

# From Sociological Vacuum to Horror Vacui

The History of the Mezzo Level Question in Polish Sociology

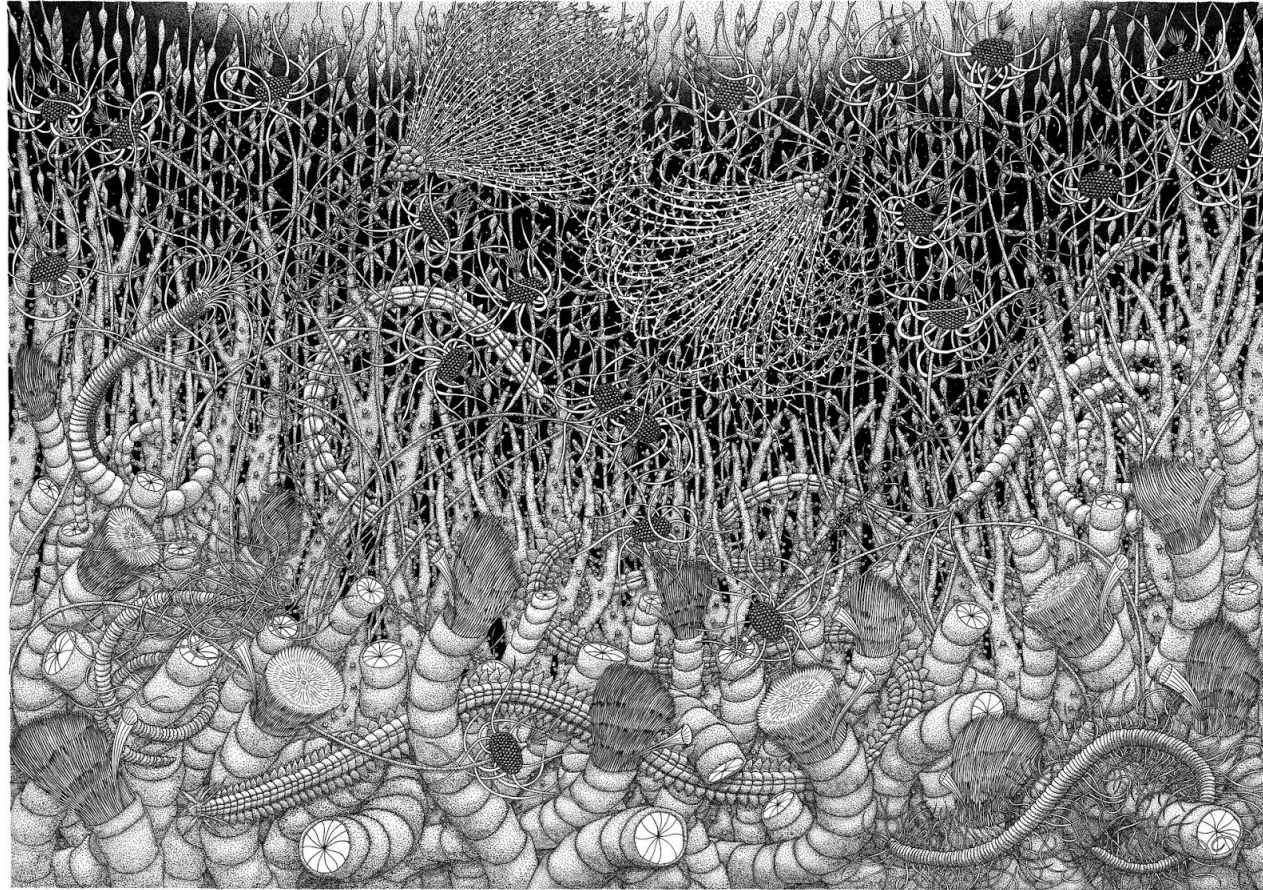
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# Structure of the presentation

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# Stefan Nowak and his thesis

„from the point of view of people’s identification and their emotional involvement there exist 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 [..] In actuality, of course, the objective social structure of Poland is as complex as that of other industrial societies.” (Nowak 1979b: 160).

