

# Analysis of Historical Reform from Marxist Social Science Methodology -- Take Mohammed Alis Reform as an Example

**Haolong Pang**

*Shandong Normal University, Jinan, China  
kht566e@163.com*

**Abstract:** *Since human beings entered a civilized society, the research in the field of social sciences has been continuous, which has played a great role in improving the degree of civilization of human society. Especially since modern times, the research results in this area have been more remarkable. Marxist social science methodology is based on historical materialism, and strives to explore the general law of human social development. By using the content and theory of Marxist social science research methods to analyze the typical historical reform fact of Muhammad Alis reform in modern North Africa and Egypt, it can better reflect the historical research significance of Marxist social science theory.*

**Keywords:** *Marxism; Social Science Methodology; Historical materialism; Mohammed Ali Reform*

## 1. Introduction

*Muhammad Alis reform is a top-down modernization reform led by the enlightened feudal landlord class in Egypt in the modern 19th century. On the one hand, the reform adapted to the needs of productive forces development and the reality of Egypt, thus achieving great results and promoting Egypt to the road of enriching the country and strengthening the army. On the other hand, the reform was led and carried out by the declining feudal landlords and bureaucratic class under the backward feudal state system, which naturally carried a strong feudal remnant, resulting in imperfect reform, and finally failed under the domestic high-pressure rule and the intervention of foreign powers. However, the reform also embodies the concept of Marxist social science methodology. For example, the background of the reform embodies the research method of social contradiction, the content of the reform embodies the research method of the social system, and the significance of the reform also embodies the research method of social process. Therefore, through the concrete analysis of the reform, we can better analyze the reference significance of Marxist social science theory to China's current development.*

## 2. The background of Mohammed Alis reform combined with social contradiction research methods

### 2.1. Main social contradictions: sharp ethnic contradictions

Marx once pointed out: "Social contradictions are universal, and the law of the unity of opposites is the fundamental law of the development of things. The law of the unity of opposites reveals the fundamental content of the universal connection of things and the internal driving force of change and development, and fundamentally answers the question of why things develop."<sup>[1]</sup> However, contradictions universally exist in everything, and the contradictions of things are composed of many kinds, and the main contradictions are in a dominant position. The situation faced by the Egyptian people in modern North Africa is a typical example.

Since the rise of the Ottoman Turkish Empire in the 13th century, it has continuously expanded its territory to neighboring countries. After conquering the Eastern Roman Empire in 1453, it defeated the Mamluk Dynasty and conquered Egypt in the 16th century. Since then, it has continuously levied excessive taxes in Egypt, which has brought extremely profound disasters to the Egyptian nation and deepened the contradiction between the Turkish nation and the Egyptian nation. By the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, due to Egypt's unique geographical location and the

stepping up of Western powers' external expansion, France sent troops to Egypt. As Marx said, "We should apply the dialectical relationship between the main and secondary aspects of contradictions to practice and grasp the main contradictions and the main aspects of contradictions." At this time, the contradiction between the French colonists and the Egyptian nation replaced the contradiction between the domestic autocratic rule in Egypt and the Egyptian people and rose to the main contradiction of social contradictions. After the Egyptian people repelled the French invasion, British forces infiltrated Egypt and continued to woo the Mamluks, trying to establish long-term rule in Egypt and continue to enslave the Egyptian people. At this time, Britain replaced France, and the contradiction between British colonists and the Egyptian nation rose to the main aspect of social contradiction. The situation facing the Egyptian people is that only by driving away all foreign aggressive forces and putting an end to the decadent rule of the Mamluk can we safeguard the independence and autonomy of the country.<sup>[2]</sup>

When France and Britain invaded, the Egyptian people not only relied on their strength but also helped the sovereign state and domestic feudal forces to attack the British and French armies. It was precisely because the Egyptian people saw the main contradiction in the society at that time (the contradiction between foreign colonial forces and the Egyptian nation). According to the specific situation, they joined forces with Britain to resist France in the early stages. After seeing the colonial nature of Britain in the later stage, they also began to rise against Britain, grasping the key points to solve the main aspects of the contradiction first, that Egypt effectively repelled foreign aggression and safeguarded its independence and sovereignty, which reflected the thoroughness of Marxist social contradiction research methods in the analysis of contradictions in human history.

