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# 21. The practice of *parrhēsia* and the transformation of managerial governmentality

*Richard Weiskopf*

## INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault's interest was in 'see[ing] how men govern (themselves and others) by the production of truth' (Foucault 1991, 79). People are governed and made governable by objectifying practices of science and pseudoscience. They are also made governable by imposing truth obligations on them and guiding them to tell and reveal the truth about themselves. 'In the West', Foucault says, the confession has become one of the 'most highly valued techniques for producing truth' (Foucault 1981c, 59). These mechanisms have been studied by students of governmentality in a wide variety of fields. In Organization Studies, the 'Foucault Effect' (Burchell et al. 1991; Raffnsøe et al. 2019) has challenged existing certainties in several waves. A first wave of Foucault reception considered organizations primarily as embodiments of disciplinary power and thus politicized seemingly neutral techniques of managing and organizing; with the reception of the concept of governmentality (Foucault 1991, 2008, 2014a) (which began in the early 1990s), practices were placed in a broader context. Authors such as Paul du Gay, Barbara Townley and many others, have made important contributions drawing on the seminal work of the 'London governmentalists' (for example, Miller and Rose 2008). In this interpretation the focus has been on the 'microtechnologies to enhance governmentality' and the 'disciplinary technologies which allow the individual to be known in depth and thereby rendered open to management' (Townley 1998, 198–199). In focusing on 'managerial governmentality' (McKinlay and Pezet 2017), practices of management were predominantly interpreted as subjectification that binds individuals to an identity and incorporates the self-direction of individuals in the production process. In the analysis of neoliberal governmentality, the 'entrepreneurial self' has been studied as a mode of subjectivation that subjugates individuals to the truth-telling (veridiction) of the market, mediated by multiple techniques of assessment, evaluation, ranking, incentivizing, etc. (Bröckling 2015).

Studies of governmentality thus have produced multiple insights on the processes and practices of 'governmentalization', that is, the 'movement through which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice through mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth' (Foucault 2003, 266). While regular reference is made to the ubiquity of resistance in power relations (Knights and Vurdubakis 1994), critique

as 'the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth' (Foucault 2003, 266) is rarely seen as an *integral* part of governmentality. In Foucault's theory, the concept of 'counter-conduct' provides an empirical and conceptual supplement to the study of governmentalization. With its 'double ethical and political scope', it refers to 'an active intervention of individuals and constellations of individuals in the domain of ethical and political practices and forces that shape us' (Davidson 2011, 32; Foucault 2008, 193–216; Golder, this volume). The concept includes resistance in the form of 'struggles against the processes implemented for conducting others' but also 'the pursuit of a different form of conduct' (Foucault 2008, 201). The ancient concept of *parrhēsia*, interpreted by Foucault as 'fearless speech' (2019), 'free spokenness (*franc parler*)' (2011, 2) or 'profession of truth' (2010, 188) belongs to this broad field of counter-conduct. With it, Foucault refers to the genealogy of the critical attitude and brings into play a 'dissensual concept of truth' (Seitz 2016) that destabilizes established practices.

In the context of governmentality, 'truth-telling' can thus play a thoroughly ambivalent role. It can establish a new form of truth-obligation that contributes to an intensification of power relations and enables 'governing by the truth' (Foucault 2014b), but it can also interrupt established relations of power, and introduce a 'critical opening' (Butler 2005, 24) that calls the limits of an established regime of truth into question. This will be demonstrated in this chapter, especially using the example of 'whistleblowing'. In critical organizational studies, this practice has been conceptualized as a manifestation of *parrhēsia* in the contemporary organizational context (see, for example, Kenny 2019; Vandekerckhove and Langenberg 2012; Weiskopf and Willmott 2013; Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch 2016). By linking ethical and political dimensions, this (emerging) wave of Foucauldian scholarship opens a line of flight for exploring the conditions of possible transformation and counter-conduct within governmentality.

Throughout this chapter, in examining truth-telling and *parrhēsia*, I will make reference to two examples, which I briefly introduce in the following.

## Example 1

On 18 September 2015, the United States Environmental Protection Agency disclosed Volkswagen's (VW) violation of The Clean Air Act. Immediately after this event, the value of VW stock plunged dramatically. While the immediate economic losses have been estimated at $16.9 trillion, the losses that have subsequently resulted from worldwide lawsuits and fines, buy backs and recalls, sales stops, disgruntled customers, and loss of trust, go far beyond that, not to mention the environmental and health damage (Jung and Sharon 2019).

