In many studies, the concept of social distinction is used without a sufficient awareness of the fact that there may be more at stake than simply questions of status or class. We have become so accustomed to equating ‘distinction’ with the sense of superiority manifested by dominant groups that we tend to forget how the notion can potentially concern all sorts of social categories and types of differentiation. The desire to stand out also includes forms of affirmation that are not necessarily reducible to mechanisms of internal hierarchy. It is important therefore to recognise that the identities and perceptions at play may transcend boundaries between strata and bind people whose positions in society are very different.

In this chapter, I would like to discuss an aspect of one such neglected phenomenon. I shall refer to it (for lack of a better word) as communal distinction. If elites usually seek to establish pre-eminence within their own social system, they also frequently try to uphold the superiority of their communities or polities over other similar entities. These communal forms of distinction may encompass cities, countries, and more informal identities which unite both leaders and followers. It can be considered that what we are dealing with here are matters of a socio-political nature, especially so since elites often wish to stand for their place or people. After first offering some general reflections on these communal dimensions of distinction, I will devote a second section to the topic of representation – which proves most enlightening from the relativist viewpoint defended in this book.

Expressions of communal distinction

If high-status groups and individuals can be measured in terms of prestige, the same applies to entire polities, regardless of the respective social level.
of their members. In these cases, as was briefly pointed out in Chapter 2, the symbolic struggle takes place between separate and cohesive units rather than between social strata. We should not lose sight either of the fact that, for centuries, the only significant line of divide ran between one’s community and those that lay beyond it. As far back as antiquity, elites have shown some degree of concern for the impression conveyed by their symbolic environment and treated it as something that could affect their own standing and honour. It is difficult to disentangle retrospectively whether what they had in mind was a competition between ‘their world’ and that of their foes or a more specific rivalry opposing them to their foreign peers. In any case, however, what remains clear is that evaluations often and repeatedly relied on elements reflecting a shared local pride. One famous illustration is provided by what was labelled as ‘campanilismo’ during the Italian Renaissance – that is, a sense of parochial patriotism fuelled by challenges from rival cities which led to the building of increasingly imposing public edifices and notably of ever-taller and more distinctive towers.\(^1\) As most of us can attest first-hand, this sort of trend has survived in the present world.

Indeed, elites still tend to identify closely with the place from which they come and show preoccupation for reputations in the plural rather than simply with their own singular image. As a result, when studying contemporary societies, the specialist of social distinction regularly encounters, alongside the other more usual and expected forms of distinction, logics of the following kind: the inhabitants of a city, region, or federate state contending that they are more urbane than their ‘coarse neighbours’, claiming status through precedence or avant-gardism. A wide range of features, from impressive architecture to far less visible markers, can contribute to a collective sense of self-importance.\(^2\)

I consider it mistaken to envisage this aspect of distinction as something secondary or as implying a sort of ‘false consciousness’ that acts as a mere cover for more essential social divides.\(^3\) This does not mean, of course, that we should be naive with regard to the links that may exist between claims of superiority on behalf of an entire community and the self-assertion of its upper groups. Quite the opposite, in keeping with our central theme, we will examine the relations between these two levels throughout. That being said, I think it is possible to differentiate between at least four types of communal distinction. The first is associated with euergetism; the second with emulation between elites; the third with patrimonial networks; and the fourth with public authorities.

\(^{1}\) Euergetism is a neologism coined to designate the specific practice, common in Hellenistic Greece (and later in ancient Rome), whereby