Tying Micro and Macro

STUDIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES, PHILOSOPHY AND HISTORY OF IDEAS

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Tying Micro and Macro

What Fills up the Sociological Vacuum?

PETER LANG

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Introduction

The concept of the sociological vacuum was coined by the prominent Polish sociologist, Stefan Nowak (1979a; 1979b), by the end of Gierek's era, in the 1970s. It expresses the idea that although Polish people are bonded with their families and close circles of friends on the level of primary groups, as well as with their national community, they have no significant bonds with other structures existing between those two levels. The thesis was stated in a pessimistic tone and to this day continues to occupy the minds of Polish sociologists (Pawlak 2015) who use it to explain negatively evaluated social phenomena. The thesis on the sociological vacuum has undoubtedly a very strong status in Polish sociology and is treated as a certainty or quasi-axiom (Cześnik 2008a). I, however, believe it is always worth to question influential ideas; and indeed – after a closer inspection of the thesis itself, or of the narratives applying it to explain other phenomena, one can see its theoretical inconsistences, which are often covered with persuasive rhetoric. The present book belongs to the school of critical sociology defined by Michael Burawoy (2005: 10) as examining "the foundations – both the explicit and the implicit, both normative and descriptive – of the research programs of professional sociology." The main claim this book makes is that the misuses of the thesis on the sociological vacuum are caused by the under-theorization of the links between the micro- and macro-levels of analysis; the book's objective is to refute the claim that the sociological vacuum is relevant for major social processes occurring in Poland.

The term "sociological vacuum" is in a way misleading. The idea can be better expressed through the term "social vacuum," because the intention of its author was to describe the lack of something in the society, which is the reason why literature dealing with Nowak's thesis uses both of these forms. Ironically, however, the term "sociological vacuum" is – although not in the sense that it was originally intended – accurate too: the vacuum in society is perceived because of the vacuum in sociological theory, which does not see the links between the micro- and macro-levels of analysis. Documenting the way in which the theoretical framing of the issue consequently produces artifacts is yet another objective of this book.

In my claims about the problems with theoretical framings of important processes present in Poland, I do not simply call for more nuance, which has recently been criticized by Kieran Healy (2017), provocatively calling to "fuck nuance" in sociological theory. I do not claim that the thesis needs more complex theoretical elements or that it should be confronted with a very detailed empirical analysis. I agree that the thesis on the sociological vacuum is very interesting – in a sense,

it brings attention and triggers other researchers to work on it. At the same time, however, I track how it is grounded in theory and how it fails when used to explain phenomena. In my opinion, the problem lies in the under-theorization of the micro-macro link between the levels of analysis. This is why the story of the sociological vacuum is presented in the context of important sociological debate on micro and macro.

The discussion of the current state of the micro-macro issue in sociological theory is an equally important objective of this book. The book may therefore be read in two ways: (1) as a book about the development and reconciliation of micro-macro dualism in theory, illustrated with the case of Polish sociology preoccupied with a thesis on the sociological vacuum; (2) as a book about the thesis on the sociological vacuum analyzed from the perspective of the micro-macro problem. Since the 1980s debate on micro-macro dualism, there have been no new summaries of this debate published. This book contributes to the sociological theory by presenting new developments in this area and by integrating the theory of social fields and social network analysis into the body of micro-macro literature.

The linking of micro- and macro-levels of analysis is not an easy task. Finding relations between what is micro (connections between individuals, small groups, interactions, relations, and situations) and macro (social classes, states, nations, and societies) is key for the development of comprehensive theory. Especially the social field and social network perspectives build on theoretical and empirical elements which are not easily noticeable. The social field as a level of analysis and the salience of various social ties constituting social networks are counterintuitive both for social actors and for sociologists. Their theoretical understanding is possible thanks to the conceptualization of the links between micro and macro. In this book, I attempt at tying micro and macro in order to bring a new contribution to sociological theory. At the same time, I show the usefulness of these theoretical accounts on the example of the sociological vacuum problem.

The subtitle of the book is the question: "What Fills up the Sociological Vacuum?" It has been raised by a number of sociologists, who suggested their answers; these, however, have been only of an allegorical character. I, too, am not going to provide the ultimate answer. Instead, I use the question as an opportunity or a pretext to play with various possible theoretical approaches and try to see what was so far described as an empty space. Therefore, in this book, the narratives about the micro-macro issue and about the sociological vacuum are mutually feeding each other. By the same token, by discussing the micro-macro issue and the sociological vacuum in one volume, I am able to make the claim that the debate on the sociological vacuum – which, as a crucial concern of

Polish sociologists since the late 1970s, might seem as a very local problem – is, in fact, a quite universal tension in the development of the discipline worldwide.