Apparently, fraudulent activities were known to a large number of employees and managers. *Der Spiegel* reported about a 'vow of silence in engine development' and about the engineers' fear of 'telling the truth' to management. In the aftermath of the scandal, VW promoted 'transparency, openness, energy and courage' and appealed

to employees to cooperate in clearing up the scandal and thus repair the organization's tattered reputation. As the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported, some employees were even offered 'amnesty in exchange for whistleblowing on [the] emissions scandal' (Fromm et al. 2015). A new 'whistleblowing system (Hinweisgebersystem)' was installed in 2017, which, according to VW's Head of Compliance, is now 'even fairer, more transparent and faster' and suitable 'to highlight illegal conduct by members of our workforce' (Michels 2021).

**Example 2**

> My name is Ed Snowden, I'm 29 years old. I worked for Booz Alan Hamilton as an infra-structure analyst for NSA in Hawaii … (Snowden 2013)

With these words, on 6 June 2013, a 29-year-old computer specialist addressed the world public and presented himself in his first interview as the source of the biggest data leak in history. In contrast to the VW example, here an employee *takes the right* to question practices of the organization and break the silence that surrounds them. Snowden is not only breaking a 'vow of silence', but also legal norms, invoking an ethical and moral obligation. He explained in a radio broadcast on 12 July 2015 (Philosophy Talk 2015):

> When legality and morality begin to separate, we all have a moral obligation to do something about that […] When I saw that the work I was doing and all my colleagues were doing [was] being subversive not only to our intentions but contrary to the public's intent, I felt an obligation to act.

In both cases it is about a certain mode of organizing 'truth-telling' (veridiction). In the first case it is demanded 'from above', as an 'obligatory act of speech' similar to a confession which 'under some imperious compulsion, breaks the bonds of discretion and forgetfulness' (Foucault 1981c, 62). Employees are hailed as loyal organizational citizens. In the very act of speaking, they are constituted as 'dutiful informers' and contribute to the consolidation of the truth regime. In the second case, truth-telling comes from below and is ethically motivated. The speaker constitutes himself as a subject who assumes a critical relation to the truth regime and questions it. The act is not a *confession* (that is, an avowal or acknowledgement of a wrongdoing or sin) that binds the speaker to an established identity (as citizen and employee), but a *profession* (that is, a public statement or open declaration of a truth) that interrupts established practices, breaks the bonds to established identities and constitutes the speaker as an ethical subject, who 'felt an obligation to act'.

## 'WHISTLEBLOWING'

At least since Snowden's revelation of the National Security Agency (NSA) mass surveillance programmes in 2013, the term whistleblowing has become ubiquitous.

Almost daily new revelations appear, which are supposed to bring unacknowledged 'truth to light' in the most diverse areas – in commercial organizations and financial services (Kenny 2019) and in state-bureaucracies, public health or national security institutions (Benkler 2014) alike. Think of the 'Panama Papers', the revelations about tax havens and financial practices in connection with 'Lux Leaks' and the 'Pandora Papers', or the revelations of harmful practices by Frances Haugen, a former Facebook employee, to name just a few prominent examples. Organizations like Transparency International promote whistleblowing as a weapon in the fight against corruption. Wikileaks understands whistleblowing as a medium of 'radical transparency' that opens secretive institutions (Birchall 2014). *The Economist* even proclaims 'the age of the whistleblower' (2015). From an ethnological perspective it is important to 'determine, how a mode of veridiction, a *Wahrsagen*, could appear in history and under what conditions' (Foucault 2014b, 20). So let us briefly look at the conditions and context in which whistleblowing emerged as a *mode of veridiction*.

