

A stratified society: citizens, burghers, natives, residents

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The prosperity of the eighteenth century went hand in hand with a pronounced social and legal stratification. The population of Geneva was divided into several categories with different rights. The citizens, sons of citizens or of burghers born in the city, could hold any public office. The burghers, who had purchased burgher status, took part in the General Council but could not occupy certain functions. The natives, born in Geneva to resident parents, were deprived of political rights and excluded from certain trades. The residents, foreigners authorised to live in the city, had even more limited rights. The subjects, finally, were the inhabitants of the Genevan countryside.¹

This hierarchy had considerable economic consequences. Access to master status in several trades of the Fabrique was reserved for citizens and burghers, which confined the natives to subordinate positions. The high price of burgher status limited the social advancement of the less wealthy families of refugee origin. Public offices, and therefore political power, were concentrated in the hands of a small number of patrician families, who sat in the Petit Conseil (Small Council) and controlled the State.

The natives, who were growing ever more numerous, resented these discriminations. Many of them were skilled and educated craftsmen who contributed to the city's prosperity without being able to take part in its government or to gain access to the most lucrative positions in the Fabrique. Their demands would feed the political unrest of the eighteenth century, which Chapter V describes.

Genevan society of the eighteenth century thus presents a striking contrast. It was one of the best-educated and most prosperous societies in Europe, and one of the most unequal in terms of political rights. This tension between economic prosperity and political exclusion would be one of the driving forces of Genevan history until the end of the Ancien Régime.

Caution. The prosperity of eighteenth-century Geneva rested on a legal hierarchy that excluded the majority of the population from political power and from certain economic activities. The great fortunes of the financial centre were formed within this framework, whose tensions provoked repeated political crises.

1 Notes

1. Archives d'État de Genève (Geneva State Archives), "Genève au XVIIIe siècle" (archives-etat-ge.ch): citizens (full political rights), burghers (limited participation), natives (sons of residents, admitted to all trades after 1738), residents (foreigners and their descendants, excluded from the "noble" professions) and subjects (rural population without political rights); natives and residents, "without any political rights, [...] would have to wait until the end of the century". ↩

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