I was trained as a sociologist at the University of Warsaw by the disciples of Stefan Nowak, who worked there from 1972 to 1989 as the head of the Chair of Methodology of Sociological Research. For this reason, I can proudly define myself as his intellectual grandson. In the environment of the University of Warsaw, the legacy of Nowak is very important: the main auditorium has been named after him, the methodological award granted by Institute of Sociology carries his name as well and, finally, the course in methodology is recognized as key for sociological education. I did not have a chance to meet Stefan Nowak in person because he passed away when I was a child, but I guess that he must have had a certain charisma which one cannot simply sense when reading his publications. In this context, the interest in the thesis on the sociological vacuum came to me as something natural, although I am not able to recall the exact moment when this happened. My first theoretical problems with the sociological vacuum started when I was reviewing literature inspired by new institutionalism on the post-communist transformation in Poland. To my surprise, scholars were not applying the category of the organizational field, which is located on the intermediary level of analysis and is an important part of new institutional theoretical toolkit. On the contrary – the analysts of Polish transformation were often recalling the thesis on the sociological vacuum and lamenting on the void on the meso-level (Pawlak 2013). The sociological vacuum was appearing nearly in all of the publications I was studying, not because of my interest in it, but because of the objective of reviewing the works on transformation that I had. Some time later, I had the opportunity to read the famous paper by Mark Granovetter (1973), "Strength of Weak Ties," which turned out to be an eye-opening experience. I realized that the sociological vacuum actually might be filled-up with something that Stefan Nowak and other scholars were unable to perceive. At this point, I decided that the sociological vacuum thesis needed to be reinterpreted and confronted with theoretical accounts which problematize structures which are not easily noticeable.

This book is an effect of applying manifold research approaches. First, I decided that I did not only want to discuss the thesis as formulated by Stefan Nowak, but also as it was used by other scholars. The first step was therefore to study all works which cited the thesis. The method of acquiring the literature and the results of its analysis are presented in my paper entitled "From Sociological Vacuum to Horror Vacui" (Pawlak 2015). The thesis on the sociological vacuum seems to be the most popular idea to emerge from the field of Polish sociology, yet still, the literature that discusses it is of the volume that allows a single researcher to

process all the production citing it.[1] The analysis of the publications resulted in creating a typology of sociological problems identified by scholars as connected to the sociological vacuum Thus, the references to the sociological vacuum appear in five contexts: as an element of background description in the works on Polish society; in the works on Solidarność social movement; in the works on civil society; in the works on social capital; and in the works on the quality of democracy. These are important and huge problems for social science, indeed!

The fact that the concept of the sociological vacuum is mentioned in the background introductions to studies on Polish society proves its significance in Polish sociology, but this context did not occur to me as interesting. Many of these citations have a rather ceremonial character: authors who need to write any short description of the Polish society, mention the sociological vacuum without giving it much thought. Yet, the remaining four contexts pertain to some of the most important topics of Polish sociology after the 1980s. The next step was therefore to study the general literature on these four topics in order to learn about the relevance they had for the sociological vacuum and the micro-macro problem.

Here, I need to make a caveat about my own dilettantism. When writing my book about the sociological vacuum, on many occasions I had to struggle with my ignorance. The sociological vacuum is a concept applied in so many contexts, that it is impossible to be competent in all of them. I have to be honest and admit that as a researcher I do not feel comfortable and confident when dealing with topics of Solidarność and democracy. Yet, the central subjects of this book are the sociological vacuum and the micro-macro problem in sociological theory, therefore I write about Solidarność or the quality of democracy only when it is relevant to the main theme of this book. Certainly, I do not have the ambition of contributing much to the discussion about Solidarność or democracy, although I aim at making other scholars more aware when connecting these themes of study with the sociological vacuum.