Usually, the US consumer advocate, Ralph Nader is credited for inventing the term 'whistleblowing' in 1971. He presented whistleblowing – insiders in big organizations and bureaucracies going public with their knowledge of malpractices – as a form of resistance and democratic intervention, that is grounded 'in the right to information' and 'the citizen's right to participate in important decisions' (Nader 1972, 7). Nader was concerned about 'powerful organizations' that 'penetrate deeper and deeper into the lives of people' (ibid.). A general decline of authority, the problematization of the virtues of the 'organization man', but also an overall negative image of whistleblowers as 'snitches', 'rats', 'traitors', and a relative lack of whistleblower regulation and protection characterized the US context in the early 1970s (Olesen 2022). Since then, the situation has changed in many respects. An increasing institutionalization and proliferating regulations shape the speaking out of the whistleblower, both in legal terms and in terms of organizational policies (cf. for instance, Vandekerckhove 2022). On the other hand, in the context of contemporary 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff 2019), Nader's concern with invasive organizations that 'penetrate' the lives of people has become even more pressing (see Aradau, this volume). Paradoxically, the emerging digital infrastructures that afford intensified surveillance also make the leaking of large amounts of information much easier, as not only Snowden's revelations illustrate, but also the exposures of Cambridge Analytica's practices by 'data war whistleblower' Christopher Wylie (Cadwalladr 2018; Wylie 2019).

## THE AMBIVALENCE OF WHISTLEBLOWING

Whistleblowing is ambivalent. For some it is a remedy in the fight against corruption and corporate wrongdoing, for others a poison that disintegrates society and erodes trust in institutions. For some, whistleblowers are critics in the service of the public interest: moral heroes, 'Bravehearts' (Hertsgaard 2016) or 'ethical dissenters'. For others, whistleblowers are 'denouncers', 'snitches' or irresponsible 'traitors',

or simply troublemakers who create disunity and conflict. Such attributions and identities are by no means stable. They change depending on the (cultural or political) context. Daniel Ellsberg,[1] for example, leaker of the *Pentagon Papers* to the *Washington Post* in 1971, and 'godfather of modern whistleblowing' transformed from the 'most dangerous man in America' (vanden Heuvel 2019), threatened with 115 years in prison, to the winner of the Right Livelihood Award for his 'truth-telling project' (Ellsberg 2006). Snowden, too, still vacillates today between various peace prizes and awards and the threat of severe punishment, including the death penalty. Representations and discursive framing in the media variously make him a 'hero' or a 'traitor' (Wahl-Jorgensen and Bennett 2017). Whistleblowing is a *pharmakon* – both a remedy and poison at the same time. It 'shocks and fascinates because its singularity is "out of joint" with the smooth functioning of routine actions, the expectations, and modus operandi reproducing social (and organizational) relations' (Contu 2014, 2). It is precisely this *undecidability* that makes it so controversial. Prominent whistleblowers – such as aforementioned Daniel Ellsberg – reject the term 'whistleblower' and prefer to call themselves 'truth-tellers', who by 'revealing wrongly kept secrets, can have a surprisingly strong, unforeseeable power to help end a wrong and save lives' (Ellsberg 2003, xiv). In doing so, they inscribe themselves in a tradition of Enlightenment and a critique of authority and traditional institutions.

## *PARRHĒSIA* AND THE SEIZURE OF WORDS

In the tradition of questioning traditional authorities – which predates the Enlightenment – stands the practice of *parrhēsia*, a courageous and risky speech, that 'dares' to speak an unacknowledged truth and thereby intervenes (Folkers 2015). As a 'modality of truth-telling' (Foucault 2011, 15–30), it differs from the technical modality of the expert or teacher (who has *techne* and consolidates a bond of tradition), the sage (who speaks reticently about the world in general), and the prophet (who does not speak in their own name, but takes an intermediary position and transmits a truth, that comes from elsewhere, such as the word of God). The parrhēsiast speaks in their own name, refers to singular situations, and risks provoking or even causing violence by speaking the truth. *Parrhēsia* is also distinguished from rhetoric (which seeks to persuade and to influence the thoughts and opinions of others) and from flattery (which confirms the interlocutor in their vanity and self-image, conceals true intentions, and is guided, for example, by calculations of utility or personal career aspirations). In contrast *parrhēsia* means the direct, blunt utterance of truth. The parrhēsiastic speaker *takes* the right to speak and intervenes, even if s/he is neither asked nor in a legitimate position to speak. The exemplary scene or 'limit-situation' is the 'the parrhesiast who stands up, speaks, tells the truth to a tyrant, and risks his life' (Foucault 2010, 61).

