Comparing bodies of knowledge: units, intensities and disciplines

Matei Candea
Professor of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge

This paper reprises some of the enduring ways in which the necessity and impossibility of a ‘comparative method’ has haunted anthropology, and asks how these intra-disciplinary conundrums might feed into an inter-disciplinary conversation with Egyptology. I will be focusing in particular on the dreaded ‘problem of units’ (what constitutes an interesting, workable or legitimate unit of comparison?), and suggesting some of the ways the problem might be turned on its head, once we accept that comparison is not merely a solitary intellectual endeavour but actually an immanent, worldly and relational practice. Whilst this insight can be applied to the comparative investigation of bodies, it can also be brought to bear on the comparative investigation of disciplinary knowledges. Revisiting recent explorations of the relationship between Egyptology and anthropology and their differing relations to theory, the paper asks in closing what might happen if anthropology were seen not as a donor, but as a recipient, of theoretical insight in that relationship - how, in other words, might anthropological comparison be enriched by Egyptological concepts?

Matei Candea is Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. His research interests focus on understanding ethics, epistemics, materiality, and politics, with an emphasis on the analysis of conceptual and social forms and formalisms. Candea's fieldwork has been regionally centred in Europe and the Mediterranean, with a particular focus on France. He is the author of Corsican Fragments (Indiana 2010) and Comparison in anthropology (Cambridge 2019), and most recently the editor (with Fedirko, Heywood and Wright) of the forthcoming volume Anthropologies of Free Speech (Toronto University Press).