

**THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF CRISIS:
FROM ELIA KAZAN'S *AMERICA, AMERICA* TO ETERNITY**

by

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Several months ago, as I was watching Elia Kazan's film *America, America* (1963), I noticed that the crises presented throughout are indicative of the crises people experience nowadays. The multi-dimensional perspectives of any crisis, as these unfold in the movie, made me realize that this has been, as I will comment on further down, an on-going phenomenon. Whether this is a crisis of identity or of deception, remains to be examined.

Kazan presents us with multiple aspects of a crisis throughout his movie. The story takes place in Turkey in 1896 and the main character is a Greek young man named Stavros Topouzoglou. His humble beginnings do not leave room for a bright future, but he nevertheless keeps on trying to achieve his one and only goal, to move to America. This is further reinforced by the repetition of the word "America" in the title of the film which places emphasis on the eagerness and longing of Stavros to become an American citizen. So, the film introduces us to his odyssey, the numerous difficulties and obstacles he had to overcome, like a modern Ulysses, in order to make his dream come true. Yet, such a dream does not come without hardships and sacrifices.

Indeed, the film portrays various aspects of people's dramatic attempts to survive. One can comprehend that one of the main crises the film deals with is the subjugation of ethnic minorities. According to the film, the Greeks had to obey to the Turkish law and as a result lose their national identity. There was lack of freedom and the living conditions were intolerable for the most of Greek families, especially the unprivileged ones. Nowadays, crises experienced in any form of oppression ought to be abolished. Unfortunately, the inequality I am witnessing in the form of assaults to foreigners living in Greece troubles me.

Suffice to say that nowadays nations continue being divided as developed and underdeveloped. For instance, TV networks and social media always try to present us with an ideal world in an effort to promote their own political or religious beliefs. But the truth is different from what is shown, because there are countries and people that are constantly under exploitation. Countries are being oppressed, boundaries are crossed, women become trophy wives, the elderly are abused and human trafficking is, among others, the new trend, though authorities do not seem to mind. In addition, many children are forced to lose their childhood for the sake of labor.

Food, health and education do not exist in impoverished countries and this necessitates radical change. As a result, attempts have been made to establish aid in all possible domains and this is a matter of priority for many non-profit organizations. After all, in cruel times there is no room for individuality. People need to care for one another and be aware of the problems of the global community. A great number of

volunteers is cooperating worldwide and investing personal time for the sake of others.

Consequently, class differences have been intensified making the rich richer and the poor poorer. It is a shame that the world's wealth is not equally distributed among people. Hence, in every civilized country, even in distant villages, there are people with money and people who struggle to survive. Class differences go back in time, as it is recorded in history, and have determined societal structures in the western world at least. Kazan's film has made me aware of the fact that even nowadays, despite technological advancements in almost all socio-cultural sectors combined with improved living conditions, class hierarchies have not been eliminated. Not everyone gets to be born in a wealthy family. This is the case with Stavros in Kazan's film whose willingness to marry a rich merchant's daughter is combined with his intention to secure a higher social position.

Poverty, on the one hand, and financial abundance, on the other, are considered to be two sides of the same coin. This constitutes a contemporary situation as a great number of people are broke, bankrupt and hopeless. Shelters and social services may be of great significance in terms of protecting and helping people, though this should be the exception, not the rule. I felt distressed as the intensity of poverty in the movie was such that workers were malnourished or had to be fed by the leftovers of their bosses. There was evident lack of social support and no one seemed to care. I would also like to refer to the narrations of my close elderly relatives who lived during cruel times being confronted with abandonment and starvation. Watching the news, I often wonder if this is a situation we are reliving nowadays. Our daily routine includes witnessing numerous incidents of the poor fighting for their lives and the rich trying to prevail at any cost. This unfortunate chain of events, as described above, is usually an omen of misery, one that must not be overlooked.

Moreover, human relationships are usually based on financial exchanges and the patriarchal families share many common features with people in power. Decision-making is still a male prerogative. It is up to the elder members of the family to set the rules. Recalling my childhood, I must admit that only one family member was working and to be specific that was my father, as was also the case with many friends of mine. Consequently, his opinion mattered. Watching the movie and particularly the scenes in which the merchant's daughter has no personal opinion, I realized that only after I was considered a grown-up did I have a saying in discussing and probably altering some of the house rules. In modern societies, though, this is a controversial issue due to liberal movements. But, at the same time there are families across the world whose freedom is restricted due to the different tasks and responsibilities allocated to men and women. Specifically, living in rural areas can mean having no personal opinion and no rights, since a lot of women are not or are not allowed to be educated. In addition, most of them do not have the chance even in our days of escaping the narrow boundaries of their community. As a result, raising the children is their only occupation.

