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Put the Fries in the Bag: A Marxist Analysis of Trump's 30-Minute Shift Under the Golden Arches

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Put the Fries in the Bag: A Marxist Analysis of Trump's 30-Minute Shift Under the Golden Arches

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WRI 120: Rhetorical Theory

Phillip Lovas

10 December 2024

Put the Fries in the Bag: A Marxist Critique of Trump's 30-Minute Shift Under the Golden Arches

In the lead-up to the 2024 presidential election, Donald Trump worked a 30-minute shift in a McDonald's kitchen in Buck County, Pennsylvania. This seemingly mundane publicity stunt at a McDonald's franchise reveals a complex narrative of class dynamics, political performance, and the ongoing struggle to connect with America's working class. This performative labor, which I define for the purposes of this essay as any activity which generates the *appearance* of busyness and production rather than true labor, becomes a microcosm of broader social tensions. This thus exposes the intricate ways political candidates negotiate their relationship with working-class identity and experience. This analysis seeks to unpack these social tensions between the American proletariat and U.S political entities by examining Trump's McDonald's shift alongside both Harris' and Trump's socioeconomic and political backgrounds using Marx and Engels' ideas of worker alienation of labor and class consciousness.

Keywords: Political performance, U.S. electoral politics, Donald Trump, 2024 presidential election, political rhetoric, class consciousness, McDonald's, Marxism, performative labor, capitalism, class identity

The History and Structure of McDonald's

McDonald's began as a small, traditional drive-in restaurant in San Bernardino, California, founded by brothers Richard and Maurice McDonald in 1940. In 1948, the brothers revolutionized the business by implementing the "Speedee Service System," which dramatically simplified their menu and introduced a streamlined kitchen process. They reduced their menu to a few key items and focused on quick, efficient food preparation. Ray Kroc, one of the first and most famous McDonald's franchisees, opened his first McDonald's stand in Des Plaines in 1955, and eventually bought out the McDonald brothers in 1961 for $2.7 million. He standardized operations, created consistent quality controls, and developed a franchise model that would make McDonald's a global fast-food empire (Hess, 1986).

Today, the vast majority of McDonald's locations are franchises. A franchise is a type of license given to a franchisee that allows them to access the franchisor's business knowledge and gives them the ability to sell a product under the name of the franchisor, typically in exchange for a large start-up fee and yearly licensing fees (Hayes 2024). This means that, despite franchisees not having autonomy over a wide range of decisions such as operating hours and pricing, McDonald's can technically advertise itself as locally owned and operated, as we can see plastered on the take-out bags in the footage of Trump's McDonald's shift (Hess, 1986).

McDonald's and the American Working Class

This franchising structure reveals the dialectical contradictions between McDonald's appearance and underlying economic reality. The rhetorical strategy of presenting McDonald's franchises as "locally owned and operated" is a calculated maneuver that masks the true nature of the bourgeoisie's (defined as

the owners of the means of production) accumulation of capital (Marx, 1818-1883). This sleight-of-hand approach attempts to humanize a global corporate entity by creating an illusion of small business entrepreneurship, while simultaneously maintaining centralized control and extracting surplus value from local franchisees. The take-out bag thus becomes a subtle propaganda tool, a symbol of the capitalist ideology that seeks to normalize corporate dominance by presenting it through the disguising lens of

locally owned businesses.

The story of McDonald's is fundamentally about the systemic alienation of workers, which Marx describes as the estrangement of the worker from the fruits of their labor, as well as their own human nature and the wider world (Marx, 1844). We can see this manifesting in McDonald's as the transformation of food production into a highly rationalized, mechanized process that strips workers of their agency and creativity. The restaurant's high-paced, assembly-line approach to food preparation epitomizes broader industrial production methods, reducing human labor to its most specialized form. By standardizing McDonald's franchises, Kroc created a system that reduced his employees to mere extensions of the production line. Workers are trained to perform tasks with machine-like precision to maximize output while minimizing individual agency. This system encapsulates Marx's critique of how capitalism alienates the worker from the fruits of their labor.

Thus, McDonald's represents far more than a mere workplace. It is a profound symbol of the contemporary industrial working class', or proletarians', labor (Marx, 1818-1883). By selecting McDonald's as the specific location for this publicity stunt, Donald Trump attempted to construct a proximity to working-class experience. This is something he would have no prior hands-on experience with, being a member of the bourgeoisie. Unlike more physically demanding blue-collar jobs such as construction, manufacturing, or agricultural labor, McDonald's has the potential to offer a more controlled environment that allows for performative labor without genuine physical strain or risk.