In a pejorative sense, *parrhēsia* can simply mean saying anything that comes to mind, or serves the interest of the speaking person. The negative version is akin to what Frankfurt (2005) has described in the modern context as 'bullshit', an empty

talk, where the speaker has 'an opinion' about everything and feels compelled or entitled to voice it even though there is a lack of knowledge or understanding about an issue. In 'bullshitting' the speaker's relation to truth is cut off. By contrast, *parrhēsia* is linked to the 'care for the truth'. 'What is at stake is the relation of the self to truth or, I should say, to certain rational principles' (Foucault 2019, 246). The parrhēsiast not only speaks 'without concealment, reserve, empty manner of speech' (Foucault 2011, 10), s/he also speaks in their own name and thereby 'binds himself to the truth spoken' (Foucault 2011, 11). There is always a risk associated with *parrhēsia*: minimally, it puts the relationship that makes it possible at risk. In extreme cases the parrhēsiast risks his or her life. *Parrhēsia* is thus 'truth subject to the risk of violence' (ibid.).

*Parrhēsia* is a form of criticism that comes from below, that is, from the weaker position. The following quotation summarizes its central features:

> [*Parrhēsia*] is a verbal activity in which the subject expresses his personal relationship to truth and risks his life because he recognizes that telling the truth is his own duty, so as to improve or help other people. In *parrhēsia*, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses truth instead of lies, death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and duty instead of interest and selfishness. (Foucault 2019, 46; see also Foucault 2010, 66)

*Parrhēsia* is relational. It involves speaker and listener and is shaped by the context in which it emerges. It expresses not only the freedom of the speaking subject, but also the freedom of the listener to hear and accept being told the truth (Catlaw et al. 2014). It is 'the courage of truth' in a double sense:

> *parrhēsia* is the courage of truth in the person who speaks and who, regardless of everything, takes the risk of telling the whole truth that he thinks, but it is also the interlocutor's courage in agreeing to accept the hurtful truth that he hears. (Foucault 2011, 13)

These are two sides of the 'parrhēsiastic game'. This is not to be confused with models of 'communication free of domination' or an 'ideal speech situation' (Habermas 1984), which have been formulated as the normative ideal of deliberative democracy. Unlike such models, freedom in the context of *parrhēsia* does not refer to the absence of internal and external constraints and limitations. It is also not a matter of the 'equal distribution of the right to speak' (which is *isegoria*), but denotes a surplus or excess that goes beyond any regulation (Foucault 2010, 188–9). Similarly, *parrhēsia* does not aim at establishing consensus by exchanging rational arguments or raising seemingly neutral truth-claims, but rather introduces the difference of truth-telling into the debate. It is a critical practice that generates dissensus, disrupts existing orders and conventions and opens a space of contestation (Seitz 2016). *Parrhēsia* is at once a political, an ethical, and an epistemological concept. It is political as it refers to existing institutions and normative orders and reveals their contingency; it is ethical in the sense that it concerns transformation of self-relations and modes of being. Finally, it is epistemological in that it refers to existing forms of

knowledge and their modes of veridiction and questions truth claims. *Parrhēsia* can take many different forms and it occurs in different contexts.

## MODERN ORGANIZATION AND THE EXPULSION OF *PARRHĒSIA*

> Where there is obedience there cannot be *parrhēsia*. (Foucault 2011, 336)

Modern organizations are not privileged places of *parrhēsia*. On the contrary, one can almost call them social inventions for the avoidance or expulsion of *parrhēsia*. Who can say what, when and in which form – or also, who has nothing to say – is regulated by a multitude of mechanisms. In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, Foucault hypothesized 'that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery of its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality' (Foucault 1981a, 52). Organization theory has always emphasized this aspect and declared the regulation and restriction of communication to be a defining characteristic and functional necessity. In classical bureaucracy Max Weber argued that without the civil servant's 'moral discipline and self-denial' that enables him 'to execute conscientiously the order of superior authorities, exactly as if the order agreed with his conviction … the whole apparatus would fall to pieces' (Weber 1991, 95). Formality is still seen as the 'law of organization' (du Gay and Vikkelsø 2017) that sets limits to communication flows and defines legitimate and illegitimate forms of exchange.

In addition, a variety of informal mechanisms contribute to disciplining and normalizing speech and action, so that speaking out in the sense of *parrhēsia* is expelled and the moral-ethical commitment that motivates it is dampened. Not only repression is at work here, but also productive power, as well as positive and seductive mechanisms that reward and incentivize organizationally compliant behaviour, making resistant speech unlikely.

In the following, consider a few of the organizational mechanisms that lead to the 'expulsion' of *parrhēsia*.