“this suggestive albeit controversial hypothesis was one of the few sociological ideas which became domesticated in lay sociology” (Sulek 1998: 171).





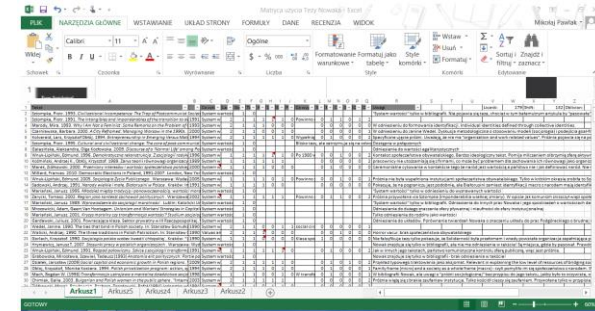
# Purpose of the study

- To provide a representation of sociological discourse on Poland.
- To see the picture of Polish society painted not only by well-known sociologists but also by so called ordinary sociologists applying the sociological vacuum concept.
- To disenchant a spell casted by Stefan Nowak on Polish sociology (Wedel 1992b: 10).



# Research design

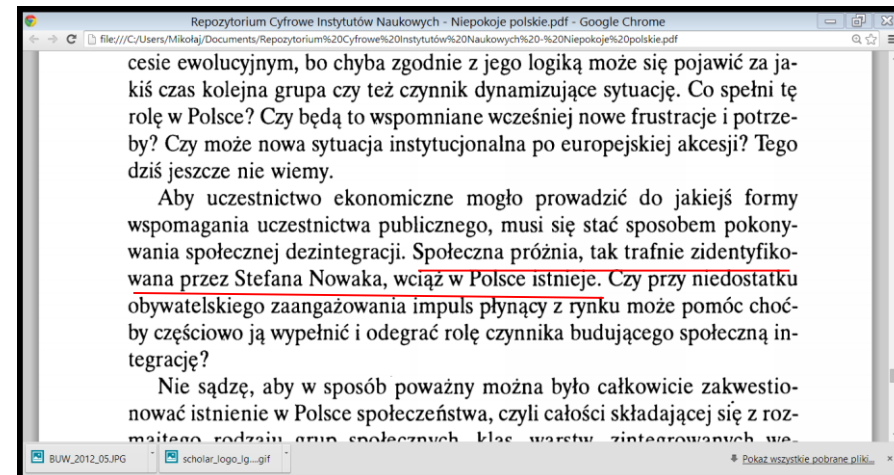
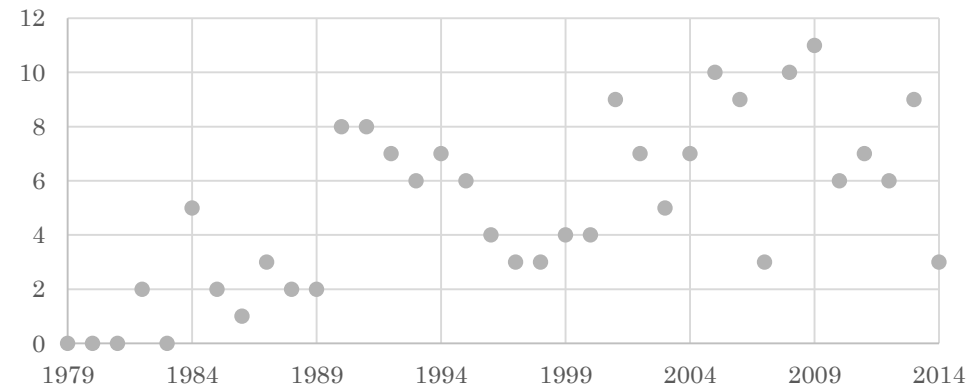
1. Selection of **278** scientific publications, where at least one of the the four Nowak's publications (1979a, 1979b, 1980, 1981) discussing sociological vacuum is cited. The main tool applied in the identification of these set of titles was Google Scholar engine. 22 documents were not available – the proportion of missing data is 7.9%.
2. Selection of **142** documents explicitly referring to sociological vacuum.
3. Supplemeting the selected set of documents by **37** publications identified during regular library query.
4. The final data set containing of **179** scientific publications of various type (books published by academic publishing houses, chapters in edited volumes, articles in peer-reviewed journals, PhD dissertations, research reports and working papers published on scholarly websites) was coded according to the following heuristic categories: themes of application of Nowak's thesis; analysis and interpretation of Nowak's thesis; verification or falsification of Nowak's thesis.
5. Qualitative zooming in on publications for which sociological vacuum was a key issue.