## **2.2. Social secondary contradictions: complex class contradictions**

In the modern history of Egypt, apart from the invasion of foreign colonial forces, the cruel exploitation of the Egyptian people by its own Mamluk feudal warlords ruling class is also an aspect of social contradiction. The years of Mamluk wars not only destroyed the social economy of Egypt but also made the people displaced. After the war, the feudal class deepened exploitation and suffered misery, which caused a profound class contradiction between the feudal class and the common people in Egypt.<sup>[3]</sup>

At that time, a class contradiction in Egypt was an important reason for social reform in Egypt, but it could only be a secondary contradiction. Under the threat of foreign colonial forces in an unprecedented crisis at that time, how to resist the invasion of foreign powers was what the Egyptian nation had to think about at that time. Just as Marxism emphasizes that contradictions have identity and struggle, the opposites of contradictions are interdependent and interconnected and can be transformed into each other under certain conditions. Under the actual conditions at that time, it was decided that the Egyptian people could not only strive for national independence through their struggle but also rely on the old feudal ruling class to help fight against foreign invaders. Therefore, Ali, a ruler whose class interests are completely different from those of the Egyptian masses, can win the support of the Egyptian masses. Ali took advantage of the Egyptian people's spirit of resisting foreign colonists and put on a legal coat for his power seizure. The Egyptian people also used Ali as the spiritual leader of the resistance and successfully repelled foreign colonial forces. Because of the support of the Egyptian masses, Ali can succeed, which stipulates that Ali must establish a political power that meets the needs of the interests of the masses. After that, Ali's establishment of feudal autocracy deviates from the needs of the people and violates the law of transformation of things, which dooms his reform to fail.

However, when we see the contradictory identity between the Egyptian ruling class and the people, we should not ignore the fundamental opposition of their class interests because the contradictory identity is conditional and relative. The reason why Ali was able to establish a feudal regime is that under the unprecedented, serious national crisis, he was united with a helpless special connection, and there was a great centrifugal force lurking, and their class contradictions reflected that the struggle of contradictions was unconditional and absolute. After repelling the foreign colonists, its contradictory struggle shifted to the main aspect.

## **3. The content of Mohammed Alis reform combined with social system research methods**

The Marxist social system research method strives to study society as a complex big system. Among them, there are not only the elements of productive forces and production relations but also the superstructure related to the construction of political and economic policies and systems, as well as the objective elements of population and natural environment. From the perspective of historical

materialism, through dialectical analysis, the elements of several subsystems are organically combined to form a large social organism structure. Through the study of this social organism and social form during Alis reform, the accuracy and importance of Marxist social system research methods can be better reflected.

### ***3.1. Dialectical relationship between productivity and production relations: economic reform***

Under the rule of Mamluks in modern Egypt, a decadent tax system prevailed in rural Egypt. After paying a fixed tax package to the rulers, the tax collectors exploited the productivity of the Egyptian people by various more severe exploitation means. As Marx said, "Productive forces determine the relations of production, and the relations of production have an active reaction to the productive forces." However, because Egypt's decadent feudal relations of production are bound by the failure to adapt to the developed productive forces, it is difficult for capitalism to grow up. As the saying goes, productive forces are the ultimate decisive force of social development. It originates from the needs of people's survival and development, and it always develops forward, which leads to the constant transformation of production relations.<sup>[4]</sup> Therefore, Ali abolished the traditional tax system in terms of economy, nationalized the land, divided it into small pieces and gave it to farmers. He only paid a fixed amount of land tax to avoid intermediate exploitation, partially improved feudal production relations and promoted the adaptability of Egypt's productivity and production relations.

Ali also cleverly used the natural environment system to build canals using the irrigation of the Nile River. The increase in irrigation and water conservancy expanded Egypt's cultivated land area. He also planted cash crops such as sugarcane and cotton, which increased Egypt's foreign trade income and promoted the development of productive forces. Marx also pointed out: "Other aspects of production relations also have an important influence and restrictive effect on the ownership of the means of production. When they adapt to the requirements of the nature of ownership, they will play a role in consolidating and developing the ownership of the means of production. On the contrary, it will weaken and disintegrate the ownership of the means of production. In terms of commerce, Ali implements a state monopoly commercial system. The government funds the purchase of farmers' goods and prohibits farmers from buying and selling freely. The state also monopolizes the sales of handicraft products. Under the historical conditions at that time, farmers and artisans were unable to trade with foreign countries on a large scale. The government implemented state ownership of commercial means of production, which met the requirements of Egypt's fragile ownership relationship at that time and greatly promoted the prosperity of industry, agriculture and foreign trade.

Then, Ali founded a number of modern factories, such as textile, tanning, sugar, etc. He introduced new and advanced machines in the factories, which greatly improved the efficiency of commodity production.<sup>[5]</sup> As Marx said, "Science and technology, as an important symbol of advanced productive forces, play a great role in promoting social development." Although the modern production machines in modern factories retain a certain degree of feudal personal exploitation relationship, they absorb advanced science and technology and adopt an advanced capitalist mode of production, which promotes the growth of modern Egyptian national industry.

