

Représentants and Négatifs

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

In the middle of the century, Genevan political life came to be organised around two parties. The “Représentants” defended the rights of the Conseil général and made use of the right of representation, that is to say the right to submit grievances to the councils. The “Négatifs” supported the government and the right of the Petit Conseil to reject these representations, the “droit négatif”.¹

The condemnation of Rousseau’s books by the Petit Conseil, at the beginning of the 1760s, reignited the conflict. The Représentants saw in it an abuse of power and an infringement of the rights of the citizens. Rousseau himself, in his *Lettres écrites de la montagne*, attacked the Genevan government and defended the prerogatives of the Conseil général.² The crisis lasted several years and gave rise to a further mediation. It concluded with an edict, adopted at the end of the 1760s, which granted the Représentants certain concessions and opened a few new rights to the natifs.³

The natifs, growing in number and often active in the Fabrique, now constituted an actor in their own right. They demanded access to the bourgeoisie, to the masterships of the trades and to political rights. Their demands aroused the distrust of both parties of citizens, who feared losing their privileges. Tensions flared, and from the 1770s the natifs demanded economic equality and easier access to the bourgeoisie.⁴

These conflicts had economic consequences. They created a climate of uncertainty that discouraged investment. They drove skilled artisans to emigrate to other towns, notably Ferney, Neuchâtel, Constance and London. They weakened the social cohesion on which the prosperity of the Fabrique rested. For the capitalists, they served as a reminder that the political stability of the Republic could not be taken for granted, which encouraged them to place a growing share of their wealth abroad.

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS; Historical Dictionary of Switzerland), art. “Représentants”: name applied from 1762, at the time of the Rousseau affair, to the members of the popular party, on account of their demand to make unrestricted use of the right of “representation”; a movement “formed mainly of citizens and bourgeois drawn from the middle and lower bourgeoisie (above all artisans)”, aiming “to establish the sovereignty of the people”; DHS, art. “Révolutions genevoises”: the edict of pacification of November 1782 was “favourable to the Négatifs”. ↩
2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Lettres écrites de la montagne*, Amsterdam, Marc-Michel Rey, 1764 (Wikipédia fr): a reply to the *Lettres écrites de la campagne* of Jean-Robert Tronchin (1763), which justified the condemnation of Émile and the Contrat social by the Petit Conseil in 1762; the first five letters contest the sentence, the sixth defends the Contrat social and the last three support the Représentants by denouncing the “droit négatif” of the Petit Conseil; the work was burned in Paris and The Hague and banned in Bern. ↩
3. Wikipédia (fr), art. “Révolution genevoise”: compromise of 9 March 1768, formalised by the edict of conciliation of 11 March 1768, which opened access to the bourgeoisie each year to five families of natifs. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Natifs” (Martine Piguet): the natifs, “men born in Geneva to a father who was a habitant or himself a natif”, represented 46% of the population in 1781 while being deprived of political rights and of the economic privileges reserved for the bourgeois; their demands were met with the revolution of 12 December 1792. ↩
4. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Révolutions genevoises” (Dominique Quadroni): “From the 1770s, the natifs demanded economic equality and easier access to the bourgeoisie”; the foreign mediation of Bern, Zurich and France imposed in 1782 an edict of pacification favourable to the Négatifs, which the Représentants called the “code noir”, before the revolution of December 1792; DHS, art. “Natifs” (Martine Piguet): the natifs made up 46% of the Genevan population in 1781. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/geneva-representants-and-negatifs