Trump vs. Harris: Socioeconomic Background

Kamala Harris was raised in what would be considered a middle to upper-middle class, single parent household and born into a family of immigrants (The United States Government, 2024). She graduated from Howard University, a historically Black college in Washington, with a degree in Economics and Political Science. She later attended the University of California, Hastings College of Law and acquired a Juris Doctor degree in 1990 (Yurow, 2024). Harris has since served as an employee of the state, be it as an attorney, senator, or vice president, for more than twenty years. Kamala Harris

represents a more complex narrative of social positioning that diverges from traditional upper-class privilege. Harris exemplifies the intellectual and professional mobility often sought out by immigrant communities through education and public service. Her upbringing in a single-parent household, while more proximate to typical working-class experiences, was distinguished by intellectual capital and educational opportunity.

In contrast, Donald Trump's background epitomizes generational wealth and systemic economic privilege. Donald Trump was born into a wealthy family in New York. His father, Frederick Trump, ran a real estate company called Elizabeth Trump & Son, developing middle-class housing in various New York City boroughs. Trump would later work full-time for his father's real estate business after obtaining a degree in Economics from Penn's Wharton School of Finance and Commerce in 1968 (Waterhouse, 2017). Trump frequently took advantage of his father's wealth and connections for his own business ideas, such as developing the Grand Hyatt Hotel (Kessler, 2016). However, despite his father's resources, Trump frequently faced entrepreneurial hardship. He took out significant loans to fund the development of his hotels and casinos, and multiple of his businesses declared bankruptcy (Lee, 2016). Donald Trump's entry into business was predicated on extensive familial resources, network connections, and direct financial support. His Wharton education was not a pathway to social mobility, but a credential within an already established economic ecosystem. While both Harris and Trump work to serve oppressive capitalist societal structures, Harris's background objectively places her in a socioeconomic

status more similar to the working class than Trump has ever been. Republicans, including Donald Trump, see this as a threat to their own appeal to the working-class voter.

McDonald's Employment & American Class Consciousness

On October 20th, 2024, former president and current Republican candidate Donald Trump made an appearance at a McDonald's franchise in Buck County, PA. During his time there he worked a 30-minute shift in the McDonald's kitchen, where real McDonald's managers and employees taught him how to fry french fries and serve the drive-thru window. Trump himself stated multiple times throughout

his shift that his main motivating factor for participating in the publicity stunt was to one-up his Democratic Party opponent, Kamala Harris. Kamala Harris has claimed before that in order to fund her undergraduate tuition at Howard University, she took a job at a McDonald's location in Alameda County, California. However, the legitimacy of her claim is somewhat dubious. McDonald's is unable to verify whether or not the Vice President was actually employed with them, as their employment records do not go back far enough to the early 80s, the period of time in which she claims to have worked there (Henderson & Smith, 2024). Further, the current employees of any possible McDonald's location that Harris may have worked at are sworn to secrecy regarding her employment history (Diver & White, 2024). While McDonald's corporate management, had they been asked, may have stated that this was enacted so that they could retain the appearance of neutrality in the election, this shows that corporations care more about their own image and ties to the bourgeois than the fates of their workers. Due to this dubiousness, Republicans have accused her of lying to ingratiate herself with the American working class. In the footage of the event, Trump states, "I like to see good jobs. I think it's inappropriate when somebody puts down all over the place that she worked at McDonald's. It was a big part of her resume that she worked at McDonald's… She never worked at McDonald's" (WSET ABC 13, 2024). By attempting to declare that Harris' claim of McDonald's employment is illegitimate, Trump denies Harris the connection and identification between the American working class and herself.

It is important to note that the franchise location was closed to the public while Trump worked his shift. It is likely that the families Trump served in the drive-thru were selected from the hundreds of Trump supporters witnessing the event from the parking lot, as can be seen in the video footage. A possible explanation for this decision might be for the sake of former President Trump's safety, as there had already been two assassination attempts on his life. However, closing the McDonald's to the public also serves to shield Trump from the realities a true McDonald's employee faces daily: the realities of the American working class.

