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From Sociological Vacuum to Horror Vacui: How Stefan Nowak's Thesis Is Used in Analyses of Polish Society

Abstract: In the late 1970s, Stefan Nowak posited the existence of a sociological vacuum in Poland, and his concept became one of the most widely employed in studies of this society. The author of the present article uses an inventory of publications citing Nowak's perspective to analyse the manner in which this key concept has been implemented in sociological explanations. According to his findings, the idea appears to be most often used in accounts of the 1980s "Solidarność" movement, in reference to civil society and social capital, and in treatments of democracy in Poland. The validity of Nowak's idea is not usually questioned, and scholars referring to his thesis frequently modify the initial argument by shifting its meaning and ignoring its national identity element. Furthermore, in the analyzed works, the authors point to a sociological vacuum as an obstacle to the desired development of civil society, social capital, and democracy in Poland. This is usually done without deeper theoretical or empirical discussion, and in an essayistic and dramatized fashion. Such an anxiety about the lack of necessary ingredients in Polish society is described as horror vacui—i.e., fear of empty space.

Keywords: Sociological vacuum, Stefan Nowak, horror vacui, "Solidarność", civil society, social capital, condition of democracy.

Introduction

The existence of a sociological vacuum in Polish society—a thesis formulated by Stefan Nowak—is one of the most celebrated ideas produced by Polish sociologists. It is customarily repeated in analyses of key social phenomena like the emergence of the "Solidarność" [Solidarity] movement in the 1980s, the development of civil society, or the issue of social capital and the condition of democracy in Poland. It has also become part of journalistic analyses of Polish society and its recent history. In spite of its wide circulation, there seem to have been but few attempts (see: [Kubiak, Miszalska 2004](#); [Czeńnik 2008a](#)) to thoroughly discuss and debate Nowak's argument. This observation gave rise to the following questions: How is Nowak's thesis being used by social scientists? Is the sociological vacuum treated as fact? Is it ever measured? Is the proposition about a sociological vacuum being refined, or even amended? And if so, in what manner?

In order to answer these questions, I made an empirical base comprising all the publications citing Nowak's thesis that I could identify.¹ The resulting 179² papers

¹ Due to space limitations, I have not listed all 179 publications in the reference section, but only those to which I point directly or give as examples. The updated index of publications citing the sociological vac-

of the base made it possible to see tendencies in using the concept of a sociological vacuum. Further, it also provided valuable insights into the characteristics of social science discourse on Polish society. This study is a history of a concept embedded in the Polish context. Yet it is also a case illustrative of a broader phenomenon in the social sciences and humanities, where ideas, once articulated, start ‘lives of their own’ and are used in new and sometimes surprising circumstances.

Below, I will first introduce Nowak’s insights, and then give my objectives and the methods applied in my investigation. I present the ways in which the idea of a sociological vacuum was understood by the authors who refer to it and argue that the majority of authors treat the sociological vacuum as fact, while only a smaller part attempt to challenge Nowak’s thesis. I also draw attention to two mechanisms: the shift in meaning and the selective and partial implementation of the thesis. I further point to the most significant phenomena with which this key concept is made to converge: the ideological and structural conditions of Polish society; the “Solidarność” social movement; civil society; social capital; and democracy in Poland. On this basis I discuss the findings and conclude that a sociological vacuum is often pointed out as being an obstacle for Poland’s desired development and that it dramatizes the rather essayistic narratives of Polish society. I term this anxiety with regard to Poland’s incomplete modernization ‘horror vacui’—i.e., fear of empty space.

Stefan Nowak and his Thesis on Poland’s Sociological Vacuum

Stefan Nowak (1924–1989) was a prominent Polish sociologist of the communist era. For a considerable time he acted as head of the Chair of Methodology of Sociological Research at the University of Warsaw, and in 1976–1983 he served as president of the Polish Sociological Association. He contributed to bringing survey techniques grounded in positivist methodology into Polish sociology. He was also a leader in Warsaw sociological circles. In his empirical studies, he was mostly interested in the question of values and attitudes and their intergenerational transmission (Grabowska, Sułek 1992; Sułek 1998).

In 1979, during a session of the ‘Poland 2000’ Committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Nowak presented his ideas on the existence of a sociological vacuum in Poland.³ His argument was twice printed in Polish: first as an essay—see ‘Przekonania

uum thesis is available at: <http://mikolajpawlak.bio.uw.edu.pl/research/sociological-vacuum/bibliography-sociological-vacuum/>.

² The number of 179 citing publications is very high for Polish sociology. Nowak’s original paper, ‘*System wartości społeczeństwa polskiego*’ (1979b), is the most cited article published in Polish sociological journals.

³ This was not the first presentation of the idea. During the 5th Congress of Polish Sociologists in 1977, Nowak suggested that the ‘worrying void in our society’ should be a subject of sociological study from dynamic perspectives (Nowak 1979c). Yet it was mainly with the 1979 publications that the idea was specifically put on the table. In the two Polish papers, Nowak used the term *próżnia socjologiczna* [sociological vacuum] (1979a; 1979b); this was repeated in the English translation published in *The Polish Sociological Bulletin* (1980), but in the ulterior publication discussing the concept in English (1981) he used the term *social vacuum*. For terminological unity with the publications I analyze in Polish, I have decided to use the term ‘*sociological vacuum*’ throughout this paper.

i odczucia współczesnych' ['Beliefs and Feelings of Contemporary People'] (Nowak 1979a); and then in the leading Polish sociological journal *Studia Socjologiczne*—see 'System wartości społeczeństwa polskiego' [The Value System of Polish Society] (Nowak 1979b). As this latter is the most commonly quoted version, I will mainly use this reference for the purposes of this study. Its English translation was published in *The Polish Sociological Bulletin* (Nowak 1980); and in the year following the eruption of the "Solidarność" social movement, due to increased interest in Poland, Nowak reiterated his arguments in *Scientific American*—see 'Values and Attitudes of Polish People' (Nowak 1981). According to Nowak:

...from the point of view of people's identification and their emotional involvement there exists a kind of sociological vacuum between the level of primary groups and that of the national community. If we wished to draw a gigantic "sociogram" based on people's bonds and identifications, the social structure of our society perceived in those terms would appear as a "federation" of primary groups, families and circles of friends united in a national community, with rather insignificant other types of bonds between those two levels (Nowak 1979b: 160).