### The Production of (Moral) Indifference and 'Organized Thoughtlessness'

Hierarchical structuring and authority, in combination with objectifications and classifications, contribute to the emergence of an 'organized thoughtlessness' (Alford 2001). Quantification, datafication and numerical representation of people create abstractions that work as a moral narcotic, effectuating moral apathy and indifference. Paradoxically, organizational situations that force people to speak and contribute – in complex situations in which they lack knowledge – create a breeding ground for 'bullshit talk'. In such contexts, a 'noisy ignorance' (Spicer 2020, 9) prevents *parrhēsia* or replaces it by 'empty talk'.

## Discipline and Productive Subjects

Performance measurement, rankings, individualizing competition, incentive systems and so on, act as productive power with subjectifying effects. Related organizational discourses, practices and technologies suggest an orientation towards (egoistic) utility calculations and tend to exclude questions of moral duty or frame them as 'irrational.' 'Strong corporate culture' and *esprit de corps* – such as those created by homogenizing recruiting practices, and long-term membership, or family metaphors – can lead to the exclusion and marginalization of dissenters. They help establishing loyalty as a norm that makes it difficult or impossible for organizational members to speak 'truths' that contradict loyalty demands. The person who disturbs 'business as usual', provoking conflict or crisis, easily becomes a scapegoat to be sacrificed and put to flight in order to overcome social 'deadlocks', restore harmony and affirm the 'purity of "us"' (Lok and Willmott 2014, 221).

## Identification and Subjectification/Subjugation

Organizational identification limits the ability and willingness to articulate criticism in the face of perceived wrongdoing. Ellsberg (2010), for example, reflects on such mechanisms in the context of national security whistleblowing. In his experience, it is not only contractual obligations (like non-disclosure agreements) as well as the (justified) fear of social isolation (like demotion and exclusion) that prevent members from breaking the organizational 'code of *omertà*' (783) but also the promise of positive career development and the granting of a 'valued identity' that becomes a 'source of one's pride and self-respect' (774). Such mechanisms of a 'governmentality of desired identities' were also discovered by Moonesirust and Brown (2021) in their study of the VW headquarters in Wolfsburg where they found 'most people desiring a VW identity, speaking enthusiastically and supportively about the company' (520). According to their analysis, this produced 'a (disciplinary) apparatus that functioned seemingly smoothly, in which discontents were rarely voiced' (522). Similar mechanisms were observed by Kenny (2018, 2019) in her whistleblowing study in the financial services sector, where a 'complex matrix of control operated … dictating what could and what could not be spoken about' (Kenny 2018, 19). With reference to Butler, Kenny speaks of 'powerful norms of censorship' that create a 'wall of silence' around misconduct or wrongful practices and turn those who break through it into 'impossible others' who are denied recognition as subjects of the organization and regularly experience exclusion and violence as a consequence (ibid.).

## The Inscription of Economic Discourse in Organizational Practices

This leads not only to a crowding out of moral orientations, but also to a crowding out of the ability and willingness to speak out in terms of *parrhēsia*. In public organizations, this can mean weakening the ethos of civil servants (du Gay 2000). The (parrhēsiastic) idea of the civil servant as a companion and adviser who critically reflects

on the government's actions (in terms of the common good) is replaced by the idea of the expert ensuring efficient implementation and enforcement of the government's will (Barratt 2019). Similarly, reframing social and organizational relationships in neoliberal categories of human capital theory and -management tends to erode to the space in which the veridiction of the market can be critically questioned.

Putting all this together, a bundle of factors emerges that intersect, reinforce or compensate each other, effectuating a 'rarefaction' (Foucault 1981a) of parrhēsiastic truth-telling. The 'vow of silence' that made headlines at VW may not even be a peculiarity of VW, but rather a general tendency of modern organizations, or at least a disposition inscribed in the mechanisms of modern organization and organizing (Morrison and Millken 2000). However, this is not a completely determined process, as the Snowden example shows.

