It is perhaps fitting that the first footnote of Marcus Roberts’s critique of analytical Marxism should refer to Perry Anderson. It is now nearly a quarter of a century since, on the publication of Lineages of the Absolutist State, Anderson’s creative juices became exhausted. But Anderson’s trademark olympian dismissiveness does not lack for imitators and Marcus Roberts – himself published by the great man’s own house – provides us with some splendid examples of the style. The neatly placed bon mot, the witty little parody, the deft use of a clever quotation, and the ironic use of the rhetorical question: all are deployed with verve. The hazard of deploying this rhetoric, however, is that one leaves oneself vulnerable to more of the same: as a certain thinker once wrote, ‘de te fabula narratur’.

Which is not to say that this is a bad book, by any means. On the contrary, Roberts gives broadly accurate summaries of the main theses espoused by both G.A. Cohen and John Roemer and has something to say about a number of the other analytical Marxists – particularly Erik Olin Wright and Adam Przeworski. Critical as he is, though, of what all of these thinkers have to say, the book betrays a deep ambivalence towards their thought. The more he reads, the more Roberts confronts what Lord Denning might have called an ‘appalling vista’. Namely, that the analytical Marxists may have – despite themselves – undermined rather than reconstructed the central claims of Marxian social science. If so, then what remains? Many of the original analytical Marxists have concluded that we can divorce the ethical commitments of socialism from the social scientific claims of Marxism and that attention must be given to clarifying and examining those commitments. Does Roberts dissent? It is hard to tell. Certainly, he thinks that ethical arguments are rather feeble weapons in the face of global capitalism (and who would disagree?). But, although a total theory of the type classical Marxism proclaimed itself to be would – if true – be both useful and reassuring in the face of our current political predicament, it is precisely that truth that is at issue. Lenin may have proclaimed, in one of Louis Althusser’s favourite sayings, that ‘Marxism is all powerful because it is true’. What of its power if it is not?

In the ‘Preface’ to this work, Roberts addresses himself to these questions, but does not give any satisfactory answer. He tells us that some of his readers have suggested that his arguments presuppose the health of some alternative, non-analytical, Marxism. His readers are right about this: he does often write as if there were some other Marxist school (unnamed) which is – unlike analytical Marxism – in good
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order. But when the question is posed explicitly, Roberts denies that he believes any such thing. This ambiguous attitude marks and in the end mars the book.

What is analytical Marxism?

The first problem that must confront someone contemplating a critique of analytical Marxism is that this 'school' displays an alarming lack of unity. It is not just that the main protagonists of analytical Marxism disagree about the 'analytical' part, with some pursuing a slash-and-burn programme of methodological individualism, whilst others permit a mild anti-reductionism. Some of the 'analytical Marxists' aren't even (do not even pretend to be) Marxists. This is true, for instance of Philippe Van Parijs who is misdescribed as an exponent of analytical Marxism on p. 207. On the methodological front, commitments range from enthusiastic to sceptical concerning 'rational choice' theory and are sufficiently heterodox to allow for the inclusion of Erik Olin Wright, despite his penchant for the work of Althusser. As Roberts himself points out, one of the most methodologically aggressive of the original analytical Marxists – Jon Elster – is, in a number of works, also one of the most trenchant and sophisticated critics of that approach.

So what is, methodologically speaking, distinctive about analytical Marxism? My own view is that it is best to emphasise the negative: analytical Marxism denies that Marxism is methodologically distinct from 'bourgeois' social science. It does not employ any special methods or logic of its own and claims that those attempts that have been made to do so have been part of immunisation strategies designed to shield Marxism from the kind of critical reflection that should be applied to any body of knowledge.

Now, of course, what the standards for evidence and argument ought to be may be a moot point. But, and here is the key point, whatever they ought to be is a matter for epistemology and the philosophy of science, and Marxism – as Marxism – has (or rather ought to have) nothing whatever distinctive to say on those matters.

What does Roberts himself think? It is hard to tell. The most sustained discussion of the philosophy of science in the book takes place at pp. 63–72 in the context of a critique of Cohen’s allegedly positivist account of science. Roberts quotes approvingly from both Sean Sayers – who contrasts a dialectical method to that employed by positivism – and Richard Miller who is, arguably, himself an analytical Marxist. But what is meant by ‘positivism’ here? Again, it is hard to tell, since Popper is mysteriously enlisted to their ranks (which would have been news to Carnap et al.). The apparent target of Roberts’s remarks is Cohen’s adherence to the deductive-nomological model promoted by Hempel and Nagel and we are told, rather sniffily, that ‘the leading Analytical Marxists have signally failed to engage with recent work in the