Nowak saw the vacuum as a peculiarity of Polish society. According to him 'the "objective" social structure, and even more, the institutional structure of the society, is as complex as in many other industrialized countries' (Nowak 1979b: 160). But the 'subjective' social structure, based on individuals' identifications, was distinctive from other modern societies. Nowak considered this peculiarity to be problematic: Polish society was lacking something. He explained the absence of identifications with intermediary-level institutions by positing the occurrence of alienation from these. People were not forming social groups and were not thinking about themselves in terms of 'we'.

In his essay, Nowak also made other reflections about Polish society and the moral values shared by Poles. He distinguished between the world of people and the world of institutions and pointed out that the dispersion of values in this country was almost random—there were no class or generational differences. According to Nowak, religion only played the role of a private philosophy and thus was not really capable of coalescing social groups around its institutions. Importantly, all these conclusions were drawn from surveys made in big cities—Warsaw and Kielce. Nor can the social context in which Nowak announced his thesis be forgotten. The late 1970s in Poland was a period of economic crisis and disappointment with Gierek's rule. The possibilities of conducting empirical sociological studies were very limited and researchers could not easily refine their arguments or empirically test new statements.

The sociological-vacuum thesis was formulated just before the 1980 strikes and the foundation of the "Solidarność" movement. As Nowak and his disciples were engaged in the movement, the thesis was widely discussed in this period. Bronisław Geremek (1981), for instance, then president of the commission preparing the "Solidarność" program during its first summit, invoked the vacuum as the context for building Poland as a self-governing republic. With the publication of an English version of Nowak's article, the idea also became available to the broader international community of researchers. Similar ideas about Eastern European societies were developed by other authors. The first who should be mentioned is Arthur Kornhauser, who claimed

that both western mass societies and soviet-type totalitarian ones suffered the loss of community (1960). Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan described the landscape of Eastern European civil societies as very flat and as such negatively affecting the development of political systems (1992: 132). Geoffrey Evans and Stephen Whitefield distinguished a missing-middle approach in studies of Eastern European politics, although they claimed that in Poland it did not explain the bases of party competition (1993). Finally, Richard Rose described Russia as an hour-glass society, in which on the bottom there are dense relations between individuals and on the top there is a rich political life, but links between the two are very limited (1995: 35).

Nowak's thesis circulated mainly in sociology, but there were also incursions into neighbouring social sciences. With Nowak continuing to build on this thesis in his further publications, and with the increased references by Polish authors as well as by foreign ones studying Polish society, 'this suggestive albeit controversial hypothesis was one of the few sociological ideas which became domesticated in lay sociology' (Sufek 1998: 171).

Yet, as often the case with widely quoted conceptions, which become decontextualized and depart from the initial intentions of their authors, Nowak's idea soon started having a 'life of its own'. Successful ideas become inspirations or instruments for different purposes. The sociological vacuum thesis, for instance, outlived both its author and the communist regime. In the process, however, it became so domesticated that sometimes when it is used neither of the original publications is consulted, nor is Nowak's name even mentioned. The objective of this article is therefore to analyze the adoption of the sociological vacuum thesis in the social sciences discourse about Polish society, and to explore the manner in which this is perceived to explain other social phenomena. This sociological term appears repeatedly, almost automatically, whenever a background check is run on phenomena such as the "Solidarność" movement, civil society, social capital, or the condition of democracy in Poland. Thus an analysis of its uses may give a fairly accurate representation of the sociological discourse—and to some extent also the social sciences discourse—on Poland. Notably, by discourse I mean the publications of well-known and lesser known (so-called ordinary) sociologists applying the sociological vacuum concept. Thus, my approach differs from a regular history of ideas, where it is mainly the work of the most influential authors that is being studied.

Method

Analysis of the uses of Nowak's thesis in the social sciences required an inventory of papers making reference to this concept. The first part of the data-gathering phase was to prepare a list of all the publications where at least one of Nowak's four above-mentioned discussions of a sociological vacuum is mentioned (Nowak 1979a, 1979b, 1980, 1981). At this stage, I took into account works of an academic nature: monographs published by academic publishing houses, chapters in collections published by academic publishing houses, and articles in peer-reviewed journals.

These were supplemented by ten PhD dissertations, by research reports, and by working papers published on scholarly websites. The main tool for identifying these sets of titles was the Google Scholar search engine.⁴

According to Google Scholar scores of June 2014, the four Nowak papers (1979a; 1979b; 1980; 1981) formulating or restating the sociological-vacuum idea were cited by 278 publications. Of these, 22 were inaccessible for the analysis. These were mainly publications in English and German, from the 1980s and 1990s, available only in the collections of local libraries. Thus, the proportion of missing data is 7.9 per cent, which is still an acceptable level.

The second stage in the data-gathering phase was the selection from this broader category of documents explicitly referring to a sociological vacuum. As the Nowak publications dealt with more issues than just the vacuum, it happened that they were cited in contexts of no relevance for the purposes of this paper. An initial examination permitted the selection of 142 papers for further analysis. This data base was supplemented by 37 publications referring to Nowak's thesis which were not indexed by Google Scholar but which I was able to identify by an ordinary library query. In the end, I had 179 academic publications for analysis.

During the quantitative stage of the empirical data analysis, I coded the documents according to the following heuristic categories: themes in the application of Nowak's thesis; analysis and interpretation of Nowak's thesis; and verification or falsification of Nowak's thesis. This codification allowed me to identify the main domains where the sociological vacuum idea was used, and also the types of causal reasoning with which it was linked. My quantitative analysis was followed by qualitative focus on the publications for which the idea of a sociological vacuum was a key issue. These also served as illustrations of the categories and types of reasoning I had identified. For these case studies, Nowak's thesis constituted the main conceptual frame.

Results

The 179 analyzed publications varied a great deal: from PhD dissertations and research reports to articles in collected volumes, through journal articles and monographs. In some publications the thesis is merely mentioned; in others it is analyzed

⁴ Google Scholar is a web browser research tool designed to query scientific publications. One of its functions is that it can put together a list of all the titles quoting a certain article. Although there are other bibliographic tools providing such services, I chose Google Scholar because it covers the widest range of publications and moreover it also lists works not written in English—a highly valuable aspect if one also has to search for publications in Polish. Other similar tools customarily limit their search to selected academic journals, while Google Scholar indexes books and proceedings as well. On the other hand, Google Scholar is described as a tool of limited accuracy. There were four main shortcomings that I had to keep in mind while preparing the empirical data base for this study: older publications are less likely to be indexed; while comparatively more effective in covering non-English publications, Google Scholar still has a pro-English-language bias (Mikki 2009); its software has problems with accurately recognizing bibliographic metadata (the so-called 'meta-data, mega-mess problem') (Jacsó 2012: 129); and there are constant changes in content, algorithms, and data base structure, which decrease the reliability of queries (Giustini, Boulus 2013). These shortcomings notwithstanding, Google Scholar was still able to provide the widest possible list of publications to be considered in the analysis.

but does not play a crucial role in the narrative. There are also ten publications granting a key role to Nowak's insights⁵—the sociological vacuum constitutes the main frame or source of inspiration for the whole text.