Trump harbors poorly hidden disdain for McDonald's and its employees, and, by extension, the proletariat class as a whole. This is somewhat ironic, considering Trump's love of fast food is well

documented, with him even claiming to a McDonald's worker in 2023 that "I know this menu better than you do" (Chad de, 2024). Despite this, and even when surrounded by McDonald's workers, Trump exclaims to the cameraman, "Never even touch it, huh… never touched by a human hand, nice and clean," while being shown how the fries are packaged into their container (WSET ABC 13, 2024). The implication behind this statement is that fast food workers *do* touch the food being served with their bare hands, that they do not practice good hygiene, and thus the food and the establishment are unclean. In actuality, because McDonald's is a restaurant, all its employees receive food safety training during their onboarding process, and more than 600,000 food safety audits were conducted in McDonald's franchise establishments in 2023 (McDonald's Corporate). While this initially comes off as a social faux pas that would make the surrounding employees and general public feel uncomfortable and insulted, this move may actually strengthen Trump's ties with his supporters. American proletarians currently resent elitism more than they do the rich, and many are fond of Trump because of his seemingly anti-establishment and casual way of speaking. They see Trump being made fun of by the Democrats, and they see themselves in him, as people who are disregarded by the left as poor, uneducated, and unempathetic (Hull, 2020). This comment emphasized the establishment of Trump by the left as a person to be ridiculed, thus further endearing him to the members of the working class who held such sentiments.

Regardless of their public reception, Trump's comments about these workers reveal a fundamental contradiction in capitalist ideology; workers are essential to production yet simultaneously dehumanized and rendered invisible. Engels states in *Condition of the Working Class in England* about the English bourgeois of his time, "He cannot comprehend that he holds any other relation to the operatives than that of purchase and sale; he sees in them not human beings, but hands" (Engels, 1887). This sentiment seemingly still rings true for the modern American bourgeoisie. Trump does not see these workers as his equals. To Trump, the McDonald's employee is a cog in the machine that produces his Big Mac, and in this specific moment, a tool for garnering political appeal among their proletarian peers, rather than an intelligent (and hygienic) human being. The worker is simultaneously necessary and repulsive, a paradox that reflects the inherent tensions within capitalist social relations.

Trump's obsession with hygienic performance masks deeper structural inequalities. While the former president celebrates the technological innovation behind the perceived "cleanliness" of the frying process, he omits the precarious working conditions, low wages, and systematic exploitation that characterize fast food labor. Although the minimum salary of an average McDonald's employee has recently reached $15/hour nationwide, this only averages to about $40,000/year assuming the employee works 40 hours per week (Genovese, 2024). For reference, the average yearly cost of living in America as of 2024 is $61,334, potentially being as high as $107,702, depending on the state ("*Cost of Living Index by State 2024,"* 2024*)*. Furthermore, many fast-food employees do *not* work full-time, with 38% of workers clocking less than 35 hours a week in 2022. Most employees receive their work schedules less than two weeks in advance. Last-minute changes in the timing and/or duration of their shift also occur frequently. (Bellew et al., 2022). By maintaining a workforce characterized by part-time and unpredictable scheduling, capital achieves multiple objectives: preventing workers from achieving economic stability, undermining potential collective labor organization, and maintaining maximum flexibility for capital's operational needs.

The numerical evidence presented materializes Marx's fundamental analysis of surplus-value extraction.

Surplus labor, as is discussed in Marx's *Value, Price, and Profit*, is the labor worked in a day that exceeds the value of its wage equivalent, or the necessary labor to be performed in order to acquire the materials of production and sustain the livelihood of the laborer (Marx, 1818-1883). The profit created by exploiting the worker to extract surplus labor is where the capitalist's wealth comes from. In this way, the wage itself becomes a mechanism of perpetual economic impoverishment, where workers are compensated at a level that systemically prevents them from performing socially necessary labor that maintains day-to-day human life and allows for reproduction of a new generation of laborers, also known as reproduction of labor power. This wage structure is a calculated design, ensuring that workers remain forever precarious in their economic status, unable to accumulate capital or escape the immediate necessities of survival. The rhetorical strategy here is quintessentially ideological: *by Trump creating an image of fast-food service as a "good job," one he "wouldn't mind having*," *he simultaneously*

normalizes and obscures the systemic violence of capitalist labor relations (WSET ABC 13, 2024). All of this begs the question, why do the bourgeois want to appear as members of the working class so badly? The irony of this situation is profound. The very class that systemically exploits working class labor simultaneously seeks to appropriate the cultural markers of that same class. The mimicry of working-class identity is fundamentally an attempt to resolve the class struggle inherent in capitalist social relations through obscuration. Often, this manifests as an attempt to superficially unite themselves and the working class under other forms of identity, for example, a shared American nationality (Allen, 2017). In this way, the bourgeois establish themselves as representatives of the American people as a whole and assert that what is good for the bourgeois is good for the whole country. Marx discusses this phenomenon in *The Communist Manifesto*, stating:

