

Description for the general public

The goal of the project is the analysis of representations of emotions generated by changes of social structure and processes of social mobility in Poland between 1944 and 1981. The interdisciplinary perspective of the project, concentrated on the topic of emotions, will allow for the analysis of social changes in post-war Poland, consequences of which are experienced till today. The analysis of a rich and diverse body of source material (not limited to a single medium, such as literature; or a single register, such as the high register or art) will lead to naming and investigating the models of experiencing upward and downward social mobility in post-war Poland. And so the project will examine the fears and hopes brought on by the end of war and the introduction of a new political system, promising upward social mobility for the masses; enthusiasm of officially sanctioned socialist-realist narratives; envy experienced while participating in labour competitions, which facilitated upward mobility of specific individuals, while drawing on the rhetoric of an advancement of the masses; resentment of groups affected by downward mobility (aristocracy and intelligentsia) and so on. The time covered by the project will span from 1944, when the Manifesto of the Polish Committee of National Liberation was proclaimed, with its promises of extensive land reform and social equality and the year 1981, when the Martial Law was introduced, the moment of the definitive crushing of hopes for an improvement of living conditions and mass upward social mobility for all classes, demanded by the “Solidarity” movement.

The processes of upward and downward social mobility are usually examined by historians and sociologists. The analysis of emotions connected with these processes will result in the uncovering of the contradictions, processuality and sometimes even impossibility of social mobility. Examined with the use of sociological tools, upward and downward social mobility make themselves visible mainly through movement (migrations, moves to a better or worse neighbourhood, or, the opposite, finding yourself stuck in the same place) and growth or decline (of economic, social, cultural capital). However, on the most basic level, upward and social mobility are experienced in the form of clusters of emotions rather than as quantifiable material and immaterial gains or losses. Social mobility is experienced – individually and collectively – as excitement, joy, fear, love, hope, resentment, anger, pride, envy, shame and pity. While immediate bodily perception – the sensation of being overwhelmed by an emotion – is an essential element of experiencing social mobility, emotions can also become a durable element of class identity, often formed by conflicting feelings, e.g. the pride of having transgressed class boundaries and simultaneous fear of being exposed as an unworthy member of the new class. The project will thus seek to examine how members of the Polish society experienced the post-war radical change of the social system as well as its long-term consequences, and how they created representations of this experience.

The project will result in the publication of a book monograph and the submission of an article to an important international journal from the field of cultural studies or anthropology. The interdisciplinary research project should prove to be of interest to a wide group of scholars, as well as the general public. The consequences of post-war changes in the social structure and the emotional formulas developed to deal with their effects operate till today. Many of these emotions – a sense of shame caused by a lower-class background, resentment stemming from downward mobility, disappointment with failed projects and promises – could and should be understood, tamed, sometimes disarmed. Understanding the emotional heritage of the 1944–1981 period should lead to the understanding of contemporary emotions present in public debates and structuring class relations.