Of the 179 indexed papers, Nowak's thesis was cited in 104 publications in Polish and 68 works in English. In addition, I also analyzed five publications in German, one in Spanish and one in Slovenian. 50 publications in English, one in German, and one in Spanish were written by authors based in Poland or of Polish origins.

Of the analyzed publications, only 17 were published in the 1980s. The thesis's popularity rose markedly after the 1989 anti-communist revolution, with at least five publications per year invoking the sociological vacuum in the first half of the 1990s. The number of references to Nowak's thesis started increasing again after 2001. In the years 2005, 2008 and 2009, there were at least ten publications per year quoting Nowak's thesis. The interest in the sociological vacuum was growing perceptibly.⁶

Given that in the social sciences the boundaries between academic disciplines are rather blurred, I refrained from categorizing each publication as representing one specific discipline or the other. The majority of the works are by sociologists, but a considerable number are also by political scientists. Also represented in the publication index are human geography, political philosophy, architecture and town planning, economics, historiography, pedagogy, psychology, management studies, social anthropology, and the history of literature.

I will begin presenting my results with an explanation of how Nowak's thesis was understood by the authors referring to it. I show that this often underwent a shift in meaning or selective and partial implementation—the latter mechanisms refer to the author's avoidance of the national-identity element. Then I analyze the status ascribed to this idea—the fact that the sociological vacuum is treated as a fact of Polish society—and I show the phenomena in connection with which this vacuum is most often invoked.

The Shift in Meaning

In about three-fourths of the analyzed publications (132/179), Nowak's idea was somehow modified or reinterpreted. His argument was made in relation to individuals' identification with social groups; it depicted a 'subjective social structure' (Nowak 1979b: 160). Regardless of Nowak's intentions, many authors read the thesis as concerning the lack of middle-level structures and not as the absence of identification with these. Thus, although Nowak made a statement about the 'subjective' social structure, this was often understood as concerning the 'objective' social structure. Thus a shift in meaning seems to have occurred.

⁵ These are: Czapiński 2006; Cześniak 2008a, 2008b; Krzemiński 1992, 2013; Kubiak, Miszalska 2004; Nowak, Nowosielski 2005; Starosta 1995; Wasilewski 2006; and Wedel 1992b.

⁶ Although older publications are less likely to be indexed by Google Scholar (Mikki 2009), this result still allows us to conclude that Nowak's thesis is still being actively discussed.

In some instances, the shift appears to be the effect of a misunderstood reading, or even of a ceremonial quotation of Nowak's work. What these papers probably needed was a statement on the lack or extreme weakness of middle-level structures in Polish society: 'The notion of a "middle-range social vacuum" was coined to describe the lack of independent civic associations during the communist era' (Działek, Biernacki, Bokwa 2013: 190); the absence of social institutions or organizations (Wedel 1992b; Wasilewski 2006); communication (Lewis 1994: 264); social representations (Nowak, Nowosielski 2005: 272); social bonds (Kubiak, Miszalska 2004); trust and legitimacy (Weredyński 2007: 63); social contacts outside of the family and workplace (Andorka 1995: 127); integration—the "sociological vacuum" meaning the lack of possibilities of integration through the institutions' (Rychard 1990: 141); and social norms regulating human behaviours (anomy) (Szafraniec 2002: 453).

At other times, the shift in meaning is more intricate. The thesis is read accurately as concerning identification with social structures not the social structures themselves, but the weakness of these identifications is traced to that of the structures. Thus, the lack of identification is understood as an indicator of the feebleness of the social structures: as its outcome and sometimes even as its cause. These levels often become confused to the extent that authors writing about identifications draw conclusions with respect to the structures. Often, strong identification with social structures is assumed to be indispensable for the proper functioning of such structures. This is mostly the case for studies linking the idea of a sociological vacuum with the issue of social capital, where it is believed that identification with objects is tantamount to social integration or that lack of identification has a negative impact on social trust and, consequently, also on collective action.

It has to be stressed that the shift in meaning from a deduction based on indicators of a consciousness nature (typical of survey techniques on the state of social structures 'behind' the consciousness) seems to be taken for granted and justified in the sociological paradigm of surveys in Poland at the time the thesis was formulated. As an example we can use a short quotation from Janina Frentzel-Zagórska's article on political culture:

He [Nowak] noted that people identify strongly with small primary groups and with the Polish nation as a whole. They do not identify with ideological, class or strata or other kinds of social groups and institutions. There is a notable lack of cohesive social institutions between that of a circle of friends and the nation, though the objective social structure of Poland is as complex as that of other industrial societies (Frentzel-Zagórska 1985: 87).

The author presents Nowak's argument quite systematically and repeats his remark that the objective social structure of Polish society is similar to that of other industrial societies, yet the lack of group identification works as an indicator that cohesive institutions on the intermediary level are missing. Implicit in the understanding of cohesion or integration in this way of thinking about social structures is that they require notice by social actors. Unnoticed structures (those with which there is no identification) are less important or weaker. It needs to be emphasized that Nowak himself took the same approach to empirical data, deducing information about the state of existing structures from the opinions and attitudes of survey respondents. His

remarks about the “Solidarność” movement spontaneously filling the social vacuum (1981: 53) could even be ironically interpreted as evidence that he shifted the meaning of his own thesis himself. Thus in summary it can be said that Nowak offered an empirically grounded thesis about a vacuum at the level of identification and that in his later comments he was suggesting its validity at the level of existing structures as well.

