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Ulf Himmelstrand in memorial

Ulf Himmelstrand, Uppsala Sweden, has passed away on June 8, 2011. He leaves behind his wife Karin and his three children. Ulf Himmelstrand, professor of sociology and chairman of the International Sociological Association 1978-1982, was also a member of our RCHS. He participated with a paper at our committee sessions in Brisbane Australia 2002, but his paper was read aloud as he could not come himself. When he was young, he participated likewise with a paper at an ISA conference in Italy 1959 and could not come. His paper at that time was read aloud by Talcott Parsons himself. Ulf was the link between the generations of sociologists devoting themselves to the discipline.

Ulf Himmelstrand was born on August 26, 1924 in Turipattur, in colonial India, as son of missionaries for the Swedish Church. It is there where the origin of his planetary view may lie. He wrote his dissertation in Uppsala, at the oldest department of sociology in Sweden (established in 1947). His dissertation Social Pressures, Attitudes and Democratic Processes came in 1960. Then he was a Rockefeller fellow in USA 1960-1961, professor of sociology at the Ibadan University in Nigeria 1964-1967, fellow at the Center for Advanced Study at Stanford University in USA 1968-1969, guest professor at the University of Nairobi, Kenya in the early 1980's and professor of the Sociological department at Uppsala University from 1969 to his retirement in 1989.

Attitudes were at the centre of his research work, framed in political sociology. The last research article he wrote, “Social norms, social identities and social distance”, was published in Swedish in Sociologisk Forskning, the sociological referee journal of Sweden, in 2009. It reconnects with his L-scale in his dissertation concerning the links between the world of words and the world of things. Ulf Himmelstrand wrote in 2009: “As these two isomorphic worlds also have their own constellations of habits and emotional associations, there may emerge psychological dissociations which puzzle the naïve person.” Gaps between words and deeds were at his focus. Hans L. Zetterberg asserts that Himmelstrand’s dissertation is the first empirically verified correction of the rational choice theory. Not only rational self-interest but also emotions influence our choices.

One central thing that we, his students, learnt from him was the importance of pluralism. A sociological department should not be ruled by a single theoretical or
methodological perspective. A constant dialogue between scholars of different views was necessary for quality. Pluralism demanded respect and an ability to listen and this also distinguished himself. He made good use of that ability as a professor building up a postcolonial sociology in Nigeria, as chairman for ISA negotiating cold war conflicts within the sociological community and as a professor in Uppsala in 1969 in the middle of student revolts.

I wish some of the chapters of his vivid autobiography, Ögonblicket (2000) could be translated into English as they concern the history of sociology.

If any reader of this piece is having a good memory of Ulf Himmelstrand, please send it on to me. Missing Ulf Himmelstrand as I do, there is some consolation to be fetched in that he is missed by so many around the world.

Uppsala November 15
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PS. More to read: In Global Dialogue no 1 this year, there are obituaries on Himmelstrand written by Ayodele Samuel Jegede and Margaret Archer. From the funeral there is Hans L. Zetterberg’s speech in Swedish (http://www.zetterberg.org/Lectures/l110712.htm). Moreover on the ISA site there is Jennifer Platt’s biography on Ulf Himmelstrand.