

essay by

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## DEMOCRACIA

ORDER

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"Grub first, then ethics" is the well-known *refrain* of the song that closes the second act of *The Threepenny Opera*. The unscrupulous, bourgeois criminal Mackie Messer and the prostitute Low-Dive Jenny (of Messer's favorite Turnbridge brothel) alternate their voices in front of the lowered curtain, over the notes of Kurt Weil's jazz-cabaret-foxtrot, but repeating the same words: "So first sort out the basic food position, then start your preaching!". This Brechtian excerpt, which has now become proverbial, cannot but come to mind (at least it did for me) about the filmic triptych *ORDER* by the Spanish art collective Democracia: shot in different cities around the world between 2014 and 2018 and conceived rather like an opera in three acts. The very titles of the acts - if we want to continue calling them that - are symptomatic of the reference to *The Threepenny Opera*. *Eat the Rich/Kill the Poor* is the first act and is filmed in the neighborhoods of Houston, Texas. *Konsumentenchor* ('Consumer Choir' in German) is the second act and is set in a shopping mall in Dublin. Finally, the last one - *Dinner at the Dorchester* - takes place within the restricted setting of one of London's most exclusive hotels. But what do these three titles share if not the common denominator of food deprivation or abundance as the basic condition of income inequality and class difference? Isn't *Eat the Rich* the anti-capitalist political slogan, attributed to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that has come back to prominence in town squares around the world (from Spain to South Africa) in the last decade?

Between Brecht's 1928 play and 2018's *ORDER* there is about a century. A period of time (of history), that is, in which we believed that the cycle of social struggles had secured labor rights and civil security rights that, on the contrary, have recently been destroyed by contemporary neoliberalism to make way for servile labor relations and domination: with the triumph of the new fascisms. The empire of hate resurrects class and caste frontiers that seemed to have blurred, reactivating indiscernible relations between violence and institution, between war and governmentality, between rule of law and state of exception, between civilian and military. The return of racism, sexism and fascism is the effect of the reorganization between neoliberalism and nationalism, through the garb of democracy, such, however, as to result in a war against the people. *The Threepenny Opera*, set in a London slum, is the image of a mirror-image and ruthless reversal of the redistribution of property within pre-Nazi bourgeois society and an unapologetic critique of the indifference between low crime and high finance, of the moral hypocrisy of a corrupt society that makes beggars, thieves, prostitutes look like policemen, merchants, bankers, and business elites. Such an association that Brecht was able to state. "the bourgeoisie's fascination with

bandits rests on a misconception that a bandit cannot be a bourgeois" and, conversely, "that a bourgeois cannot be a bandit". *ORDER's* three acts are an equally harsh critique of the dissimilarities of contemporary capitalism but conducted through a cold, glossy, sharp aesthetic that is typical of contemporary mediatized *soft power* devices, at a time when new fascisms no longer need to be as violent or paramilitary as historical ones. Not the tank, in essence, but the limousine. It is no coincidence that the black Hummer limousine that appears at the beginning of the first film, with the words *Eat the Rich* and *Kill the Poor* on both sides of the vehicle respectively, had already been employed by Democracia in a 2010 urban intervention in New York to transport collectors during the Armory Show. Always ready to counter the ideology of social comfort promised by neoliberalism, with its substitution of social democracy for revolution and the welfare state for class struggle, the Democracia art collective over the past two decades has continuously deployed subculture tactics, agitprop strategies, anti-capitalist slogans, and situationist references to expose all those pacified pitfalls that have dramatically led us to neo-fascisms today.

A few years ago, an unsettling choreography of parkour 'tracers', hooded in red sweatshirts in Madrid's Civil Cemetery, surprised us for its unexpected character of political defiance just as today we marvel at the use of opera to condemn social inequality in *ORDER's* three films. Yet, even here, the reference to Kurt Weill's *songs*, to the captions, to the signs where the titles of Brecht's epic theater scenes or ballads are projected, seems to me a not insignificant feature. Thus Amanda, a young white woman who appears inside the black limousine in *Eat The Rich/Kill the Poor*, is the voice that sings a chant against the poor as the sound is broadcast outside from a loudspeaker above the vehicle's sunroof during its journey through downtown Houston. "Kill the poor. /Let them lick their wounds. /They're no longer necessary. /Now there are machines /that do it all for you": this is one of the insulting verses that highlights the return of classism in our advanced society. The new poor, when they are not being discriminated against, are encouraged to change their behavior to individually take on the risks involved in indebtedness. This chant is counterbalanced by a muted demonstration by the armed members of the New Black Panthers who parade through the streets of Houston with white signs bearing slogans such as "Work is the blackmail of survival" or "We are not your slaves" and "Government is death". The second act of *ORDER, Konsumentenchor*, features a chorus of children dressed in a red robe and white ruff who, in single file, enter inside a Shopping Mall where they arrange themselves to sing "We are born to suck. / We grow up to eat the world. /We consume so as to forget time that, every day in silence, / consumes us bite by bite". Finally, in the last act, during an exclusive party at the Dorchester Hotel, there is a dispute between a white man, a tenacious supporter of the profits of capitalism, and a black female worker who is part of the service and who shouts in closing: "It is time to stop". Even though the entire work is informed by the text "Works and Days" written by Hesiod, in the face of this extraordinary film trilogy by Democracia two of Mackie Messer's questions continue to resonate in the background and unabated: "what is a picklock to a bank share? What is the burgling of a bank to the founding of a bank?".