Selective and Partial Implementation

The two pillars of Nowak’s thesis are strong identification with primary groups and strong identification with the Polish nation. The vacuum expresses the lack of identification with groups at the mezzo-level, situated between the family and the nation. The latter element—strong identification with the nation—is actually quite rarely cited, and when mentioned the focus is rather on the primary groups and the lack of identification with structures broader than the family. This issue was first observed by Cześniak (2008a: 24). I refer to this phenomenon as selective and partial implementation, meaning that the authors, when implementing Nowak’s thesis, often tend to ignore or abandon one of its constitutive elements. This kind of treatment took place in nearly half of the publications mentioning or discussing the issue of sociological vacuum (84/179). In almost all these instances (83/84), a shift in meaning is also noticeable in the narrative about Polish society, which gets increasingly dramatic, being pictured as poisoned by anomy and reduced to small, amoral family units (Kubiak, Miszalska 2004).

As with the shift in meaning, the selective and partial implementation of Nowak’s thesis (the overlooking of the national identity component, in particular) occurs in various forms. In some cases, the national identity element is simply not mentioned, while Nowak’s idea is treated as a theory about anomy, the privatization of life, or about some other manifestation of a lack of individual bonds with broader structures than those of the family or a small group of friends—‘social values are focused on the family level, and at the same time there are very weak or no civic values’ (Sulkowski 2012: 154).

At other times, however, the selective and partial implementation is purposive. Then both elements of the thesis are mentioned but authors consider the strong identification with micro-groups and the lack of other identification as being problematic. These authors are well aware that Nowak’s perspective also deals with the strong national identification, but use his arguments for analysing phenomena on the micro level. Thus, they contribute to the trend of ignoring the macro element in Nowak’s theory and consequently also fail to take into account identification with the broader community in their discussion on social integration.

The Sociological Vacuum as Fact and Attempts to Disprove Nowak’s Theory

In order to better understand the status granted to Nowak’s insight in descriptions of Polish society, I analyzed how it was treated: Do the authors who invoke the sociolog-

ical-vacuum argument take it for granted, or do they look for more theoretical and empirical evidence? The bulk of the publications (151/179) consider the sociological vacuum to be a ‘true’ fact about Polish society. It cannot escape notice that this is a ‘black-box’ or ‘quasi-axiom’ (Cześniak 2008a: 25) in regard to the Polish situation even today.

I managed to identify only 20 (20/179) publications in which authors citing Nowak’s thesis attempt to disprove it. However, with the exception of the works by Wedel (1992) and Starosta (1995) discussed below, these attempts are not actually designed to test the sociological vacuum hypothesis empirically, but to give counter-examples or cast doubt on Nowak’s assumptions. One striking result is that the majority (15/20) of the authors who challenge Nowak’s thesis do so because they have shifted its meaning and, consequently, treat it as a thesis on the lack of real structures and not on the lack of identification with structures. According to these studies, the vacuum was (or still is) filled by informal relations (Mokrzycki 1991; Rychard 1990: 141; Wedel 1990; 1992b, 1998); ‘dirty togetherness’ (Mokrzycki 2001: 145); workplaces (not as economic institutions solely, but also as social and political ones) (Federowicz 1992: 36; Kochanowicz 2004: 75; Nowak 1984: 360; Morawski 2010: 106; Rychard 2010: 449); and collective activity (Górniak 2014). All these instances of taking issue with Nowak’s thesis seem to be connected, even facilitated, by an initial reinterpretation or restatement of it. The authors give examples of existing structures whose existence is supposed to contradict Nowak’s conception. While this means that Nowak’s thesis was misinterpreted, the misinterpretations have contributed to widening the range of information about mezzo-level structures in Polish society.

The publications challenging Nowak’s (un-shifted) thesis are Starosta’s detailed deconstruction of patterns of identification (1995); Jarosław Górniak’s findings on declared identifications, which, although different from Nowak’s results, are not used to contradict the sociological-vacuum thesis—on the grounds that the differences might be due to the research tool employed (2005: 115); and Magdalena Gadomska’s claim that data on social-class identifications in Poland prove that on this kind of mezzo level there is no vacuum (1984: 144). In his discussion of Nowak’s thesis, Ireneusz Krzemiński calls for analysis of deeper structures like meta-attitudes and the desire of people to conduct their lives on the basis of moral values, which were not recognized by ‘scientific’ sociology (1992, 2013). It is interesting that only one author, Antoni Z. Kamiński, points out that identification with organized religion challenges Nowak’s thesis (Kamiński 1992: 253). As already indicated, in his original essay Nowak describes religion in Poland as mainly fulfilling private spiritual needs and not as creating a ‘we’ feeling (Nowak 1979b: 171). Still, these observations on Nowak’s thesis are fragmentary and do not occupy a central position in the papers. Thus they can hardly be treated as counter arguments, but rather as expressions of doubt or the desire to initiate discussion.

The two studies in which questioning Nowak’s thesis was the main purpose were *The Unplanned Society* edited by Wedel (1992a) and the chapter on bonds with local communities in Starosta’s book *Poza metropolią* [Outside the Metropolis] (1995). The unifying aim of Wedel’s book was to take issue with the ‘spell cast’ on Polish sociology

by Nowak's social vacuum thesis (Wedel 1992b: 10). Wedel claims that Nowak's thesis is a product of positivist methodology:

Models, rather than experience, are at work here: Nowak assumes axiomatically both the prior existence in Polish history of a classic civil society and such a society's ongoing survival in the West. [...] But Nowak goes on to observe that civil society in the rigorous sense remained lacking a generation later, and so judges his society to be guilty of vacuousness (Wedel 1992b: 10).

The research strategy applied in *The Unplanned Society* derives from the anthropological tradition: No hypotheses are being tested, while findings are expected to emerge from field research. Wedel claims that thanks to this strategy she was actually able to observe the social structures—informal networks and social circles—located in the middle, between the family and the nation (Wedel 1992b: 12). The studies in the volume document the richness of informal social organization in Poland during the 1980s. Yet on a closer look it is observable that the above-mentioned shift in meaning emerges in the process, and that Wedel adopts the sociological vacuum argument in regard to the lack of civil society, and not in regard to a lack of identification with middle-level groups.

According to Starosta's data from rural, small, and medium-sized-urban communities, there are stronger local community identifications in villages and small towns, and weaker ones in medium-size towns (Starosta 1995: 127). From this, Starosta concludes that the empty-zone thesis (Nowak's argument included) is not corroborated by empirical evidence (1995: 150). It should be mentioned here that Nowak came to his conclusion after analyzing survey data from large cities: Warsaw and Kielce. Starosta analyzed the factors correlated with local community identification thoroughly and his findings contradict the commonsense reasoning that a sociological vacuum is connected with low levels of participation. Starosta's research shows that a strong identification may sometimes be the result of a traditional adhesion to a structure (e.g., the local community), and not of the modern engagement in civil life, and that strong identification with a group is not a condition for participation in its life. Thus, Starosta's input to the discussion on the relationship between the supposed sociological vacuum and social capital is that there are different explanations for people's identification with social structures, and that some types of identification may turn out to be less facilitative of collective action than others.