### ***3.2. Dialectical relationship between economic base and superstructure: political reform***

Marxism points out: "The superstructure must adapt to the law of the economic foundation. The economic foundation and superstructure are dialectically unified. The economic foundation determines the superstructure and the superstructure reacts on the economic foundation, which influences and interacts with each other." Ali was carrying out a series of economic reforms, and the original political system could no longer meet the needs of the newly grown capitalist economic system, so he first eliminated the decaying Mamluk class that had ruled the country for hundreds of years and removed the remnants of the old superstructure. Then, he strengthened the centralization of power, imitated the Western capitalist countries, and set up a cabinet with seven ministries, including military, judicial and health ministries, all of which were appointed by Ali. He also reformed the local administrative system and implemented strict political rules.<sup>[6]</sup> After the reform, the growth of Egypt's capitalist economy determined that Egypt's political system should meet the needs of capitalist development. Ali carried out a series of political reforms, got rid of corruption, and established a centralized system to adapt to the development of a unified country, which made Egypt's superstructure adapt to the changes of its economic foundation and promoted the prosperity of Egypt.

### ***3.3. The dialectical relationship between social existence and social consciousness: cultural and educational reform***

Marx once said, "Social existence and social consciousness are dialectically united; social existence determines social consciousness and social consciousness reacts to social existence." Egypt's social consciousness at that time, that is, the most core national thought, had to be reformed accordingly to adapt to the present situation of social existence after political and economic reform; otherwise, it could not develop further. Social existence is the objective source of the content of social consciousness. Social consciousness is rooted in social existence and reflects the constantly changing and developing real-world based on practice.<sup>[7]</sup> At that time, the reality of low traditional religious culture and national cultural quality in Egypt obviously could not adapt to the changes in social existence. Ali focused on building a number of non-religious secular schools and colleges, such as language, architecture, medicine and other specialized schools, and actively sent overseas students to study in developed countries in Europe and America, which trained a number of advanced scientific and technical personnel for Egypt's modernization reform. Just as the reaction of social consciousness to social existence can provide intellectual support for social development. Ali's reform in culture and education soon trained a group of high-quality talents, comprehensively improved the cultural and moral level and comprehensive quality of the Egyptian people, and expanded the degree of civilization of the Egyptian country.

### ***3.4. Important Principles of Social Systems: Military Reform***

The principle of integrity emphasizes starting from the whole, taking the whole as the destination, and analyzing the relationship among the parts that make up the whole to reveal the law of social development. After the economic, political, cultural and educational reforms, Ali naturally could not ignore the military reform because, at that time, only a strong military force could effectively resist foreign invasion. Without the guarantee of military force, other reforms cannot be talked about. This is the embodiment of the holistic principle of social system research methods, and the overall social structure cannot operate without a part. So, Ali built a number of modern military factories and shipyards, abolished the traditional mercenary system, implemented a conscription system, built a new army equipped with new weapons, built infantry, cavalry, and artillery schools, and hired French instructors. He also vigorously developed the navy, established two fleets in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, and purchased warships from abroad.<sup>[8]</sup> These measures have greatly improved the combat effectiveness of Egypt's army and provided a guarantee for defending the country. If Egypt had not carried out economic reform to improve the backward feudal relations of production, political reform to expand centralization, and cultural and educational reform to improve the national spirit and comprehensive quality of the people, then the military reform would not have been successful. It is in this systematic, holistic and structural principle that Egypt's reform achieved the goal of enriching the country and strengthening the army, which also provided a feasible way for China's modernization drive and reflected the thoroughness of Marxist social system research methods to historical research.

## **4. The impact of Muhammad Ali's reform combined with social process research methods**

Marxism emphasizes that the social and historical process is progressive and tortuous, and the social form of human society is constantly advancing from low level to high level, but the process is not smooth sailing and always encounters some setbacks. Moreover, there are subject selectivity and objective regularity in the social and historical process. If we can conform to the objective laws and make correct choices, we will be able to succeed, otherwise we will fall into failure. The influence of Ali's reform reflects these aspects.

