
In his classic autobiographical novel, Nässlorna blomma (Flowering Nettle) (1935, 1936), Swedish Nobel laureate Harry Martinson (1904-78) relates how as a seven-year-old child whose father had died and whose mother had run off to the United States, he was “auctioned off” by the parish authorities to be taken care of by the lowest bidder, becoming a charity boy going “on the parish,” moving between farm households characterized by either awkwardness, cold lovelessness in the disguise of religiosity, or outright raw primitiveness before ending up at the old folks’ home at the age of eleven—the only place where he was received with love and tenderness.

This was Sweden a century ago, a country that, like Haiti today, still had a long way to go before the modern welfare society was introduced. Martinson and others like him were Swedish equivalents of the Haitian restavek of a century later, with the difference that the former were better off, in an institutionalized and controlled system, while in Haiti the mechanism is completely informal.

A restavek is a child handed over by a poor family to a better-off one, living with the latter, not as an adopted child, but as an exploited household worker, badly clad and fed, frequently beaten and sexually abused, and without access to school. The restavek system is frequently referred to as a modern form of child slavery, with children scrubbing floors, carrying water, emptying and cleaning chamber pots, setting the table without being allowed to eat with the family, and sleeping on the floor.

The most frequently cited (1996 UNICEF) figure claims that Haiti has 300,000 restavek, though this appears to be an exaggeration (Schwartz 2011). A more systematic study, carried out in 2002 by the Norwegian Fafo research institute gave a figure of 173,000 children between 5 and 17 years of age (Sommerfelt 2002), and a 2009 survey ended up with a figure of 225,000 (PADF 2009).

The writer who gave the restavek system a face was Jean-Robert Cadet. In his first book (Cadet 1998, 2002) he described his own childhood as a restavek and told how he managed to become a middle-class African American, benefiting from the American system of compulsory education, joining the army, and eventually getting a university education. The book was...
well received and got a wide readership. Cadet testified before the United Nations, the International Labor Organization, and the U.S. Senate, and was given time on CNN, the Oprah Winfrey Show, and the CBS news program 60 Minutes. A number of international NGOs decided to become involved. Altogether, the restavek issue was converted into what one commentator has called “a human rights, NGO, and media hysteria” (Schwartz 2011).

Whether Cadet actually qualifies as a restavek has been questioned, since he was left by a white father to his mistress and his father paid for him to go to the United States. He was also allowed to go to school. In retrospect, this matters less. The importance of Restavec lay in the fact that it exposed child labor in Haiti to the international community in a direct and intelligible fashion.

My Stone of Hope continues Cadet’s story, or rather, repeats it. More than half of the new book simply retells Cadet’s Haitian and American story in the same way as the first book, frequently word for word. Restavec ended with Cadet’s marriage and the birth of his son. It is not until page 185 in Stone of Hope that the story continues, with less than 100 pages to go. These are devoted to an account of what happened to Cadet after the publication of Restavec, his career in education, and his trips back to Haiti where he looked up family members and saw the school teacher who once took him on for free. He also reports his decision to give up teaching in order to become a full-time advocate for the abolition of child slavery in general and the restavek system in particular, his efforts to make the media interested in the issue, his direct intervention in a couple of restavek cases, and the formalization of his endeavor through the Jean R. Cadet Restavek Organization.

All this is fine, as far as it goes. What is missing is an account of how successful Cadet’s foundation (and other similar efforts) has been. Especially after the 2010 earthquake it has to compete for attention with up to ten thousand other NGOs. Is it fighting an uphill battle? Also, has the restavek system received new fuel from the calamity? These should be important questions, especially for Cadet, who has strong views on what the system does to society as a whole, and they should be dealt with in a broader, institutional and analytical, framework:

I do not exaggerate in asserting that the restavek system is destroying Haiti’s future and severely limiting the country’s potential for development and growth, even its