Favoured Themes in the Application of Nowak's Thesis

In this section I present the social phenomena that are usually discussed when applying the sociological-vacuum argument. I begin with Nowak's insights as background information on Polish society. I move to its discussion in the context of the "Solidarność" movement and the 1980 and 1981 events in Poland. Next, I present its revitalization in relation to civil society, social capital, and the issue of democracy in Poland after the fall of communism.

The Sociological Vacuum as Background Information

In 94 publications (94/179), Nowak's thesis appears for the purpose of providing context for the main topic of the study. This often revolves around one of the two turning points in recent Polish history: the 1980–1981 rise of the “Solidarność” movement and the 1989 collapse of communism. The sociological vacuum is rarely discussed, but rather listed among other facts about Polish society. It is linked with a certain period in the narrative of this recent past—the country under communist rule before 1980 or the ‘social pre-history’ of one of the two turning points. The 1980s were a time of struggle between society and its communist rulers. In 1989 the period of transformation began. Thus, the sociological vacuum is perceived as a more or less essential impediment, and most often as a significant obstacle to political and social development. Other concepts, such as the following, were similarly treated: the ‘dimorphism of values’ and ‘social schizophrenia’ (Wnuk-Lipiński 1982), ‘amoral familism’ (Tarkowska, Tarkowski 1990), ‘dirty togetherness’ (Podgórecki 1987), ‘learned helplessness’ (Marody 1987), ‘homo sovieticus’ (Tischner 1990) and ‘civilizational incompetence’ (Sztompka 1993). The sociological vacuum is usually mentioned as a factor contributing to some kind of problematic condition or deficiency of Polish society. In publications dealing with the consolidation of democracy and the development of social capital or civil society (see the discussion below) the sociological vacuum is an inherited element which in a path-dependent manner is perceived as hindering the development of these phenomena.

The Sociological Vacuum and “Solidarność”

Nowak's thesis is intrinsically bound with the history of the “Solidarność” movement for at least three reasons. First, as it was formulated shortly before the famous August 1980 strikes, it was almost automatically added to descriptions of Polish society before this turning point. Second, some sociologists, who observed or even engaged in the social movement, needed to come to terms with the contradiction between the pessimistic bias of the thesis and an optimistic evaluation of the 1980 events in Poland. Third, Nowak himself was engaged in commenting on the evolving situation from the theoretical angle he had only just launched. In his English-language paper, ‘Values and Attitudes of Polish Society’ (1981: 53), Nowak stated that although he had not yet gathered empirical data, from his observation of everyday life he could infer that “Solidarność” was starting to fill the vacuum.

I identified 33 publications (33/179) where Nowak's thesis was brought up in relation to “Solidarność.” Two main questions stand out: How was it possible for such a large and vibrant social movement to have emerged in a society affected by a sociological vacuum? And, a closely related question: Does the appearance of “Solidarność” contradict or at least limit the applicability of Nowak's hypothesis?

The former question is related to the oft-repeated statement that Polish sociology was unable to predict the social anxiety of the times and the rise of “Solidarność.” Authors had difficulties answering this question and even Nowak suggested that the

application of regular survey methodology would be futile in explaining the 1980 events: ‘There are important concepts that are not easily measured by batteries of indicators but that nonetheless are necessary for the proper understanding of some social situations. One cannot understand the events in Poland without reference to restored human dignity’ (Nowak 1981: 53). When discussing this aspect, Marek Latoszek states that survey research on workers was mainly providing a ‘crippled’ picture, and that the grasping of social processes was only possible thanks to biographical methods (1995).⁷

In a similar vein Ireneusz Krzemiński pointed out that the survey methodology and the model of attitudes applied by Nowak was not capable of explaining the phenomenon of “Solidarność” (1992). So in order to ‘rescue’ Nowak’s general description of society Krzemiński decided to modify the model of attitudes by adding the concepts of meta-attitudes and latent cultural patterns. This modification—inspired by symbolic interactionism and psychoanalysis—of Nowak’s perspective was meant to enable an explanation of “Solidarność.” Yet Krzemiński’s rather essayistic reflections provide only general directions on how to encompass the phenomenon of a vacuum and “Solidarność” in one theoretical model.

Thus descriptions of the emergence of Solidarność that make use of the concept of a sociological vacuum are more rhetorical than explanatory in nature. “Solidarność’s” burst from out of the vacuum (Wnuk-Lipiński 1994: 16) and similar accounts depicting how the social movement filled the social void employ a metaphysical tone—the trade union is called a ‘treasure’ (Matynia 2001) or frustration is said to have turned into action (Amsterdamska 1987: 281).

For authors focusing on the absence of certain expected ingredients at the mezzo-level, the question of how “Solidarność” could appear in such conditions remains an open one. Still, when the national-identity element is also taken into account (as in Mikołaj Cześnik’s work), this is helpful in explaining the success of “Solidarność,” which was built around a strong, unifying national affection (2008a: 44).

Hence, some authors seem to be wondering whether—if “Solidarność” filled the sociological vacuum but it is difficult to explain how this happened—Nowak might have got it wrong? As I wrote about attempts to disprove the thesis, these often occur in relation to shifting its meaning. Thus authors are disproving a proposition about the lack of structures and not Nowak’s thesis per se. As far as “Solidarność” is concerned, something similar seems to have happened; it has been pointed out that the sociological vacuum argument missed the existence of the workplace as a mid-level institution in Poland—the same workshop that the trade union was later built on. On the other hand, there are also authors who note that “Solidarność” rather supports the historical nature of the thesis. Two disciples of Nowak make a point in this regard: the validity of the thesis was limited to Poland in the 1970s and the actual intention of their teacher was to provoke discussion, not to deliver universal truths about Polish society (Grabowska, Sułek 1992: 25–26).

⁷ I will not elaborate this topic here, but it seems that “Solidarność” impacted the methodology of Polish sociology by catalyzing its anti-positivistic turn.