## THE RETURN OF *PARRHĒSIA* IN THE SOCIETY OF CONTROL

Snowden's truth-telling shows that even in relatively strictly regulated organizations there is room for counter-conduct or for ethical action and decision-making. 'National security whistle-blowing' (Ellsberg 2010), of course, follows its own rules and cannot be understood independently of security discourse, institutional and legal frameworks and economic developments (see, for instance, Bauman et al. 2014). Nevertheless, the NSA represents an extreme case. If Moonesirust and Brown (2021) describe VW as a 'disciplinary apparatus' that makes the organization a 'closed hierarchical universe', it is plausible to assume that this assessment is even more apt to the NSA as an organization at the heart of the surveillance apparatus. A variety of mechanisms regulate the behaviour of employees at all levels to ensure that the organization is protected from external intrusion. Greenwald (2014) has described the NSA as 'one of the most secretive agencies' (56) or a panoptic regime 'with no accountability or transparency' (389). At the same time, the organization cannot be understood (like the classical panopticon) as a (closed) entity. As an officially public agency, the NSA has innumerable partnerships with private sector companies. Many of the NSA's core functions are outsourced to contractors (Shorrock 2008). Members of a wide variety of organizations often work under one umbrella (formally assigned to NSA), while many of NSA's staff are widely dispersed and technologically networked across borders. The emerging organizational complex is a contingent stabilization of a multiplicity of practices and technologies.

Snowden's truth-telling illustrates the 'ethics of truth-telling as an action which is risky and free' (Foucault 2010, 66) in the context of a control society. Specifically, this means that:

- Snowden speaks in his own name and publicly professes (his) truth ('My name is Edward Snowden …'), thereby binding himself to the truth spoken.
- He takes a high risk with full knowledge and awareness.

- He exposes himself and becomes vulnerable and attackable.
- He claims responsibility and can be held accountable.
- He understands the criticism as that which will help to improve the situation ('the public should decide').
- He speaks and acts out of moral duty rather than self-interest.

From a governmentality perspective, the case is also interesting because it brings to light a fundamental paradox: with the help of 'fluid' (Bauman and Lyon 2013) surveillance practices and technologies, organizations intensify the control of their internal environment (employees at all levels), and simultaneously expand the control of flows of communication and information and the circulation of people in wider economic and political contexts. This 'governmentalization of visibility' reveals an intensification and extensification of organizational power (Weiskopf 2021), producing a surveillant apparatus that goes far beyond the traditional panopticon. It seemingly closes off spaces of possibility to an unprecedented degree, giving rise to a 'world of no escape' (Zuboff 2019). At the same time, however, the emerging organizational complex is vulnerable to disruptions and internal and external criticism. Organizations are increasingly dependent on experts and 'knowledge workers' (like Snowden) who, through their activities, gain insights into contexts that may (as in Snowden's case) contradict their personal or professional value standards; who, by virtue of their professional expertise (like Snowden), are able to make 'tactical reversals' (Foucault 1981c, 157) of technologies, and who (like Snowden), as employees of external contractors, are less likely to be socialized into 'loyal organizational wo/men' than long-term employees who perhaps more fully internalize the 'code of *omertà*' as an organizational norm (Ellsberg 2010). All this makes cracks, fissures and lines of flight appear in the organizational regime of truth.

The example also shows that parrhēsiastic truth-telling (today) is not only an individual act, but collective process. As such, it not only depends on 'risky interactions with others' (Contu 2014) but – particularly in mass-mediated societies – also 'requires all manner of props, mediators, technological prosthetics, and social connections' (Walters 2014, 293). The (necessary) involvement of journalists and media organizations illustrates how truth-telling depends on the support of and collaboration with various others. Not only does the effectiveness of truth-telling to a wider audience rely on media channels, equally important is the power of media to frame and shape the perception of the speaker. Snowden was well aware of this. His dramatization and self-presentation as a credible and ethically motivated truth-teller therefore was carefully staged and orchestrated, as particularly his appearance in the first video-interview (conducted by Glenn Greenwald, professionally arranged by artist and filmmaker Laura Poitras and published online by *The Guardian*) shows (Snowden, 2013). While Foucault stresses the plain-spoken nature of *parrhēsia*, as if words themselves are impact enough, we see how in these contemporary situations there is concern about how best to stylize revelations and how to dramatize truth-telling – all necessary to win eyes and clicks within the crowded 'attention economy' as well as credibility in the battle for recognition. As Vandeckerkhove

