

THE phrases “ethic of conviction” and “ethic of responsibility” mean little to most English-speakers. In Germany the equivalent terms—*Gesinnungsethik* and *Verantwortungsethik*—are household words. Pundits drop them casually during television talk shows. Hosts use them as conversation-starters at dinner parties. The concepts draw on the opposition between idealism and pragmatism that runs through politics everywhere. But they also capture a specific moral tension that is “very German”, says Manfred Güllner, a sociologist and pollster. Anyone interested in understanding German politics, on anything from the euro to refugees, would do well to get a handle on them.

The terms come from the sociologist Max Weber, who used them in a speech he gave in January 1919 to a group of leftist students at a Munich bookstore. Germany had just lost the first world war. The Kaiser had abdicated, the country was in the throes of revolution and Munich was about to become the capital of a short-lived “Bavarian Soviet Republic”. Armed with only eight index cards, Weber gave a talk that would become a classic of political science. (“Politics as a Vocation” was published in English only after the second world war.) The lecture ranged broadly through history, but its main purpose was to curb the Utopian romanticism then gripping the ideologues fighting over the direction of the new Germany, including those sitting in front of him.

Weber described an “abysmal opposition” between two types of ethics. Those following their convictions wish to preserve their own moral purity, no matter what consequences their policies may have in the real world. “If an action of good intent leads to bad results, then, in the actor’s eyes, not he but the world, or the stupidity of other men, or God’s will who made them thus, is responsible for the evil.” By contrast, someone guided by responsibility “takes account of precisely the average deficiencies of people...(H)e does not even have the right to presuppose their goodness and perfection.” This sort of politician will answer for all the consequences of his actions, even unintended ones. Weber left no doubt about his

sympathies. Ethicists of conviction, he said, were “in nine out of ten cases windbags”.

The prevailing view today, like Weber’s in 1919, is that “Germany has a surfeit of *Gesinnungsethik*,” says Wolfgang Nowak, who served as an adviser to Gerhard Schröder when he was chancellor. The postwar yearning of Germans to atone for their nation’s Nazi past through extravagant moral posing exacerbates the tendency. In general, the ethic of conviction is most prevalent among leftists and Protestants, and slightly less so among conservatives and Catholics, says Mr Güllner.

Thus the Social Democrats, who view themselves as crusaders for social justice, often give the impression that they are not only “unable but unwilling” to govern, lest they bear actual responsibility, Mr Güllner thinks. That may explain why there has been a Social Democratic chancellor for only 20 years since 1949, compared with 47 years under the Christian Democrats. Many of Germany’s most strident pacifists, meanwhile, are Lutherans. Margot Käßmann, the church’s former leader, dreams of Germany having no army at all. She disavows force even to prevent or stop a genocide.

But an ethic of conviction also runs through the centre-right, which since the 1950s has approached the European project as an end in itself, a way for Germany to become post-national and dissolve its guilt along with its sovereignty. In the process, Germans deliberately overlooked the fact that most other Europeans never shared this goal. Once the euro crisis erupted, many conservatives opposed bail-outs out of an ethic of conviction, argues Thilo Sarrazin, a controversial pundit. They wanted to decry rule-breaking by crisis countries as inherently bad—even at the cost of letting the currency zone unravel.

The ethic of responsibility holds that such stances are not merely impractical but wrong, and that what will not work cannot be moral. Those governing Germany have mostly been of this camp. In the 1980s millions of Germans marched against the modernisation of NATO's nuclear arsenal, but Chancellor Helmut Schmidt let the missiles deploy, accepting the grim logic of deterrence. (His reward from his fellow Social Democrats was largely disdain.) In the euro crisis, Angela Merkel reluctantly agreed to bail-outs in order to hold the currency zone together.

### **Transports of joy**

That is what makes Mrs Merkel's historic opening of Germany's borders to refugees on September 4th, 2015 so remarkable. "She galloped away with an ethic of conviction," says Konrad Ott, a professor of philosophy and author of a book on migration and morality. At the time this aligned her with a euphoric "welcome culture", as ordinary Germans volunteered to help refugees and the press celebrated the country's humanitarian example. Mrs Merkel refused to put a numerical limit on accepting human beings in dire need, a position she still maintains.

But as predicted by ethicists of responsibility (in whose ranks Mrs Merkel is usually found), the mood soon turned. Other Europeans accused Germany of "moral imperialism", the flip side of *Gesinnungsethik*. And many Germans felt that too much was being asked of their society. Some, in a development that would not have surprised Weber, turned xenophobic.

The history of the past year can thus be seen as Mrs Merkel's attempt to return to an ethic of responsibility without betraying her convictions. This includes biting her tongue as she deals with an increasingly authoritarian Turkey, whose cooperation she needs to reduce the migrant flows, and other moral compromises. Max Weber would have found her dilemma compelling. Even someone with an ethic of responsibility, he said,

sometimes “reaches the point where he says: ‘Here I stand; I can do no other.’ That is something genuinely human and moving.”

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