As a theme, “Solidarność” is often made to converge with a topic Polish sociology has been stubbornly tackling since the second half of the 1980s: civil society. This term was not originally used to describe “Solidarność” *nota bene*, its program was called *Samorządna Rzeczpospolita*, [A Self-Governing Republic] (Załęski 2010). Yet, later on, the sociological vacuum, “Solidarność” and civil society were often linked in the narrative of the historical events: The 1970s belonged to the sociological vacuum, “Solidarność” appeared in 1980, and subsequently civil society started to develop in Poland.

The Sociological Vacuum and Civil Society

I found the issue of civil society in 48 publications (48/179), thus it is the topic that was most often made to converge with Nowak’s thesis. The vast majority of these papers have a strong ideological character: civil society is assumed to be valuable and its development should be supported. At the same time, the authors lament the poor condition or underdevelopment of civil society in Poland. This is usually the moment when the sociological vacuum enters the stage—this condition of Polish society is to be blamed for civil society not meeting expectations.

These publications usually link two elements: a diagnosis that civil society is underdeveloped in Poland (according to indicators of participation in formal associations) and disappointment with this state of affairs. Some titles make use of keywords such as ‘barriers’ (Bukowski, Gadowska, Polak 2008; Dzwonczyk 2003); ‘blockades’ (Szczegółka 2003); ‘non-movement’ (Nowak, Nowosielski 2005); and ‘factors limiting the development’ (Dzwonczyk 2005). Others make use of rhetorical questions: What kind of democracy do we have (Mokrzycki 2000)? What self-governing Poland? What civil society (Rymsza 2014)? From the revolution of participation to...? (Skrzypiec 2008).

The analyzed data comprises several explanations converging civil society with a sociological vacuum. Accordingly, during communism, there was a shortage of associations (the accounts which shift the meaning of Nowak’s thesis even point to their lack) and those present were controlled by an oppressive state to such an extent that identifications were simply nonexistent. Further, it is argued, this situation had such an impact on Polish society that after the fall of communism people still do not identify themselves with associations. In addition to the sociological vacuum per se, a related statement by Nowak (1979a; 1979b) on the existence of two worlds—one of people and one of institutions—is often mentioned in this context. Even when statistics are given showing an increase in the number of associations in Poland, the authors usually doubt any ‘real’ engagement with these institutions on the part of the people.

The building of civil society is a must, and its lack or fragility should be overcome—‘the task of filling the sociological vacuum in the Third Republic [of Poland] was first of all taken up by the so-called third sector’ (Dzwonczyk 2008: 83). The word ‘vacuum’ is convenient to describe and stress the absence of something needed, desirable. Thus once again, at the rhetorical level, the sociological vacuum is converged with other phenomena. In these instances, the vacuum appears to be the characteris-

tic distinguishing Polish society from ‘imagined’ Western ones. An underdeveloped, imperfect, and weak civil society troubles the authors because it is proof of Poland’s incomplete modernization. It is not my intention to belittle the analytic aspects of publications linking civil society and a sociological vacuum, but I wish to signal that they typically display a strong normative tendency.

The Sociological Vacuum and Social Capital

Though I am not discussing the meaning of the vague concept of civil society, I still found it analytically useful to distinguish it from the issue of social capital. I categorized the publications according to the terminology used by their authors, without debating the criteria they employ in their definitions. It emerged that 12 of 27 publications (12/27/179) converging a sociological vacuum with social capital also link it with civil society. There is a theoretical explanation for all this—the publications are littered with references to Putnam’s concept of social capital, which is intrinsically connected with the civil society issue (1993).

In this line of theorizing, formal associations are both the cause and the effect of the development of social capital, and their perceived weakness is a result of a sociological vacuum. Also emphasized in Putnam’s treatment of social capital is the element of trust—he used survey questions about trust as indicators of social capital. Nowak’s thesis is linked with the issue of trust in intermediary-level institutions as well—this is why we were able to observe its shift in meaning from a thesis about identities to one about trust. The low levels of social capital are traced, among other things, to a sociological vacuum: ‘Poles suffer from such a lasting predisposition to distrust and atrophy of the capabilities to cooperate’ (Chumiński 2011: 124).

Putnam differentiated between bridging and bonding forms of social capital (2000). The former are mainly evaluated positively, while the latter are also discussed in relation to their negative consequences. The sociological vacuum is used as a proof of strong bonding capital (identification with the family and friendship-based groups) and of weak bridging capital (lack of identification with intermediary, especially formal, organizations or groups). This state of affairs has been labelled ‘worrying’ (Frąckiewicz 2012: 143). Katarzyna Lasinska refers to Poland as the Southern Italy of Central Eastern Europe (2013) and Janusz Czapiński calls it a state without a society (2006). He observes with disappointment that the sociological vacuum has not been filled since the 1970s. In his opinion, a vacuum means there is no civil society in Poland. In order to support his argument, he refers to findings from the *Diagnoza społeczna* (Social Diagnosis, a research project carried out in the years 2000–2013 in order to study the quality of life in Poland) on low levels of engagement in civil life, generalized trust, and social capital in Poland. These low levels and lack of ‘society’ are presented as a problem, hence the author’s conviction that the vacuum should be filled. Czapiński’s treatment of social capital and civil society is of a normative character. The thesis on the sociological vacuum fits the dramatic tone of Czapiński’s article.

Similar tones are heard in Anna Kubiak and Anita Miszalska’s article, ‘Czy nowa próżnia społeczna, czyli o stanie więzi społecznej w III RP’ [A New Social Vacuum, on

the Nature of Social Bonds in the Third Republic of Poland] (2004), which attempts to revisit the sociological-vacuum concept by investigating the nature of social bonds. The authors compress several statements on Polish society under the name of the sociological vacuum—shifting the original meaning and implementing it selectively—and treat it as a general claim about social atomization and a deficit of horizontal bonds (Kubiak, Miszalska 2004: 19). The data is treated rather selectively and the argument is exaggerated in order to dramatize the picture drawn. The sociological-vacuum thesis is the leading metaphor used to describe a situation perceived as unfavourable, but other terms are also applied in a buzzword manner—‘dirty togetherness’ and ‘amoral familism’ being a case in point. Kubiak and Miszalska’s article is a very interesting example of a dramatized sociological narrative on the condition of Polish society.

The selective and partial implementation of Nowak’s thesis—the ignorance of the national identification element that I mentioned earlier—is quite visible. There is no hint that the common strong identification with the broader imagined community might be a possible ingredient of social capital, or even a ground for bridging capital. The understanding of the thesis is restricted to the aspect that something is lacking and this is used to strengthen the narrative in regard to the ‘worrisome’ problem.