### ***4.1. Positive aspects***

The objectivity of the law of social history does not deny people's subjective initiative in historical activities and does not exclude people's historical selectivity for certain social forms on the basis of following the law of social development. People's historical choice of social forms depends on their fundamental interests, fundamental wishes and the degree of grasping and conforming to the law of social development.<sup>[9]</sup> After Ali's reform, Egypt did not fundamentally change the old feudal relations of production and feudal system, but only established a new feudal dynasty. However, despite the severe scene of internal and external troubles in Egypt at that time, it was more conducive to defending the

country and developing the economy in the form of great unification. Moreover, a series of policies promulgated by Alis reform met the interests of the people and adapted to the objective regularity of the transition from feudalism to capitalism in social history. For example, educational reform adapted to the development of the times and enlightened the thoughts of modern Egyptian people, economic reform made Egypt's traditional industrial and commercial cities revive again, secularization reform promoted the separation of religion and politics, and laid the foundation for the construction of civilized country.<sup>[10]</sup> Therefore, the reform not only promoted the rapid growth of modern Egypt's national industry and accelerated Egypt's industrialization process but also increased its military strength, greatly enhanced Egypt's national strength, and made Egypt an independent and powerful sovereign country. The development process of social history is conscious, planned and conscious, and it is the result of human activities. Alis's reform was carried out with the support of the Egyptian people, and his reform that conforms to the objective laws of historical development and people's interests will naturally achieve great results. This is one aspect of the development law of human history discovered by Marx.

#### 4.2. Negative aspects

In the process of social and historical development, objective regularity and subject selectivity are dialectically unified in social practice activities. These laws are objective and independent of human will. Although Alis reform improved the feudal relations of production to a certain extent and met the needs of capitalist economic development, it did not fundamentally change the original feudal relations of production in Egypt but also deepened the farmer's attachment to the ruling group. The commercial monopoly system also greatly aggravated the burden of the Egyptian people, and he continued to expand everywhere, which aggravated the suffering of the Egyptian masses, led to their constant uprising and resistance, seriously weakened the foundation of Alis rule, and finally led to the collapse of Alis regime. As Marx said, "The basic social contradiction is the fundamental driving force of social development, the contradiction between productive forces and production relations, economic foundation and superstructure is the basic contradiction of society, and class struggle is also the main driving force of class social development." Alis successive years of wars destroyed Egypt's newly growing economic and productive achievements, which highlights the contradiction between productive forces and production relations, economic foundation and superstructure in Egypt highlighted again. Ali, as an outstanding representative of modern Egypt's historical figure, won national independence on behalf of the people in the early stage and carried out a series of reforms in the middle stage of the policy, which was also conducive to the modernization of Egypt. However, the militaristic policy and the nature of the ruling class he promoted in the late period made him deviate from the voice of the people. Moreover, Ali himself represents the interests of the traditional feudal class. He can only carry out the reform within the scope allowed by the feudal system, which will inevitably violate the interests of the people and the law of social history. This is also the historical failure of his reform.<sup>[11]</sup> It also reflects the correct grasp of the objective laws of social history by Marxist social science methods.

#### 5. Conclusion

Marxist social science methodology clearly analyzes the background, content and influence of historical reform. On the one hand, its social contradiction research method not only sees the main contradiction of foreign colonial invasion in modern Egypt and the primary and secondary aspects of contradictions in various periods but also sees the internal class secondary contradiction. On the other hand, the content of the reform is put on the principle of the whole social system, and the advantages and disadvantages of the reform are analyzed. Finally, it demonstrates the positive and negative effects of the reform and whether it violates the objective laws of social history. This not only shows the applicability of Marxist social science methodology to the study of the social science field but also plays a great reference significance for studying and absorbing historical experiences and lessons.

#### References

- [1] Liu Jianjun et al.(2018). *Introduction to the Basic Principles of Marxism*. Beijing: Higher Education Press, 37.
- [2] Wu Yuxi, Qi Shirong(2011). *Modern History of World History (Volume 2)*. Beijing: Higher Education Press, 159.

- [3] Lu Tingen(1979). *Comment on Muhammad Alis reform. World History*, (4): 72-73.
- [4] Xu Mingqing(2022). *A brief discussion on the driving force of social development. Political Economy Research*, (1): 33.
- [5] Lei Yu, Su Ruilin(2003). *General History of Middle Eastern Countries-Egypt Volume. Beijing: The Commercial Press*, 194.
- [6] Ai Zhouchang, Lu Tingen(1990). *General History of Africa-Modern Volume. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press*, 195.
- [7] Meng Qingren(2002). *On the contradictory movement between social existence and social consciousness. Dongyue Luncong*, (6): 61-62.
- [8] Lei Yu, Su Ruilin(2003). *General History of Middle Eastern Countries-Egypt Volume. Beijing: The Commercial Press*, 193-194.
- [9] Mao Huabin(2006). *Axiological Thinking on the Law of Social and Historical Development-Also on the Objectivity of Social Law. Journal of Hubei Institute of Adult Education*, (6): 48.
- [10] Chen Tianshe, Chang Xiaodong(2021). *Exploration of Educational Reform during Muhammad Alis Reform Period in Egypt. Arab World Studies*, (4): 35-38.
- [11] Pan Guang(2013). *The enlightenment of Muhammad Alis reform on national governance. Arab World Studies*, (3): 25-27.