# General description of the data

- Languages of publications: 104 Polish, 68 English, 5 German, 1 Spanish, 1 Slovenian.
- Scientific disciplines: sociology, political science, human geography, political philosophy, architecture and town planning, economics, historiography, pedagogics, psychology, management studies, social anthropology, history of literature.
- Shift in meaning & selective implementation.
- Sociological vacuum existence in Poland treated as a true fact about Polish society (151/179).
- Themes: background information on Polish society (94); Solidarność (33); civil society (48); social capital (27); the issue of democracy (21).

Dates of Publications Citing Nowak's Thesis



# Common reconfigurations

Shift in meaning (132/179)



Selective implementation (84/179)

- The statement on the lack of identifications on the intermediary level („subjective” social structure) is read as a statement on the lack or weakness of structures on the intermediary level („objective” social structure):
  - Lack of: independent civic associations (Działek, Biernacki, Bokwa 2013: 190); 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 (Andorka 1995: 127); integration (Rychard 1990: 141); social norms (Szafraniec 2002: 453).
  - Lack of identifications is understood as an indicator of social structures feebleness, as its outcome and sometimes even as its cause.
- When discussing the thesis its (macro) element about strong identifications with Polish nation is ignored.
- In consequence the statement on the lack of intermediary level identifications is transformed into the statement on the lack of structures outside the family (and other primary groups).



# Sociological vacuum as a background information on Polish society



- Thesis on sociological vacuum appears while giving the context for the main topic of the study. This often revolves around one of the two turning points in Polish recent history: the 1980-81 rise of *Solidarność* social movement and the 1989 collapse of communism.
- Sociological vacuum is mentioned next to the following characteristics of Polish society: “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).



# Sociological vacuum and Solidarność

- How was it possible for such a large and vivid social movement to have emerged in a society affected by sociological vacuum?
- Did the appearance of *Solidarność* falsify or at least limit the applicability area of Nowak's thesis?

**ŻĄDANIA STRAJKUJĄCYCH ZAŁÓG**  
ZAKŁADÓW PRACY, PRZEDSIĘBIORSTW REPREZENTOWANYCH PRZEZ MIĘDZYZAKŁADOWY KOMITET STRAJKOWY. MKS REPREZENTUJE ZAŁOGI I INSTYTUCJE, KTÓRYCH FUNKCJONOWANIE JEST NIEZBĘDNE SPOŁECZNIE. KOMITET OWY MA NA CELU DOPROWADZIĆ DO ROZMÓW, KTÓRE SPEŁNIA OCZEKIWANIA STRAJKUJĄCYCH ZAŁÓG. JEDNYM Z PIERWSZYCH WARUNKÓW ROZPOCZĘCIA ROZMÓW JEST ODBIORCOWANIE PRACOWNIÓW. ŻĄDANIA TE SĄ NASTĘPUJĄCE: [BILANZ zmian w 1970-1976]