The social capital vocabulary also pertains to social bonds—thus, to the very framework of Nowak’s thesis. Putnam’s highly normative theory promotes a positive evaluation of societal integration, so low levels of social capital are dramatized in the publications. In a similar vein to the civil society issue, authors perceive social capital to be a missing ingredient in Polish society—a problem that should somehow be resolved. Social capital is seen as a source of economic wealth, psychological well-being, and a stable democracy. To put it bluntly, it is something good and the absence of something good must be bad.

The Sociological Vacuum and Democracy

The idea of a sociological vacuum is converged with the issue of democracy in Poland in 21 of the publications (21/179). Close to half of these (12/21) also consider the civil society question, which is perceived as an important element of democratic processes. Weak civil society (the effect of a sociological vacuum) is seen as an obstacle to the proper development of democracy in this country. The sociological vacuum is also connected with the process of building a party system. Mirosława Grabowska, for instance, calls attention to the vacuum as a condition of emerging party electorates which needed to be ‘glued’ together by political entrepreneurs (2004: 163). Hieronim Kubiak explicates the weakness of the party system by the fact that people do not identify themselves with political parties—thus, again, the sociological vacuum mechanism appears (1999). Further, Andrzej Zybertowicz points out that there is no proper social control and regulation in conditions of a sociological vacuum, and therefore Polish democracy is open to abuse by anti-development forces (2009).

In these accounts, the sociological vacuum is either mentioned when providing some background information on the state of social affairs (see section The sociological vacuum as background information) or is converged with the low level of

democracy's development via the underdevelopment of civil society (see section The sociological vacuum and civil society). Thus, overall, the vacuum is perceived to have a negative impact on democracy in Poland. The publications of Jacek Wasilewski (2006) and Mikołaj Cześniak (2008a; 2008b) are illustrative in this regard. The former finds inspiration for coining 'the political vacuum' notion in the sociological vacuum concept. The 'political vacuum' signifies the lack of communication between the political elites and the masses, which is caused by the weakness of political life on the local level (2006).

The latter sociologist, on the other hand, argues that linking the sociological vacuum with the quality of democracy has neither theoretical (2008a) nor empirical (2008b) basis. Cześniak first analyzes what is state of the art in democracy research and points out that in the most influential conceptions of democracy there is no indication that a low level of identification with mezzo-structures has a negative impact on the quality of democracy. Although it might seem paradoxical, too strong an identification with intermediary structures (such as a region or social class) might even prove jeopardizing for the democratic process and disruptive for states where macro-level identities have to compete with mezzo-level ones (Cześniak 2008a: 32). In addition to his review of theory, Cześniak also tests the hypothesis on the correlation between the indexes of the quality of democracy and the existence of a sociological vacuum (2008b). Accordingly, there is no empirical evidence suggesting that the existence of intermediary-level identifications has a positive impact on the quality of democracy. Examples of countries that indicate the presence of a sociological vacuum but also of efficient democracy can be given (i.e., Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon ones), as well as countries with strong mezzo-level identifications yet a low index of the quality of democracy (2008b: 21). Another empirical finding of interest for the purposes of this paper is that there are countries with lower levels of intermediary identifications than Poland. This challenges the perception of a sociological vacuum as a Polish peculiarity (Cześniak 2008b: 22). Cześniak's theoretical refinement and empirical testing of the sociological vacuum are important for the debate. He is the only scholar to have undertaken to analyze the thesis in the comparative perspective. He accomplishes the analysis in two ways: by confronting Nowak's thesis with current theories of democracy, and by comparing empirical data from different countries. Cześniak also follows the elements of the thesis scrupulously—no shift in meaning or selective or partial implementation occurs.

Discussion

The majority of the publications (151/179) treat Nowak's thesis as fact, with the result that its propositions and methodology are not really analyzed or called into question. At most, there is an expected time and duration of the phenomenon—for some authors the vacuum was filled by the "Solidarność" movement, while for others it persists even today. As indicated by the above analysis, when a thesis receives such treatment, reinterpretation of the original occurs, either by a shift in meaning or by selective or partial

implementation (with the national-identity element usually being avoided). The sociological-vacuum concept becomes a black box and is almost taken for granted in descriptions of Polish society and explanations of important social processes in Poland.

Such causal accounts where the sociological vacuum is treated as an independent variable are rarely supported by empirical evidence. Its effect on social capital, civil society, or the quality of democracy is usually backed only by rhetorical arguments. It seems that the *post hoc* fallacy is committed—the perceived post-communist deficiencies in the quality of democracy and low levels of social capital occurred after the sociological vacuum, therefore because of the sociological vacuum.

In some cases the reason lies in the nature of the citation. In many of the publications analyzed, the thesis does not play a central role. The sociological vacuum is just mentioned and placed in the background or listed as a source of inspiration. The impression is often of theoretical name-dropping and ceremonial citation. As the sociological vacuum is considered a reified characteristic of Polish society, reference to it has also come to be taken for granted.

I consider that the genre of publication also plays an important role here. The works in which the concept of a sociological vacuum plays a key role—on “Solidarność” (Krzemiński 1992, 2013), the nature of social bonds (Kubiak, Miszalska 2004), the social non-movement (Nowak, Nowosielski 2005), and the state without society (Czapiński 2006)—are in fact sociological essays; and the contributions on social circles (Wedel 1992b) and the political vacuum (Wasilewski 2006) are introductions to collected volumes. These are not research articles, and by implication the authors are ‘allowed to say more’ without rigorous empirical evidence and to draw conclusions in a speculative manner. In contrast, the papers on local communities (Starosta 1995) and the quality of democracy (Cześniak 2008a; 2008b) are embedded in theoretical argumentation and empirical data analysis. These latter aim to show that Nowak’s insights, and the potential convergence of the sociological vacuum with other social phenomena, are much more complex than they appear to be.

Regarding the sociological essays, another feature of these is that they often overstate in order to make a point. As a matter of fact, Nowak’s original paper was, as he also stressed, an essay (1979b: 155). As I have documented in my analysis of the publications mentioning and discussing the idea of a sociological vacuum, this often occurs in dramatized narratives on the state of social affairs in Poland. The sociological vacuum—already a term with emotional connotations—is placed with other, similarly strong concepts: dimorphism of values, social schizophrenia, amoral familism, dirty togetherness, homo sovieticus, social non-movement, civilizational incompetence, etc. As with Nowak’s idea, these notions had analytical and conceptual potential. Yet their insertion as buzzwords has done little to advance the sociological understanding of empirical reality, and more to increase the dramatic tone of the discourse and, in the long run, even to devalue the concepts.