What is more, friendship is highly overestimated due to the fact that it can result into taking advantage of others in order to achieve one's expectations. Therefore, the whole essence of friendship has lost its original purpose and meaning, and has been used as the means to either make money or gain fame. Most of us are constantly

trying to overshadow our friends and family by pretending to be the best employees or bosses, the best mothers or fathers. Unlike Stavros in Kazan's film, who chose his own path, I would like to underline the fact that people may be insecure and this is reflected in all kinds of relationships. For example, I often notice that many parents seek their personal recognition through their children's success. Such parents do not constitute role models by any means. What I have learned and what the film projects is that looks can be deceiving. One should keep a wary eye that what may seem real and authentic is not necessarily truthful. I often get carried away due to my spontaneity and kindness and as a result I often get heart broken.

As far as I am concerned, this comes as no surprise since many so-called friends can easily prove to be enemies. Surely, this does not apply to everyone and not all are willing to sacrifice their morals. Yet, the emptiness of one's soul combined with egotism can push people towards doing nasty things. Friends are vulnerable to everyday anxieties and occasionally drift apart after many years of companionship. Nonetheless, values such as dignity and self-respect should be preventing people from hurting one another, but it seems really romantic to think of a world without loss and pain. At times, emotions cease to exist which highlights one's cruelty and inhumanity. Besides, the conclusion to be drawn is that innate instincts eventually prevail which has a negative impact on people's lives. In the film, Stavros is deceived by an alleged friend who promises to help him during the trip. The so-called friend eventually tricks naive Stavros and steals his clothes, money, food as well as the donkey he had with him. Furthermore, Stavros is led under false pretence to a local court. While watching these scenes, I kept on wondering whether people are innately evil or whether they act and react as such under tough circumstances. I am able to understand and justify that good people may occasionally resort to negative actions, but when it comes down to money I am pretty convinced that this is the driving force to every evil.

Thus, money, as displayed in the movie, is seen as the objective and not as the means in people's lives. People will do just about anything to have money. However, money does not necessarily bring happiness. People are often captivated in a fantasy world and are not able to see clearly that their motivation is not in fact their own, but it is what is instructed by society, gender, color and class. One does not need every single product from the supermarket, but through constant brainwashing from TV commercials and magazines people have come to believe into a stereotypical version of reality. Nevertheless, money can make one's life a little bit more comfortable if handled in moderation.

Unfortunately, money currently plays the most vital role in the world's economy. Accordingly, decisions are made by governments and leaders on the premises that things will get better. No consciousness is being embraced and, as a result, people are the ones to suffer the outcome of irrational expectations.

Hence, the consecutive decrease of payrolls and pensions in Greece as well as in many other European countries has made lots of people miserable and angry, because they are unfairly deprived of what they have worked for throughout their lives. This is no extraordinary news since similar instances are shown in the film as well. The bargain amongst the merchant, the future buyer and his wife constitutes an effort to sell in order to make money. Nowadays, however, the problem rests with the survival of one's enterprise. Factories, businesses of any sort, shops and banks are threatened

with closure and people end up being unemployed. The effect is immediate and concerns all people no matter their social status, gender, political or religious beliefs.

Due to these decreases and unemployment people are left hopeless, seeking to find new means of survival, with immigration still considered to be one of the most promising solutions. Therefore, immigration is another sensitive subject brought out in Kazan's film due to the director's own background. Specifically, Kazan was forced to move to America, the promise land, as does his hero in the movie. This seems to work like a repetitive cycle that needs to be completed through the making of the film. No wonder people have an ongoing desire to share experiences, ideas and connect to one another. These are after all fundamental elements in human nature. At present, lots of people on a global scale are obliged to relocate due to hard working and living conditions in search of a better future. I really understand that people must move due to wars and poverty. However, I find it hard to accept that in my country the issue of immigration has taken numerous negative variables. I no longer watch the news because of the politicians' recycled obnoxious attitude and the inexplicable urge to condemn all immigrants. I do not see why Kazan's Stavros or any other legal immigrant has to be viewed suspiciously as long as they are a pair of working hands that pay off.

So, people at different ages are still driven by the need to move to new places and try to start over. Legal immigrants are more than welcome and are also invited to contribute to the global and local community. Students, workers, scientists, academics and so on and so forth are encouraged to live abroad in order to fulfill one's dreams. This particular type of a crisis comes with numerous benefits as long as it is accepted and promoted by every nation worldwide.