> "For each new class, which puts itself in place of one ruling before it, is compelled merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all members of society. It has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones" (Marx, 1818-1883).

The adoption of working-class signifiers, whether through fashion, language, or cultural performance, is not merely an aesthetic or lifestyle choice on behalf of the bourgeoisie, but a complex psychological and political strategy of class camouflage.

Further, by convincing the working class that they are Americans before proletarians, the bourgeoisie are able to redirect tension and resentment resulting from class conflict towards social issues. Rising left-wing political commentator Hasan Piker, when asked why the working class buys into conservativism in a video discussing Trump's McDonald's shift, echoes this concept. Piker states "People are suffering. They're resentful, they're angry, and [Trump] tells them… it's because brown people exist," referring to Trump's extreme anti-immigration policies (HasanAbi, 2024). Racial and cultural antagonism becomes a substitute terrain for class struggle, effectively preventing genuine class solidarity and consciousness from emerging.

In the case of a presidential election, the majority of Americans are members of the proletariat.
PUT THE FRIES IN THE BAG 11

As of 2021, 62% of Americans identified as working-class individuals (Ruggles et al., 2022). In order for any candidate in an electoral race to win, they must capture the vote of the American working class. This dynamic is another quintessential example of how the superstructure – or the ideology that dominates a given time period and is dependent on the prevalent modes of production – of bourgeois democracy functions to contain and redirect proletarian political efforts (Marx & Engels, 2001). The electoral system serves as a ritualized performance of choice, where working-class voters are repeatedly presented with candidates who fundamentally represent the interests of capital, despite superficial differences. Candidates must engage in complex rhetorical strategies to appear responsive to working-class interests while maintaining the fundamental capitalist structures that systematically exploit them.

Marx would interpret this phenomenon as a manifestation of what he called *false consciousness*. Engels coined the phrase in his 1893 letter to Franz Mehring, defining it in these terms: "Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, indeed, but with a false consciousness. The real motives impelling him remain unknown to him, otherwise it would not be an ideological process at

all. Hence he imagines false or apparent motives. Because it is a process of thought he derives both its form and its content from pure thought, either his own or that of his predecessors. He works with mere thought material which he accepts without examination as the product of

thought…" (Engels, 1893).

In short, Engels refers to a failure of self-awareness on the part of the individual, in which the person lacks critical thought regarding their beliefs and the motivating factors behind them. This explains why working- class voters in America often lean toward conservativism, aligning themselves with the desires of the bourgeoisie against their own best interests.

Conclusion

Trump's 30-minute McDonald's shift represents far more than a simple publicity stunt—it is a microcosm of the complex dialectical tensions inherent in contemporary American class relations. This

act of performative labor reveals the sophisticated mechanisms by which the bourgeoisie attempt to neutralize class consciousness and maintain their ideological hegemony through the adoption of proletarian identity and redirection of resentment resulting from class conflict. The broader implications of this event extend beyond a single candidate or a single moment in time. As this essay demonstrates, the American electoral system functions as a complex ideological apparatus that transforms potential revolutionary potential into a ritualized performance of choice. With 62% of Americans identifying as working class, the potential for genuine class solidarity remains both a threat and a possibility constantly managed by bourgeois rhetorical strategies. Ultimately, Trump's McDonald's shift represents the continuous negotiation through which capitalism attempts to resolve its inherent struggle between the bourgeois ruling elite and the working class, not through genuine transformation, but through performance and strategic obscuration. Marx and Engels' concept of false consciousness illustrate the ways in which the political elite construct collective thought in America to keep the proletariat from

realizing their enemy is not their fellow working-class citizens, but the bourgeoisie. The American worker remains simultaneously essential and invisible, a paradox that continues to define the contemporary political landscape. As long as these fundamental contradictions persist, the potential for genuine social liberation remains, waiting to be recognized, articulated, and realized.

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