

# Humanness, Vulnerability, Conviviality and Hope. Prof. Jens Rydström's scholarship

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It is quite paradoxical that, Jens being a very private person, one of my first memories of what would be my dear colleague for more than twenty years is the vision of Jens alone in the middle of a scenario surrounded by an unruly (and fantastic) group of feminist/queer scholars and activists. The event took place more than two decades ago, during The Act-Up workshop at our department with more than hundred participants. Jens (who was on the way to Lund but still working in Stockholm) had the (impossible) task of summarizing and analyzing the Swedish LGBTQ struggles. A task he tried to accomplish with an active (too active) public that commented on each and every one of his words. A public that discussed, or rather offered a different interpretation or underlined that he had forgotten the most !!! fundamental event.

Most scholars could be terrified by this polyphony of (demanding) voices; but not Jens. He listened and listened again, negotiated with the speakers, patiently reworked the narrative, often arguing for his standpoint. He is a magic story teller, extremely skilled in the art of

listening. Not in the professionalization of extracting information to objects of study, but in a humanist vision of dialogue, a vision of learning as equals. He spoke with the authority that was legitimated by both his extensive academic knowledge of the field and by the trust and the confidence that he had gained through years of working together with social movements for social justice. The event concluded with massive applause and acclamation. A commitment towards diverse forms of intellectual activism is at the core of Jens Rydström scholarship.

And he laughed. It is impossible to work together with Jens without remembering his laugh.

I have tried to learn from his ability to laugh, particularly to laugh at ourselves and at the movements for social justice we study (and often identify with). There exists an extraordinary wisdom in Jens' ability to laugh. A talent crafted through patience, care and love. An acknowledgment of our (and our social movements) vulnerability; an understanding of how stupid people doing important /good things can be. The skill to read the archive as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, would like it. Not only to deconstruct but also to heal, to provide resilience and hope. Jens is one of few historians with the competence and talent to read the archive in ways through which people are allowed to be heroes and heroines, to transcend gender binaries, to speak of sexual desire, to be beautiful and courageous and formidable (because sometimes they are) but also to be unfair, depressed, narcissistic, irresponsible and weak. This responsibility towards vulnerability (as a source of strength) makes Jens Rydströms research so extremely valuable and fundamental not only for gender and queer studies but for social theory as well. A research agenda that takes vulnerability as its central point of departure vibrates with the range of Jens' scholarly work and the variety of ways that it touches people.

However, while Jens' laugh is an invitation to dialogue, it is also a powerful boundary against those voices that criminalize and pathologize. His scholarship is shaped by an impressive gift, that of giving back to those that have been the target of criminalization and pathologisation their humanness. In a time where the boundaries regarding who may be considered "human" or who is worth of mourning is at the core of political and public debates, he stands courageously defending those categories of

people stigmatized. With a solid historical gaze when analyzing; as he has done for decades, the millions of documents illustrating the language of state and societal punishment towards marginalized communities, his scientific presence is powerful. His voice is solid. seldom agitating, but his scholarly work giving back humanness is one of the most radical practices I have encountered.

Again, and again, this paradox between Jens as quite private person, and his location in the public, his extraordinary (sometimes impossible, but always fundamental) labor of developing conviviality practices within both academia and activism, in Sweden, the Nordic countries, Europe and the Global South. Jens has colleagues that are always transformed in friends everywhere. His scholarly knowledge and academic skills are impressive, but his humbleness when speaking to an undergraduate student makes him the best of the teachers. Or rather, it is not only humbleness but also a real curiosity and respect towards the work of others. A desire to learn. A labor of care and respect and interest for others and through others; so that we learn to really listen and to speak to each other. So that we are able to see the shortcomings of our own arguments and (hopefully) the strength of others.

In a society and an academic climate shaped by polarization and threat against critical thinking, Jens Rydström stands (boldly, even if he himself would never accept the adjective) in defense of academic knowledge production based on powerful respect for the plurality of ideas and agendas and also powerful resistance to whatsoever any idea or agenda that will create others, hurt, dehumanize, destroy. The Department of Gender Studies at Lund University is crafted through his presence, he has created an academic environment where scholarly work is explored with kindness and generosity. Or rather an academic environment where analytical stringency is shaped through practices of conviviality.

It is a privilege and a pleasure to work with Jens. With him, there will always be good wines to drink; archives to explore and colleagues to work together with. And hope for excluded communities, whose stories have been silenced. Jens' agenda is always on the making.

**Diana Mulinari** är professor i Genusvetenskap vid Lunds universitet. Hon är inspirerat av den svarta feministiska traditionen med tonvikten på koppling mellan genus och social rättvisa. Hennes arbete utforskar koppling mellan genus och det politiska fältet. Bland hennes senaste publikationer finns: Tzimoula, D and D. Mulinari (2020) "Pain is hard to put on paper" *Exploring the Silences of Migrant Scholars in Pluralistic Struggles in Gender, Sexuality and Coloniality. Challenging Swedish Exceptionalism*. Berg et al. (Eds) Macmillan. London. Khayaat F. D. Mulinari and N. Räthzel (Eds.) (2020) *Essential writings on Intersectionality, Labour and Ecofeminism*. Zed books. London.