and Langenberg (2012) put it, critique might travel along a 'parrhēsiastic chain'. The Snowden case illustrates that the 'parrhēsiastic chain' is not limited to persons in organizational positions and that critique might not only have to travel upwards, but also along transversal lines, building connections that go beyond specific organizations and organizational positions. Snowden's whistleblowing as well as Greenwald's 'aggressive reporting', which was determined to work against institutional barriers and to provoke 'anger and shame' (Greenwald 2014, 539), and Poitras' 'trouble-making' artistic-journalistic approach to documentary film (Danchev, 2015) – these are parrhēsiastic activities in their own right, yet they are not isolated or independent from each other. Going beyond single truth-tellers, one could speak of the formation of what I would call a 'parrhēsiastic assemblage'. An assemblage is a more or less loose network of actors, materials, tools, and so on; 'a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns' (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, 52). Here, it is not formal positions or memberships that matter, but 'alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind' (ibid.). The parrhēsiastic assemblage that Snowden formed together with others, constitutes a loose and fluid network characterized by a low degree of 'organizationality' (Dobusch and Schoeneborn 2015). In Greenwald's words, Snowden's act 'gave rise to an ideologically divers, trans-partisan coalition pushing for meaningful reform of the surveillance state' (Greenwald 2014, 577). It exemplifies a specific mode of organizing that is opposed to the dispositifs of power, driven not by a unifying strategic goal but by a common desire. This mode is less a practice of definition and determination, but more an 'art of organizing encounters' (Hardt 2002, 110). In a parrhēsiastic assemblage truth-telling is by no means exclusively a 'verbal activity' (as Foucault's original definition suggests). Rather, a wide variety of media – sound, image, film, public speech, social media, digital media, and so on – can become (expressive) media and part of assemblages of enunciation. The co-functioning of all these elements makes the multiplicity powerful and truth-telling a potentially transformative force that modifies public perception and generates new alliances and movements of counter-conduct that challenge the status quo (Kenny and Bushnell 2020). In Greenwald's words, Snowden's truth-telling

> triggered the first global debate about the value of privacy in the digital age and prompted challenges to America's hegemonic control over the Internet. It changed the way people around the world viewed reliability on any statements made by US officials and transformed relations between countries. It radically altered views about the proper role of journalism in relation to government power. (Greenwald 2014, 577)

## THE CHALLENGE OF *PARRHĒSIA* FOR ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT

### Public and Private Use of Reason

According to Kant (1983 [1784]) we make a public use of reason, when we take a universal standpoint and 'address ourselves as rational subjects to the totality of rational beings'. In turn, Kant speaks of 'private use' when we act as functionaries, members of an organization, institution, or political body, and so are 'part of a machine' (Kant 1983 [1784]; see also Foucault 2008, 55–58). The whistleblower-as-parrhēsiast makes a 'public use of reason' within the organization, breaking a private organizational logic. He or she acts not (only) as a functionary, but as a subject who reflects and enacts a critical attitude in relation to practices of the organization. By addressing the 'public', he or she intervenes and thereby not only reminds the organization that it is part of a larger world (Alford 2001), but also opens – especially in 'external whistleblowing' – a space of contestation that puts the limits of the established truth-regime into question and disrupts it from the outside. He or she thus embodies a dissent-oriented ethics that manifests itself in practices of problematizing and disturbing organizational sovereignty and closure (Andrade 2015; Rhodes 2020, 102).

### Repressing Public Use of Reason: Production of Ghosts

Organizational mechanisms preventing the public use of reason produce the whistleblower as a ghost that haunts the organization. Ghosts – according to Derrida (1994) – do not adhere to protocol and rules but find their own ways and are always good for surprises.

Snowden is a prime example: on many instances he referred to the public interest. He emphasized that he was not concerned with 'destroying' the organization, but rather with reminding it of the principles of the Constitution and its public mission. At the same time, he was convinced that 'in organizations like the NSA … proper channels can only become a trap to catch the heretics and disfavourables' (Snowden 2019, 235). Thus, he did not submit to formal rules and guidelines (which he distrusts), but broke the law instead. He spoke out in his own way and violated the rules of legitimate speech. Like so many whistleblowers, he had to pay a high price for manifesting himself as a truth-teller. Butler (2005) notes how such manifestation is linked to the condition of destroying material existence and a 'disappearing' of the 'real body' (114). Snowden quite literally had to disappear as a 'real body'. In the process, he not only lost his membership in the organization and the privileges associated with it, but also his rights as a citizen. He evaded prosecution and refused to accept punishment and taking his responsibilities in relation to the law. In the eyes of the representatives of order, this disappearance makes him a 'coward traitor' (rather than a whistleblower deserving protection). For Scheuerman (2014), on the other hand, it is an 'act of civil disobedience' justified by the fact that under the Espionage Act Snowden cannot expect a fair trial worthy of the name 'rule of law' in the United

States. De Lagasnerie (2017) goes further, arguing that Snowden's 'practice of flight' embodies a new mode of political subjectification in which Snowden 'made himself a political subject who exercises the right of sedition' (88). But while Snowden on the one hand 'disappears' and eludes, at the same time he enters the public sphere, claims responsibility for his deeds, and establishes himself as a *quasi*-public figure.

