A place in the sun
Lampedusa's The Leopard chronicles the struggle of the Sicilian aristocracy to survive in the face of social change. It is an enduring myth, says Jonathan Jones

The art of politics is an Italian invention - politics as a self-conscious way of acting and thinking. A modern awareness that human affairs are not transparent, but devious, complex and unpredictable, dates from the Italian Renaissance with its mixture of ruthlessness, ambition, fantasy, failure and self-knowledge given voice by the first modern political thinker, Niccolò Machiavelli.

In his 1513 work, Il Principe (The Prince), Machiavelli created a monster that has haunted politics ever since. For centuries the author and his Prince were seen as antichrists and early editions of The Prince in English come with notes piously refuting his cynicism. Even today, the description Machiavellian is routinely used to denote any form of political action that challenges our quaint notions of good faith and moral authenticity. Machiavelli's Prince is not a practical advice manual aimed at any specific individual - rather it creates a fantastic creature, a kind of armoured colossus bestriding (and in Machiavelli's precocious dream, uniting) Italy.

Machiavelli was a dramatist - his Mandragola is the one Italian Renaissance comedy that can still raise laughs - and the Machiavel was to become a type on the Jacobean stage. This is central to his achievement. The ever-thoughtful, ever-ruthless political anti-hero who strides and feints through the pages of The Prince is precisely and potently, as the Marxist Antonio Gramsci recognised, mythic. In Machiavelli's fictive masterpiece, said Gramsci, "political ideology and political science are fused in the dramatic form of a 'myth'."
It would be asking too much of Italian literature to produce a second such political myth. But this is what happened when, in 1958, Feltrinelli Editore in Milan brought out a novel by an obscure Palermitan aristocrat who had died the year before. Prince Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's posthumous, unfinished work Il Gattopardo (The Leopard), was at once hailed a masterpiece. It possesses the descriptive and analytic power not simply of one of the most beguiling 20th-century novels but one of the modern world's definitive political fictions. Lampedusa's irresistible creation, the Prince of Salina, a physical giant of a man who unconsciously bends cutlery and crushes ornaments when he is in a dark mood, is a Prince as seductive as Machiavelli's.

Against all our prejudices, we empathise with his subtle, undeceived and fatalistic attempts to preserve his family's virtually feudal power at the time of the Risorgimento, the unification of Italy, in 1860. The Leopard's dictum that "everything must change so that everything can stay the same" has become an ironic historical maxim quoted again and again to describe Sicily, Italy, the nature of history and the resourceful ways of power.

Open any book on subjects from the Mafia (The Godfather is in many ways a popularisation of The Leopard) to the failure of the 1968 revolutions in Europe and you will probably find that quote. In Italy and its Discontents 1980-2001, Paul Ginsborg argues that for the first time, the phrase no longer applies to Italy; with the decline of the industrial working class "the mid-1970s were precisely the moment when everything began to change and not, pace Tomasi di Lampedusa, to stay the same".

Where Machiavelli created a myth of action, of the bold ruler who violently tames Fortune, Lampedusa's Sicilian Prince believes the opposite: that we are the prisoners of history, of place, of custom, even of climate, and that the most you can hope to do is maintain what you have by playing along with history.

Lampedusa's sense of history is double: there are events, but these events are somehow illusory, superficial, and behind them, below them, the deep habits of power, subordination, and corruption abide. But where is this true - in Sicily, in Italy, or everywhere?
Lampedusa's book has become a morbidly seductive guidebook to the island, its glamour and despair; the sensual revelling in decrepit palaces, burnt landscapes studded with temples, sugary pasticceria (Lampedusa spent a lot of time in cake shops) and the magnificent ball in a gilded Palermo salon that is so gloriously visualised in Visconti's just re-released 1963 film of the book, make you breathe Sicily.

In Leonardo Sciascia's 1961 novel The Day of the Owl, the first book to systematically describe the reality of the Sicilian Mafia and portray it as a comprehensive crisis of the body politic, an idealistic policeman from Parma in northern Italy who wants to show his knowledge of Sicily loves "passing Sicilian literature in review from Verga to The Leopard". He takes Lampedusa's word as anthropological truth, as well as - in a novel that appeared just three years after The Leopard - placing it on a par with Giovanni Verga, the great 19th-century verismo writer whose Cavalleria Rusticana was turned into an opera by Mascagni in 1890.