Last but not least, the inquiry on the sociological vacuum had also its field research component. Together with Michał Kotnarowski, we designed a survey study on labor market behaviors, which was conducted by Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej [Public Opinion Research Center]. One of the objectives of this study was to confront Granovetter's and Nowak's perspectives. The design

1 The updated index of publications citing the sociological vacuum thesis is available at: http://mikolajpawlak.bio.uw.edu.pl/research/sociological-vacuum/bibliography-sociological-vacuum/. At the moment of preparing the book for publication (28.08.2017), there are 222 publications in the index. In this book I do not cite all of them, but only those which I use as illustrations to the more general tendencies I discuss.

and results of the study, which are relevant to this book, are presented below. The survey also provided us with data, which is not presented in this book. It is not related to the issue of the sociological vacuum, yet, I believe that it contributes to the understanding of the role played by social networks on the labor market. The general results of the survey study were presented in Polish in the article "Siła słabych powiązań na rynku pracy w Polsce" [The Strength of Weak Ties on the Labor Market in Poland] (Pawlak, Kotnarowski 2016). There are also forthcoming publications which explore the more narrow research questions and use the data set acquired through the survey.

I also need to point to that which is not present in the book. It certainly does not contain much about identities, mostly because the problem was not taken up in the debate on the sociological vacuum, and the thesis formulated in the language of identities soon became treated as a thesis on bonds per se. Thus, I do not provide a revision of studies on identity. At the same time, however, I believe that an in-depth review of publications by social psychologists on identity could shed some new light on the perception of the sociological vacuum. The sociology of Stefan Nowak was very much dealing with concepts which are key to social psychology, such as attitudes, identities, or worldviews. A more sociological approach to identity might be an interesting perspective to discuss the sociological vacuum's role in the institutional construction of biography or national identity. Another field which deals with identity is political science, and recently the public debate has undoubtedly been focused on identity politics, to which the notion of the sociological vacuum might be relevant as well. Yet, in this book the topic of identities is explored in a very limited scope. Still, it needs to be highlighted that it is somehow ironic that the statement formulated in the language of identities was later never seriously considered in the studies of identities.

In this book, I write a lot about social structures, but not in the traditional understanding of the term embedded in sociology of social stratification. I understand social structures as patterns of relations, therefore including in this category also social networks, organizations, and social fields – terms densely occupying the pages of this volume. I do not, however, take up the problem of social classes or social strata, defined according to other criteria. Again, the reason is the fact that the sociological vacuum as a topic was not taken up by the researchers of social structures. This is yet another ironic thing about the sociological vacuum, because Stefan Nowak (1979b: 160) was thinking about his thesis precisely in terms of a subjective social structure.

I would also not consider this book as a study in sociology of knowledge or history of ideas: it concerns sociological theory, in the text I critically discuss

important theoretical concepts of empirical relevance. When writing about theory, however, in most cases, the history of concepts is relevant for their proper understanding, and proper evaluation of theories. For example, I cannot judge Nowak for not using some concepts embedded in relational theories, because I know that at his time they were only in their nascent form. Quite similarly, some assumptions from the sociology of knowledge are always useful for dealing with concepts, especially when there is a wish to understand the context of their formulation or diffusion. For this reason, I have devoted much space in the book to the reconstruction of the history of the micro-macro issue in sociology. Nevertheless, a strict study of social conditions of knowledge creation is beyond the scope of my interest.

The chapters of this book have been arranged in three parts. Part I, entitled "The micro-macro problem in sociology: theoretical background," consists of three chapters on the classical accounts of the micro-macro problem, the theory of fields, and social networks. In chapter 1, "Classical approaches to the micro-macro problem in sociology," I introduce the issue of the micro-macro in sociological theory. For the sake of conceptual clarity, I show the affinities and differences between micro-macro pairing and individual-society, as well as agency-structure pairing. Afterwards, I present the views of the classics of sociology on relations between the micro- and macro-levels of analysis, and then move on to the theoretical debate, which was conducted in the 1980s, and in the course of which sociologists of various paradigms discussed the possible ways of reconciling the micro-macro divide in theory. In the two subsequent chapters, I present the newer approaches which are helpful in linking micro- and macro-levels of analysis to social fields and social networks. In chapter 2, "Social fields: the meso-level of analysis," I present various approaches to the social field theory and I discuss it as a theoretical tool to integrate micro- and macro-levels of analysis by introducing an intermediary level. In this chapter, I compare the insights from the thought of Pierre Bourdieu, new institutional theory of organizations, and strategic action fields theory. The last chapter of the part on the micro-macro problem in sociology entitled "Social networks: tying micro and macro" discusses the social networks approaches to studying social reality. In this chapter, I focus mostly on social network analysis and discuss the conceptions of social embeddedness of action as a promising way of linking micro with macro in sociology. This part of the book provides the theoretical background which allows to see various ways to look at micro- and macro-levels of analysis. The readers who are interested only in the issue of the sociological vacuum may omit it. I am convinced, however, that this part of the book has its own value

as a new discussion of the micro-macro debate, which since the work of Derek Layder (2006)[2] in the early 1990s has not been updated.

