

Book Review: Model Cases: On Canonical Research Objects and Sites by Monika Krause

In Model Cases: On Canonical Research Objects and Sites, Monika Krause explores how scholars select research objects and the consequences of these processes, focusing particularly on the social sciences. This highly instructive book will encourage readers to reflect on collective research patterns and their role in the collective production of knowledge, writes [Vera Linke](#).

Model Cases: On Canonical Research Objects and Sites. Monika Krause. University of Chicago Press. 2021.

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What do we as scholars look at when we do research? That is the simple but effective question that underlies Monika Krause's highly instructive new book, [Model Cases](#). Of course, there are plenty of publications that reflect on the methods scientists use to collect and analyse data. Justifying one's research design is, after all, part and parcel of scientific reflexivity. Krause argues, however, that comparatively little attention has been paid to how we select the research objects from which we derive our data and draw our conclusions.

Krause notes that in many disciplines, decisions about the object to be studied cumulate into 'privileged material research objects' – or 'model cases', as she calls them. For biologists, the fruit fly rather than the bee has become a model organism, and social scientists usually study the French Revolution instead of the Haitian one, or the city of Chicago instead of Atlanta. Once model cases have become established in their disciplines, they appear as legitimate ways to learn more about the scientific object of interest (the 'epistemic target'), whether the organism, the revolution or the city. Using examples from biology, the social sciences and the humanities, Krause entices her readers to ask how such privileged objects influence the production of knowledge in their respective fields of research.

The aim, here, is to promote an open debate that explores both the merits and the limits of research that is based on model cases. And though Krause's book starts this debate off by offering some suggestions on how model cases affect research, above all it is a call for more reflexivity. Krause argues that one can neither fully exploit the advantages of using model cases nor mitigate their disadvantages without reflecting on collective research patterns. And seeing that biologists have already developed traditions of reflecting on their model systems, Krause – herself a sociologist – looks to the social sciences, which have hardly used their reliance on model cases to discuss the quality of their work.

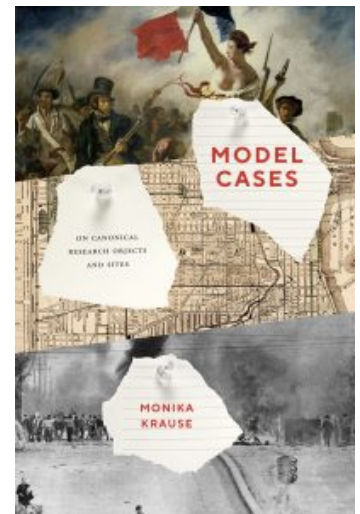




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The book is full of remarkable observations, but I want to comment on three interesting points that pervade Krause's analysis: first, how the 'logic of model cases' relates to other logics of selecting cases; second, the particularity of social science's relation to its research objects; and third, the normative implications that follow from thinking about model cases.

First, while biologists use model cases to determine research objects, Krause points to other paths such as the logic of coverage (objects are significant because they have not been studied before) or the logic of application (objects are opportunities to apply previous findings). The relationship between these logics is not systematically discussed in the book, but Chapters Five and Six nicely display the differences between the logic of model cases and the logic of application. Krause traces, for example, what happens when our colleagues gain in reputation and their findings are applied to new settings. The research objects that once formed the basis for their insights – such as Bruno Latour's laboratories – are then no longer cases that are questioned and explored in new studies. Research interest shifts from understanding scientific work through the case of laboratories to understanding other empirical cases or social structures in general through Latour's terminology, which itself becomes a kind of obligatory passage point.

A detailed follow-up discussion to this process would have been interesting to evaluate the effects of application logics, especially because there seem to be different varieties. In some instances, the laboratory remains present, but now takes the role of a [conceptual reference point](#) or a [metaphor](#). Certainly, ['all the world is not a' laboratory](#). Nevertheless, such approaches can easily reflect on how conceptual insights are tied to specific material research objects. A different kind of logic of application, however, is evident in Krause's commentary on debates about Eurocentric and postcolonial social theory. Here, she demonstrates how analyses are generalised in such a way that the initial research object – a very small number of select countries – disappears into universalist statements that are then applied without considering and reflecting the material particularity of their origin.

Second, *Model Cases* draws on examples from biology to ponder practices of case selection in the social sciences. In Chapter Two, for instance, Krause questions whether methodological debates about the ‘right’ reasons for choosing a research object grasp how case selection actually comes about. Using examples from biology, she contrasts this focus on strategy with the more mundane aspects of science, especially the collective nature of research endeavours, as well as external factors. Introducing the term of ‘sponsored’ research objects, Krause lists various factors that influence selection, providing examples from the social sciences. Here, selection may be influenced by the degree of convenience in data retrieval; by publicly established schemas; by activists who protest exclusion; or by attempts of some research objects to sponsor themselves.

Unfortunately, Krause does not use this chapter to delve more deeply into the question of how reactivity in social scientific research impacts the use of model cases. Elsewhere in the book, she briefly mentions that the social sciences do not and cannot standardise their research objects to the same degree as biologists can. But she does not further elaborate on whether model cases can be durable in the social sciences or whether reactivity drives the social sciences towards a combination of logics of coverage (for instance, an anti-privileging movement) and logics of application (as a more covert form of privileging research objects).

Third, the conclusion of the book deserves attention in itself, because it leads us to the normative question of what ‘good science’ is. Throughout the book, Krause adds comments about ‘what we need more of’ and ‘what we have enough of’ in terms of case selection. These suggestions, though instructive, divert attention from the goal of weighing the benefits and limits of working with model cases. But in the conclusion, Krause comments on the trade-offs among the various criteria for good science. She problematises the collective goal of cumulation and contrasts it with that of scientific conservation. If, as the latter assumes, ‘knowledge cannot be taken for granted once created’, then the social sciences should institutionalise reminders of (once covered but) currently less privileged cases, thereby cultivating diversity of material research objects. While one can remain critical of whether the book’s analysis warrants Krause’s normative conclusions, propositions such as adding teaching to the hitherto privileged form of scholarly communication, original research contributions, will inspire readers to reflect on our line of work.

Model Cases is not a how-to book on how to justify one’s own research. It is a book that makes us think about the collective research patterns that we are a part of. As such, it can be recommended to a range of readers: to social scientists interested in a sociology of sociology; to graduate students thinking about the reasons for and consequences of selecting research objects; and to scholars pondering their role in the collective production of knowledge.

- This review first appeared at [LSE Review of Books](#).

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About the reviewer

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Vera Linke is a sociologist and post-doc research associate at Helmut Schmidt University, Hamburg. In her doctoral thesis at Bielefeld University, she conducted a historical-sociological analysis of how insurance phenomena were categorised and evaluated at the intersection of economic and political debates – using the model case of nineteenth-century Britain. Her current project focuses on the question of how small and medium-sized organisations in the German and Swiss welfare sectors process, make sense of and use technological reforms.