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In the latest instalment of **David Grove's** exploration of novels with a political message he looks at Giuseppe di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*.

The European and American bourgeois revolutions of the 17th, 18th & 19th centuries shaped the ruling classes that confront us today. 2011 is the 150th anniversary of the liberation and unification of Italy, which was also that country's bourgeois revolution. It is the background to a bestselling historical novel, *The Leopard*, by Giuseppe di Lampedusa (1856-1957).

Lampedusa, himself a Sicilian "prince", is thoroughly class-conscious. His standpoint is that of the feudal aristocracy. But he wrote with such powerful realism that we can learn a lot even from a class enemy.

The Leopard of the title is the Prince of Salina, a towering figure who dominates the book. Lampedusa understands the dialectical relationship between

the personal and the political. The Prince scorns his own effete and sheltered children. He favours his handsome swashbuckling nephew Tancredi, who joins Garibaldi's (the most prominent figure in Italian unification) red-shirted band. They invade Sicily and overthrow the Bourbon monarchy. Tancredi leaves them when the leader's radicalism becomes embarrassing (think Cromwell and the Levellers).

The Salina family had owned several estates, villas and palaces, but were losing them one by one to the rising capitalists. Tancredi is quite clear about the need for an historic compromise. He tells his uncle: "For the king, yes, of course. But which king? Unless we ourselves take a hand now, they'll foist a republic on us. If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change."

The Prince is torn between sentimental reverence for the old ways and recognition of the strength of the new. When he arrives at a favourite property on his annual visit, for the first time he widens the invitation to after dinner drinks: "we shall be happy to see all our friends". The middle class Mayor already has an income equal to the Prince's. Tancredi's marriage to the Mayor's beautiful daughter Angelica helps to

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cement an alliance between capitalists and landlords that ensures the success of the bourgeois revolution – and has hampered Italian progress ever since.

The Prince makes one reference to Marx: "some German Jew whose name I can't remember". But Marx would have chuckled at Salina's memory of "the bourgeois revolution climbing his stairs in Don Calegero's tail-coat". While the Prince and Angelica are waltzing triumphantly at a ball, her father is discussing the price of wheat. The Prince's regret at the passing of feudal relations illustrates the passage in the Communist Manifesto: "The bourgeoisie...has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors', and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'.

The Prince's musings offer clues to Sicily's present plight. He thinks of the violent landscape, the cruel climate, and the 25 centuries of being somebody's colony.

The novel also reflects William Morris's words: "Ill were change at whiles, were it not for the change beyond the change". But Lampedusa's aristocratic pessimism can't imagine the next necessary change: a socialist revolution. He ends the novel with a sad chapter set in 1910; socialism was then on the march but he doesn't even mention it. The Leopard is by no means socialist realism – but still a good political read.