These findings prompt the following question: Isn’t there too much dramatization in the sociological discourse on Polish society? To paraphrase Antoni Sułek—who took issue with so-called ‘oral sociology’, i.e., the materialization of analyses on Polish society not as printed texts, but rather as conference or seminar presentations (1987)—

perhaps there is now a need to raise objections about essayistic sociology after all? Sociology in Poland is currently no longer hindered by a lack of printed publications, but by the use of over-dramatized narratives and of a too speculative dealing with concepts and research findings. As a result, our sociological knowledge of Polish society is exaggerated and even untrustworthy.

The sociological vacuum is invoked (after the above-mentioned terms) to account for obstacles to the development of civil society, high levels of social capital, or consolidated democracy. In connection with the rhetoric of development programs in Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s, Albert O. Hirschman noticed that very often the absence of certain ingredients, which are allegedly present in developed countries, is treated as an obstacle to change in the intended direction or as an explanation for the failure of development (1971). These elements and preconditions could be entrepreneurial (preferably Protestant), cultural, financial, or institutional (such as the accumulation of capital), organizational (such as an efficient and honest civil service), etc. Hirschman showed that, often, the seriousness and credibility as obstacle of the absence of one of these preconditions is a matter of perception, and that these necessary ingredients are not well understood and are taken out of their initial complex context (1971: 312–313).

Similarly, the sociological vacuum is pointed out as one of the obstacles to the development of civil society, social capital, and democracy in Poland. In these rhetorical explanations, the lack of something (be it vibrant and authentic associations or high levels of bridging social capital and political culture) is seen as an impediment to the desired state of affairs. The term ‘vacuum’ serves to express the problem of a deficiency of these preconditions very well, especially when its meaning is shifted. The shift strengthens the dramatization of narratives about obstacles, as does a selective and partial implementation of the thesis, with an avoidance of the national identity element in particular.

But it is not only a matter of the authors I have analyzed here. Nowak himself found the sociological vacuum troubling: a vacuum requires filling. Only a few authors question Nowak and attempt to provide evidence of what—such as local community identifications (Starosta 1995) or social circles (Wedel 1992)—fills the vacuum. The bulk of the authors who treat the vacuum as fact and as an obstacle to development point to what should fill it.

I call this anxiety caused by the lack of something in Polish society ‘horror vacui’. The term designates fear of empty space, which causes anxiety and calls to be covered with details. In visual arts, horror vacui is used to describe the technique of filling empty spaces of paintings or other surfaces with small elements—this sometimes takes the form of an abstract geometrical decoration or a detailed background full of all kinds of objects and characters. In visual art, horror vacui may be found in the arabesque of Islamic art or in archaic Greek pottery. It is also associated with mentally unstable artists who are disturbed by empty surfaces and feel an obsessive urge to cover them. By way of analogy, this fear of empty space also seems to be present in studies of Polish society, which are troubled by the alleged sociological vacuum. When it is realized that the vacuum has not been filled by civil society, social capital,

or consolidated democracy, this causes anxiety and the authors declare what should be there, where the vacuum is.

Certainly, it is just an intuition that Polish sociology suffers from horror vacui, maybe even an exaggerated one. Still, I propose to use this metaphor in order to raise for discussion the anxiety perceptible in the works of many authors, who, in their pessimism, seem to overstate the condition of Polish society. The concept coined by Nowak has somehow been built into all this anxiety, yet it has involved overlooking the strong national-identification element of the theory—which happens, on the other hand, to be an element very much present in Polish society. Thus Nowak's thesis was successful because it attracted authors' attention, even though it focused this attention on what is lacking rather than on what is present. But it was also unsuccessful because the feedback occurred in relation only to some of its aspects. Among the publications I analyzed, Cześniak's texts (2008a; 2008b) were the only ones to point to possible positive consequences for the quality of democracy from this particular element of Nowak's thesis. No other author mentioned it as a potentially positive ground for the emergence of bridging social capital or as a possibly facilitative context for the development of civil society.

Horror vacui is linked with the perception of Polish society as incompletely modern. Without comparative data, Nowak made a comparison and stated, in his original paper, that the existence of a sociological vacuum is a peculiarity of Polish society (while the objective social structure of the society is similar to other industrialized ones) (1979b: 160). As Wedel commented, Nowak was using a theoretical model and searching for it in empirical reality (1992b: 10). The concept of a sociological vacuum has been used in studies of Polish society because it helps to highlight this peculiar incompleteness. Yet Polish society seems to be incompletely modern less in comparison to other societies and more in relation to the model of a modern society that it projects and sets for itself. In this sense, horror vacui is a symptom of a normative approach in which 'how the things are' is confused with 'how things should be'.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have investigated the uses of Nowak's insights with regard to the sociological vacuum in treatments of Polish society. I have analyzed an index of 179 works by well-known and lesser known authors applying the sociological-vacuum notion. What I found was that Nowak's thesis is usually reinterpreted and uncoupled from its empirical justification: in three-fourths of the analyzed publications, its meaning is shifted from a theory on identification to a framework for the objects of identification; in around half of the publications the national-identity element of the thesis is not taken into account. In this selective and partial implementation, macro-identities are considered very little, either with regard to possible positive or negative aspects. Thus Nowak's thesis is actually more often discussed in its shifted version than in its original one. In the great majority of publications the sociological vacuum is treated as a fact about Polish society (at least, Polish society of the 1970s).

Furthermore, the thesis often appears as background for an analysis. It is most often recalled in relation to the emergence of the “Solidarność” movement (33/179), the development of civil society (48/179), social capital (27/179), and democracy (21/179) in Poland. In the few publications in which the sociological vacuum thesis is confronted with a wider theoretical context its convergence with other phenomena is called into question and presented as less evident. Yet in the bulk of publications the sociological vacuum is treated as a causal factor for the underdevelopment of civil society, for low levels of social capital, and the deficiencies of democracy. This occurs in dramatized narratives of an often essayistic character in which the sociological vacuum is treated as an obstacle for the achievement of a desired state of affairs. I have borrowed the horror vacui notion from the visual arts in order to depict the anxiety caused by the lack of something at the intermediary level of Poland’s social structure. It seems that this horror vacui may account for the social sciences’ production of an exaggerated picture of Polish society.

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