Lampedusa set his novel at the exact historical moment when Sicily came into direct contact with the forward movement of history, the history of nations, or progress, of democracy and social justice. "May, 1860", the first chapter, is emphatically dated. On May 11 1860 Garibaldi and his volunteer army, the Thousand, landed at Marsala on Sicily's west coast, aiming to kickstart a revolution in the south (the Bourbon kingdom, the Two Sicilies, included Sicily and Naples), to widen the movement for national unification that was spearheaded by Piedmont in the north, and to march on Rome. The decisive act in Italian unification happened, implausibly, in Sicily.

Garibaldi is always offstage in The Leopard, as are the battles, demonstrations and marches. We are shut in a cool palace with the Prince as he wonders what to do, making choices that are both brilliant - publicly approving of the "revolution", marrying his ambitious but penniless nephew Tancredi to a nouveau riche beauty, but refusing the offer of a seat in the new national Senate - and in the long term pointless. In the long term, his class is doomed.

From our distanced, ironic perspective - The Leopard is also an amateur astronomer and his view of events is telescopically cold and precise - we see the almost instant disillusion with what begins as a noble enterprise. Like the Italian medieval battles Machiavelli scorned for their lack of casualties or significance, the struggle for Sicily is not much of a struggle.

The initial talk of revolution fades, and Tancredi, who begins as a follower of Garibaldi, becomes a regular officer in the army of the Piedmontese, expressing contempt for the red-shirted Garibaldi rabble. The Prince of
Salina chats at a ball to the Piedmontese officer responsible for shooting Garibaldi in the foot in order to remove his subversive presence from what was becoming an ordered and conservative Risorgimento.

Perhaps it is not surprising, given its concentration on class as a social and cultural force, that some of The Leopard’s most dedicated fans have been Marxists. Gramsci had seen the problem of the backward, non-industrialised south as fundamental to modern Italian history. The Marxist (and aristocratic) film director Luchino Visconti was already fascinated by the themes of The Leopard before he came to film it, indeed, before it was published.

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Visconti’s La Terra Trema, a 1948 neo-realist lament for Sicilian fishermen filmed with the people of Aci Trezza on the island’s east coast beneath Etna, analyses the problems of Sicily not in dogmatically Marxist terms: the fishermen are systematically robbed by middlemen whose corrupt practices are clearly mafia-like.

His 1954 film Senso, based on Camillo Boito’s 1883 short story anticipates The Leopard in setting the sensual, hedonist desires of people left behind by history against the idealism and squalor of the Risorgimento.

However, if Visconti seems in so many ways to have been perfect to film The Leopard - and he made one of the most ravishing films ever, the greatest adaptation of a novel with the possible exception of the same director's Death in Venice - Visconti’s view of history is slightly different from Lampedusa’s. Visconti’s Prince of Salina makes a class alliance so that everything can stay the same; the Marxist dimension of the story is key. But this isn’t how Lampedusa told it.

Just as Machiavelli’s Prince is a rich concoction that does not resolve itself into a "theory", still less ideologies, of left or right, Lampedusa’s myth is not rational. Or Marxist. In his most forthright speech, Lampedusa's Prince says what he really thinks; and it is stranger than anyone could have expected.

In trying to explain to a Piedmontese envoy why he will not join their Senate, the Prince specifically rejects the idea that feudal class structures and a backward mode of production explain what is wrong with Sicily; people have told him this is the theory of "some German Jew whose name I can't remember".
Because there has been feudalism everywhere, Sicily is more peculiar and perturbing than that. It is the centuries of invasions, the landscape and climate that have crushed ambition and hope.

"This violence of landscape, this cruelty of climate, this continual tension in everything, and even these monuments to the past, magnificent yet incomprehensible because not built by us... All these things have formed our character, which is thus conditioned by events outside our control as well as by a terrifying insularity of mind." The Prince claims that Sicilian sensuality is a love affair with death; that a desire for the grave obsesses the island's culture and will seep out of Sicily to poison the new Italy.

"Our sensuality is a hankering for oblivion, our shooting and knifing a hankering for death; our languor, our exotic vices, a hankering for voluptuous immobility, that is for death again."

Lampedusa's Sicily is a place where the optimistic, progressive, rational forces of history as viewed in the 19th century - the march of liberal democracy and of socialism alike - get lost in baroque back streets at midnight. As a myth, as a fiction of history, The Leopard will continue to ensnare minds, and not only in Italy. Lampedusa's despair is not so different from that of today's world, with its shrunken political expectations. We are all Sicilians now.

- The Leopard is showing in a new print as part of the Visconti season at the National Film Theatre, London SE1 (020-7928 3232), and as a BFI national release

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