1. AKCEPTACJA NIEZALEŻNYCH OD PARTII I PRACODAWCÓW WOLNYCH ZWIĄZKÓW ZAWODOWYCH KASALA KRAJOWEJ KONWENCJI NR 87 NIEZALEŻNYCH ORGANIZACJI PRACY.
2. ZAGWARANTOWANIE PRAW DO STRAJKU ORAZ BEZPIECZEŃSTWA STRAJKUJĄCYCH ORAZ CIĘŻARÓW WSPÓŁCZASYNYM.
3. PRZESTRZEGANIE ZAGWARANTOWAŃ W KONSTYTUCJI PKL, WOLNOŚĆ SŁOWA, DRUKU I PUBLIKACJI, A TĄ SAMĄ NIE REPRZESKTOWAĆ NIEZALEŻNYCH WYDAWNICTW ORAZ UDOSTĘPNIĆ ŚRODKI MASOWE GO PRZEKAZU DLA WSZYSTKICH WYZNAŃ.
4. PRZYWRÓCIE DO POPRZEDNICH PRAW.
5. PODAĆ W ŚRODKACH PRZECIEŻU INFORMACJE O WYMIERZENIU SIĘ MKS-u, NADPISUJĄC JEJ ŻADANIA.
6. PODAĆ REALNE DZIAŁANIA W CELU WYPROWADZENIA NAS Z SYTUACJI KRYZYSOWEJ PRZEZ ZŁOŻENIE PUBLIKACJI INFORM. O SYTUACJI SPOŁ-GOSPODUMIENIENIE WYSTĘPIĆ O UDOSTĘPNIENIE W DOKŁADZIE NAD REFORMY.
7. WYPŁACIĆ WSZYSTKIM STRAJKUJĄCYM WYWAGRODZENIE ZA OKRES STRAJKU JAK ZA URLOP, WYPOCZYNKOWY Z FUNDUSZU CENTRALNEJ RADY ZWIĄZKÓW ZAWODOWYCH.



# Sociological vacuum and civil society

- The majority of publications linking sociological vacuum and civil society have a strong ideological character and normative tendency: civil society is assumed as something worthy and its development should be supported.
- Sociological vacuum is to be blamed for civil society not meeting the expectations of scholars.
- The word “vacuum” is convenient to describe and stress the absence of something needed, desirable. It appears as the characteristic distinguishing Polish society from the “imagined” Western ones. An underdeveloped, imperfect and weak civil society troubles the authors because it is a proof of the incomplete modernization of Poland.
- barriers (Bukowski, Gadowska, Polak 2008; Dzwonczyk 2003);
- blockades (Szczegół 2003);
- non-movement (Nowak, Nowosielski 2005);
- factors limiting the development (Dzwonczyk 2005);
- 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).

# Sociological vacuum and social capital

- Prevailing Putnamian understanding of social capital as a property of collectives rather than of individuals.
- The sociological vacuum is used as a proof of strong bonding capital (identifications with families and friendship-based groups) and of weak bridging capital (lack of identifications with intermediary, especially formal organizations, groups).
- low levels of social capital are presented in dramatized manner.
- Poland a state without society (Czapiński 2006);
- Poland a Southern Italy of Central-Eastern Europe (Lasinska 2013).

