ways of life, altering not only the social structure of the epoch, but its psychological structure as well. This entails various consequences, which generate typical, historically repeatable conflicts. First, new possibilities for organizing social life arise as the capacity for memory and record keeping is expanded, and with that the possibility of predicting results. Second, the potential of individual creative activity also increases. These tendencies can lead to conflict and in their final manifestations may generate either stagnation or destabilization. (Lotman 2019: 216)

The dynamism of cultural innovation embodies a dual nature, acting as both a catalyst for novel intellectual breakthroughs and a revivalist force for traditional modes of thought. This paradoxical dualism is also well captured by Lotman: “Every abrupt change in human history unleashes new forces. The paradox here lies in the fact that movement forward can stimulate the regeneration of archaic cultural models and models of consciousness, generating scientific benefits as well as epidemics of mass fear.” (Lotman 2019: 2020) This is partly connected to the element of unpredictability that breakthroughs introduce into the existing situation. In terms of semiotics, breakthroughs in science represent “cultural explosions” (Lotman 2009) that can both change the dominant disciplinary situation, but can also act as a reserve for future reorganisations of the discipline.

***Breakthrough* as a sign: Historical construction**

Let us first differentiate two kinds of breakthroughs in ideas within a discipline. First there is the *breakthrough* of a given field – an emerging branch of an existing discipline. A new sub-field emerges within the frame of an established one. Cultural psychology, the focus discipline of this volume, has been emerging within the rest of