However, this is not always the case since the majority of immigrants is illegal. Even though their purposes may be justified, it is not the proper way to live. We have all witnessed in our local communities robberies, crimes, assaults and rapes taking place. One of the reasons these events are generated is that too many people have been enduring insufferable living conditions in their hometowns or in their new host countries. This is not to discriminate them by any means, but this grievous situation constitutes a repetitive reality. We tend to think and make assumptions based on stereotypes. Maybe we should be open-minded and interact with different people so as to appreciate the different facets of immigration. What makes immigration an illegal act and to what extent does it facilitate the realization of one's dreams?

I find that the situation with illegal migration could and should be prevented if each country issues laws that really take into consideration the needs of the people themselves in addition to the general socio-political framework which forces them to move. I often notice that there is a lack of collaboration among nations even within the European countries and that this is a major setback in establishing universal laws and communication. Based on the movie, I can tell that any kind of collaboration is superficial. For instance, while watching Stavros being examined on the boat by the American doctor, I thought to myself that people are suspicious of one another.

Of course, I have to point out that prejudice still exists nowadays and may prevent communication among people. What is more, prejudice may have an impact on people's rights. I have come to realize that humans do not necessarily adhere to the

same rights. Even though there is freedom of speech, this does not mean it is accepted in every nation. Through the movie, I was able to understand that nothing should be taken for granted, but on the contrary everything must be fought for and achieved. Only then can people be viewed as equal as well as cooperate for a brighter future.

Many types of crises have been discussed so far, but the following type is by far the worst because in my opinion it is a matter of principles. I am referring to the judicial system, as it does not serve the public properly and constantly manipulates citizens by tricking them. This means that not everyone gets a fair trial due to the corruption of the system. As it was already mentioned above, Stavros in Kazan's film was victimized in the sense that he was wrongly accused of theft. He was taken to a court comprised of Turkish judges. There were no witnesses whatsoever and it all came down to Stavros's word against the Turk's. I must admit that prejudice plays an important factor in any outcome. As a result, the decision favored the liar at the expense of Stavros' word.

In particular, lawyers and judges are occasionally bribed so that decisions favor their own clients. Numerous incidents have been recorded over the past few years in our country of overt manipulation of both people and data that have afterwards been concealed by the authorities. We tend to forget that many cases can be resolved on the basis of good work and collaboration.

Prisons end up being crowded with people who may be real criminals as well as with innocent ones who have been wrongly accused of something. From personal experience, having worked in a second chance school within a correctional facility, I have noticed that there lies a society quite similar to that outside of prison. Specifically, these people have different national identities, cultures, languages and religions. But this does not mean they are not equal. After all, this is the purpose of the school, to educate and bring people together so as to share experiences. Inmates end up dealing with the same problems, sharing similar fears and fighting to belong to a group, whether this is a gang or a school class. Any kind of racism impels people to behave in totally different ways. Racial fanaticism is a contemporary form of discrimination and it comes with lots of manifestations.

Although a crisis should come with a myriad of connotations, it nevertheless can be viewed as a great opportunity for a brighter tomorrow. The storyline of Kazan's film has made me realize that true and pure urge to go after one's dreams has its benefits since anything is possible if one invests in it. Neither life nor death can put an end to someone's dreams and wishful thinking. People should be driven by internal motivation and this is the reason why the individual is placed at the center of the film. Stavros' dream is to do whatever his mind instructs and his heart really longs for. As I see it, he is the one responsible for his actions because each person is unique in his own way. What is more, I ought to respect one's choices, initiatives and motives. Besides that, all members in a society should not restrict "otherness" mainly because one is afraid of and feels threatened by it.

Nowadays, people face many crises in a world which makes us realize that the majority of citizens deal with the same problems. But at what cost? Is a crisis an ongoing situation that keeps repeating itself from time to time or is it a burden that every society has to bear in order to reach a sense of awareness? One cannot provide a

concrete answer and with this in mind one had better keep a wary eye on all the changes taking place around us. This is not to assume that fate is preordained, but people do share many similarities despite the historical context they live in.

After all, I believe that each country has had to deal with crises at various times throughout its history. Problems arise and such crises keep on repeating themselves due to nations' ineffective way of action and reaction. I am aware of the fact that the fate of humanity is innately connected with crisis. There have been almost forty years since the adventures of Stavros as described in Kazan's film and yet the multi-aspects of crises are basically intact and pretty much the same. I am sure that no man is perfect and of course that is not the point here. What is important is that people eventually learn to minimize the frequency of the appearance of any crisis and its following impacts. This means we should not give up but on the contrary move beyond the surface of every single aspect of our daily routine so as to gain a different perspective of our situation and cope with whatever the future has in store for us.

Works Cited

“America, America.” *Wikipedia*. Web. 14 July 2012.