

## Gender and Economics WG Webinar February 16<sup>th</sup> 12:00 EST – CET 17:00

### The Masculine Mystique in Economics: A Cultural Perspective

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It has long been recognized that the discipline of economics has short-changed women (and thus humanity), both through an ongoing failure to recognize and promote female talent and by imposing a model of reality upon society that does not properly take into account the activities, behavior, and motivations of half the world's population. Discussions of these failures are critical, but also important is understanding how such distortions arose in the first place, and why they have been so difficult to challenge.

From a cultural perspective, a discussion of the roots of the problem takes us back to the very origins of Western identity, back to a time when two emergent cultures were struggling to establish themselves. There we find two early traditions, Hebrew and Greek, in which cultural identity develops by means of casting traits considered desirable as masculine and those to be rejected as feminine. Both cultures, I would argue, were partly motivated in this habit by a need to delineate themselves through separation from an ancient, awe-inspiring, and high-developed parent culture, that of Egypt, which is recorded in canonical biblical and classical accounts that undergird Western religion, aesthetics, and philosophy. Greek canonical writers tended to depict Egypt, a place where the supreme deity during several periods was female (Isis), as a land of strange femininity and negative feminine qualities (Herodotus, Plato, Plutarch), each successive Greek version of Egypt strengthening the idea that Egyptians are a primal, feminine, mysterious people best left behind. Biblical narratives express a tension between the recognition of Egypt as a cultural parent and rejecting it as a dangerous influence and ultimately an enemy — a land of alien femininity in which sin is transferred onto Egypt in the story of the Exodus. The rejection is codified most dramatically in the second commandment: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” a reference to the rejected, feminized, bestial gods of Egypt and an assertion of monotheism in which one male god is chosen as the sole repository of truth, morality, and rightness.

The results of this twisted cultural genealogy have been profound, leading to the creation of a masculine culture of learning and science on the West that grew in medieval monasteries and carried on through the Reformation and today in institutions associated with science, in universities, and in professional societies.

In this light, the social sciences can be seen as inheritors of an impulse to establish identity, credibility, and distinction through a sort of “masculine mystique” in which binaries of male/female; rational/irrational; West/East are deeply engrained and maintained. The discipline of economics, centered as it is on a masculinized “self-interest” view of human nature, is a particularly stark manifestation.