



Introduction to Modernity: Twelve Preludes, September 1959-May 1961

Henri Lefebvre

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Appearing for the first time in an English translation, *Introduction to Modernity* is one of Henri Lefebvre's greatest works. Published in 1962, when Lefebvre was beginning his career as a lecturer in sociology at the University of Strasbourg, it established his position in the vanguard of a movement which was to culminate in the events of May 1968. It is a book which supersedes the conventional divisions between academic disciplines. With dazzling skill, Lefebvre moves from philosophy to sociology, from literature to history, to present a profound analysis of the social, political and cultural forces at work in France and the world in the aftermath of Stalin's death—an analysis in which the contours of our own “postmodernity” appear with startling clarity.

Lefebvre's lectures have become legendary, and something of his charismatic presence and delivery is captured in this book, which he intended “to be understood in the mind's ear ... and not simply to be read.” With its mercurial shifts of tone, now intensely poetic, now conversational, it not only explores modernity, it exemplifies it. Equally experimental in conception is the book's remarkable structure, twelve “preludes” through which a range of recurrent themes are interwoven in free-form counterpoint: irony as a critical tool, utopianism, nature and culture, the Stalinization of Marxism, the alienation of everyday life, the cybernetic society ... What gradually emerges is not only a series of original concepts about humanity and culture, but an extraordinary invocation of the complexity of social contradictions.

Yet the fragmented structure of the book is not left to float free. Its shifting and eclectic melodies and leitmotifs have a solid ground basis: the wish to rehabilitate the Marxist dialectic as a method for understanding and transforming the modern world. This program is at the heart of the book, and gives it its underlying coherence, making *Introduction to Modernity* not only essential reading for all students of European cultural history, but also a key text for Marxism in the post-communist world of the late twentieth century.

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