# Sociological vacuum and democracy

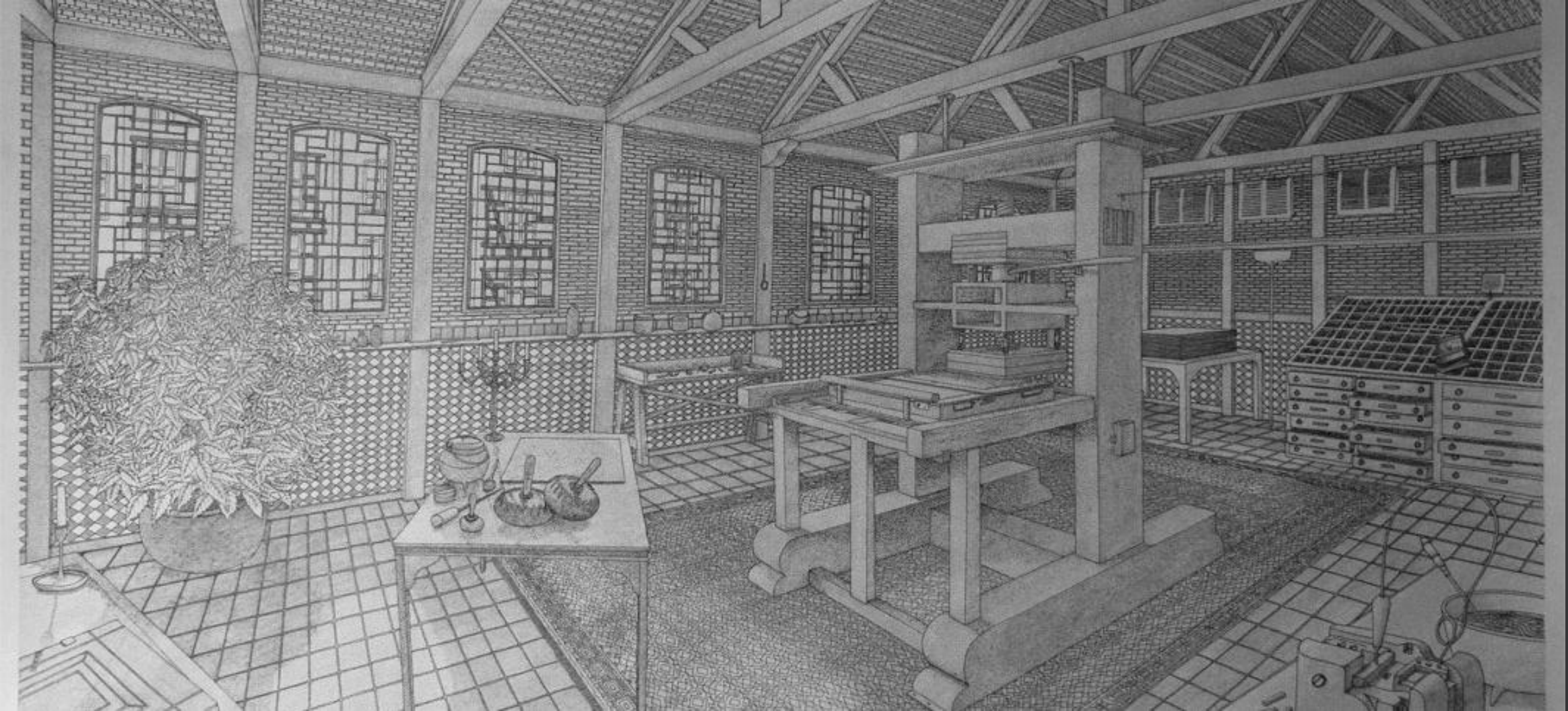
- Weakness of the party system caused by low levels of identifications with parties – consequence of sociological vacuum (Kubiak 1999).
- Sociological vacuum as a condition of emerging party electorates which needed to be “glued” by political entrepreneurs (Grabowska 2004: 163).
- Political vacuum - lack of communication between political elites and masses, that is caused by the weakness of political life on the local level (Wasilewski 2006).
- Lack of proper social control and regulation in conditions of sociological vacuum, so the Polish democracy is open to abuse by anti-development forces (Zybertowicz 2009).
- Too strong identifications with intermediary structures (like regions or social classes) might even prove jeopardizing for the democratic process and disruptive for the states where the macro-level identities have to compete with the mezzo-level ones (Czeńnik 2008a: 32).
- There is no empirical evidence suggesting the positive impact of the existence of intermediary level identifications on the quality of democracy. Examples of countries which are indicative of sociological vacuum, but of also efficient democracy can be given (i.e. Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon ones), along with countries with strong mezzo-level identifications, yet low index of quality of democracy (Czeńnik 2008b: 21).



# Horror vacui

- *Post hoc* fallacy: the postcommunist observable deficiencies occurred after the sociological vacuum, therefore because of the sociological vacuum.
- Preveil of an essay as a genre: dramatized narratives on the state of social affairs in Poland. Because of too speculative dealing with concepts and research findings the sociological knowledge of Polish society is exaggerated.
- Rhetorics of obstacles (Hirschman 1971): sociological vacuum is pointed out as one of the obstacles to the development of civil society, social capital and democracy in Poland.
- Polish society seems to be incompletely modern less in comparison to other societies, and more in relation to the model of the modern society 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 mixed with how the things should be.





# Thank you for your attention!

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