Part II, entitled "The sociological vacuum: the story of the spell cast on Polish sociologists,"[3] is a study of the uses of the sociological vacuum in explaining such important phenomena as Solidarność social movement, civil society, social capital, and democracy. My strategy for each chapter is not only to present how other scholars employed the concept of the sociological vacuum to explain or understand phenomena they considered interesting. In case of each discussed large sociological problem, I show the theoretical framings which are sensitive for the micro-macro problem. This allows me to confront the issue of the sociological vacuum with fine-grained theory, linking micro- and macro-levels of analysis. However, to open this part I need to discuss the thesis on the sociological vacuum itself. In chapter 4, "Polish sociology in the 1970s, Stefan Nowak, and the sociological vacuum thesis," I introduce the context of coining the thesis and the research program of survey sociology of Stefan Nowak. Then, I present research materials which later became the empirical basis for the thesis on the sociological vacuum and provide its internal and external critique. Having clarified the sociological vacuum thesis, I move to the discussion of the four large topics, in which it has been involved. In chapter 5 – "Solidarność: how atomized individuals mobilized as a social movement?" – I discuss how the emergence of Solidarność social movement contributed to the popularity of the thesis which it seemed to contradict, and analyze the sometimes even metaphysical references to the sociological vacuum thesis in the context of Solidarność. Afterwards, I present how the research oriented towards social networks and inter-organizational relations (elements not existent in sociological paradigm of Nowak) can be helpful in understanding the emergence of the movement. In chapter 6, "Civil society: in search of the new actor of the social transformation," I move to another grand subject of sociology in Poland and focus on organizations as a key structure to understand civil society, which I define as a self-organization of society based on free-choice associations. The sociological vacuum is often cited in order to explain the alleged weakness of civil society. I claim that it is a misunderstanding: the grounds to connect the sociological vacuum with civil society are questionable, and there are reasons not to lament so much about the condition of civil society in Poland. In chapter 7, "Social capital: what mediates between individuals and society?"

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2 In this work I cite the second edition of Derek Layder's (2006) book entitled *Understanding Social Theory*, which was originally published in 1994.

3 The expression "spell cast on Polish sociologists" is borrowed from Janine E. Wedel (1992b: 10).

I mostly focus on networks as key structures to the understanding of the social capital. The concept of social capital is a very fuzzy one, but it has a huge potential for linking micro- and macro-levels of analysis. Here, I also show that in the case of conceptions of social capital defining it on the individual level in terms of social networks, there is no reason to see the influence of the sociological vacuum on the quality of social capital. Finally, in chapter 8, "Quality of democracy: social base for political institutions," I examine the possible influences of sociological vacuum on democracy. I discuss various conceptions of democracy, and I show that for each of them the micro-macro link is a very important element, because – regardless of the way it is defined – democracy requires a mechanism translating wills of individuals into the decisions of the macro-actor – state. In this chapter, I show that the relations between the sociological vacuum and democracy depend on the way democracy is conceptualized. For some conceptualizations of democracy, the sociological vacuum is an irrelevant problem. Some see it as an advantage, as the lack of strong intermediary identities inhibits the disruption of polity (Cześnik 2008a); for others it might be disadvantageous, as a low level of certain identities might be recognized as suppressive for participation. The overall conclusion of part II of the book is that the assumed negative influence of the sociological vacuum on the social movements, civil society, social capital, and democracy in Poland is very much exaggerated.

In the last, and the shortest part III – "What fills up the sociological vacuum? Empirical illustration" – there is only one chapter 9, entitled "Getting a job in Poland: how weak ties fill up the sociological vacuum?" This part might be considered an empirical illustration, or empirical appendix, to the whole book. It presents the results of the survey in which both Granovetter's questions regarding relations and behaviors, as well as Nowak's questions regarding individuals and identities were asked. The confrontation of these two different ways of looking at society at first seems inconclusive, but this inconclusiveness is, paradoxically, very conclusive. The data on individuals' identifications with groups are a very weak proxy for real relations and real actions. I treated it as evidence of the weak explanatory power of the sociological vacuum thesis.

In the conclusion of this book, I repeat and summarize the most important findings. I also present recommendations for future research. I call for a more cautious use of certain sociological notions, more attention to theoretical links between the micro- and macro-levels of analysis, and more focus on relations and behaviors. I also suggest that if there is really a need for the macro-synthesis about a given society, it should be built in a bottom-up manner on the basis of various studies conducted on the meso-level.