

## The Golem Narrative in Max Weber's Work\*

Gad Yair and Michaela Soyer

### Abstract

This paper provides a new metaphor for reading Weber's writings by exposing an underlying cultural pattern—the Golem narrative—and showing how it is reflected in Weber's work. We depict the Jewish story of the Golem and the German demonic version of the narrative as presented in the movie *Der Golem*. We analyze the structure of this story and distinguish three components in this cultural narrative: the will to be empowered; the use of a non-human material instrument to garner this power; culminating in the instrument developing an autonomous spirit, which fatefully makes it turn against the master, leading to personal and social destruction. We show how this narrative appears in Weber's conception of the role of spirits and gods in world history and moral life. We then provide two expanded examples of the way the narrative of the Golem unfolds in Weber's work: the rise of capitalism and his observations about charisma and its institutionalization.

Keywords: German sociology, Judaism, myth, narrative analysis, Weber.

Here I sit, forming men  
In my image,  
A race to resemble me:  
To suffer, to weep,  
To enjoy, to be glad—  
And never to heed you,  
Like me!  
(Goethe, *Prometheus*, 1773).

Berlin, 1920. Max Weber lay on his deathbed while Paul Wegener celebrated his successful production of *Der Golem*, one of the first German expressionist films. This juxtaposition seems like a meaningless coincidence. But other than the sheer concurrence of the two events, we argue that there is poetic justice in juxtaposing Weber and *Der Golem*, because—as we show in this article—the narrative structure of the Golem story pervades Weber's sociological repertoire. To

\* We thank S.N. Eisenstadt, Gideon Aran, Orit Gazit, Nadav Chorev, and the anonymous reviewer of *Max Weber Studies* for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

support this claim we use the German cultural narrative of the Golem to provide a new perspective of Max Weber's writings. The paper thereby provides a new tool for interpreting Weber's writings on such topics as capitalism, religion, charisma, rationality, universities and value neutrality.

Superficially, Weber's corpus seems to be highly fragmented (especially Weber 1978). Some scholars have argued that he emphasized ideal factors in explaining social action and institutional change (Parsons 1937). Others have suggested that Weber should rather be positioned within a conflict sociology paradigm and that in some of his writings he tilted toward material explanations (Collins 1986). Weber's writings indeed challenge a coherent reading: he studied traditional world religions and modern administrative structures; he examined agrarian reforms in East Germany but was no less keen on interpreting the demise of the Roman Empire; he wrote about the evolution of the modern city but was just as preoccupied with universities and the professoriate. A seemingly eclectic corpus.

Topic-wise, we agree with prevailing assessments about Weber's fragmented oeuvre. However, we join those who occupy themselves with seeking coherence in Weber's diverse topics (e.g. Goldman 1992; Kalberg 2000). We suggest that a certain underlying cultural pattern—the Golem narrative—provides Weber's work with a consistent structure. This paper argues that the structure of the early German myth of Golem-run-mad provides a consistent metaphor that helps reading Weber's oeuvre.

In pursuing this challenge, we argue that the persistent theme of the Golem—so impressively presented by Wegener's expressionist film—appears in Weber's analyses in some of the major topics he engaged with. Hence, the paper goes beyond the mere identification of coherence in a theorist's legacy; it suggests that this legacy can be appreciated more fully as one more expression of deep cultural codes.

We have two explicit aims in mind. First, we suggest that the narrative of the Golem provides a unique heuristic tool in re-reading Weber's diverse writings. Instead of Weber's seemingly eclectic preoccupations, this re-reading points at narrative unity. Second, and more ambitiously, the juxtaposition of Weber's social theory with the history of German expressionist films suggests that these are two different renditions of common cultural narratives that were evidently diffused in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The background for this analysis is provided by a detailed exegesis of the Golem story, followed by a thematic analysis of this basic German cultural narrative. As we suggested at the outset, this motif was simultaneously epitomized in German social theory and German expressionist films, mostly around the 1920s. Therefore, we use these earliest cinematic representations of the Golem story in order to extract the basic structure of this narrative and the moods and metaphors which characterized it.

The analytic section of the paper is divided into an introductory exposition of Weber's general imagery of the ideal world, namely his discussion of gods and demons, and it continues with the presentation of two examples of the way the narrative of the Golem unfolds in Weber's mind: the explanation of the rise of capitalism and its tragic fateful destruction of human ideals, and his cynical observations about charisma and its fateful bureaucratic institutionalization. The paper concludes with a comparative discussion of two literary narratives—the case of *Doctor Faustus* being the central alternative to the Golem story—and shows that the Golem narrative better fits Weber's agenda and style of work.

#### *The German cultural context and the story of the Golem*

The original Golem story was a Jewish folktale, dated back to the thirteenth century, though there are earlier conceptions that go back to the first century in Babylon (Scholem 1941). The most famous adaptation is dated to the sixteenth century. The popular story tells of Rabbi Judea Loew Ben-Bezalel (the Maharal of Prague) who decided to sculpt a clay figure—the Golem—and to bring it to life through magical kabalistic rituals (Bloch 2005 [1908]). After awakening the Golem, he entrusted it with the task of safeguarding the Jewish ghetto from anti-Semitic attacks. Though he commanded outstanding supernatural powers, Rabbi Loew knew that the Golem harbored uncontrollable and dangerous potential. Therefore, after saving the community from evildoers, the Maharal took the life out of the Golem and kept his clay figure in the attic of the Old/New Synagogue in Prague for future use in times of catastrophe. This originally optimistic legend was highly popular amongst Jewish communities, serving to strengthen belief in Judaism and rabbinical leadership (for the most authoritative review of Jewish references to the Golem see Idel 1990).

However, this heroic story of the Jewish Golem found many darker German adaptations (Rosenfeld 1934). A well-known popu-