As such, he does not appear in a courtroom to defend or justify himself, nor does he assume a pre-constructed role on the official political stage to challenge government policies. Rather, he makes new connections and challenges the system from the outside (in the meantime he has a permanent residency in Russia); but at the same time, he has a ghostly presence on the inside. Snowden regularly appears (virtually) in talk shows, award ceremonies, documentaries, and other public events. He speaks out in international media – as most recently in connection with the Pegasus surveillance software scandal – and plays an active role in critical organizations, including his role as President of the Freedom of Press Foundation (Freedom of Press Foundation 2021). He circulates, as it were, as a spectre or ghost that dis/appears in unexpected places and at unexpected times, challenging the system by questioning it and keeping the public debate going. This is perfectly illustrated by Snowden's absent presence at a TED talk in 2014 where he appeared on stage as 'Snowbot'. His presence was mediated by a 'telepresence robot', described in *The Guardian* as 'the world's creepiest machine, which allows you to make video calls to a screen on wheels that you control remotely. Thus your face can roll around an office on the other side of the world, attend meetings, sneak up on lazy people, etc.' (The Guardian 2016).

The case of VW is different: the spectres appear in the form of billions in losses, lawsuits and calls for reparation. VW's 'deep fall' mentioned in the introduction, certainly cannot be attributed solely to expulsion of *parrhēsia*. But in the complex set of factors that conditioned it, the dispositive of silence plays an important role. Precisely because it was impossible to speak the truth (due to performance pressure, hierarchy, unrealistic targets, reward systems, and so on), the inconvenient truth (that excessive performance targets cannot be achieved without cheating) did not become a subject of discussion. In the regime of 'faster, higher, farther' (Ewing 2017), it was concealed, glossed over, withheld, or covered up. Gaim et al. (2021) summarize what a number of observers found: the constant pressure on lower and middle management to deliver results created an environment in which tacit acceptance of illegal or damaging practices was encouraged. Additionally, 'the leadership in VW ruled by fear and intimidation of those below them through a governance structure that insulated VW from external voices and pressures' (Gaim et al. 2021, 958).

One could say that conditions were created in which flattery and rhetoric took the place of *parrhēsia*. Instead of confronting the CEO (and his loyal executives) with the misperception, the flattering servants of the master reinforced the (false) self-image of the sovereign and knowledgeable steersman. Instead of speaking plainly and pointing out contradictions, marketing strategies pursued the rhetoric of 'clean diesel' to convince customers and shareholders that 'fast, cheap and green' is legally possible. In other words, instead of stating the impossibility, the illusion of possibility is sold.

Whistleblowing systems, such as the 'Hinweisgebersystem' installed by VW in 2017, for 'highlight(ing) illegal conduct by members of our workforce' (Michels 2021) appear as one component of an organizational immune system designed to ward off harm and claims from the organization and to secure its 'corporate sovereignty' (Rhodes 2020). Whistleblowing hotlines for example are 'an attempt to establish a form of infrastructure that regulates the circulation of potentially damaging information about the organization' (du Plessis 2020, 11). By governmentalizing truth-telling, it is put into socially or organizationally acceptable forms. Legitimate forms of speaking are fixed and codified, and possible content is (pre)arranged and standardized. One could say that through these systems a free circulation of statements and testimonies is warded off and the ghosts/spectres of potentially damaging information flows are (supposed to be) scared away. The regulation of whistleblowing becomes a form of 'risk management' (Tsahuridu 2011). As such it seeks to establish a security mechanism, 'which proactively facilitates and circulates the internal flow of potentially damaging information about the organization in ways that reduce risk for the organization – particularly of this information reaching the public domain' (du Plessis, 2020, 11). It is thus integrated into a governmentality that aims to ensure the 'controlled circulation' (Foucault 2008) of statements, to separate 'good' from 'bad' circulation. Thus, it is not simply about suppressing – stopping truth-telling or disciplining individual whistleblowers – but about channelling speech and feeding it into organizational productive circuits, in 'such a way that the inherent dangers of this circulation are cancelled out' (Foucault 2008, 65). This form of governmentalization of truth-telling includes the strategy of encouraging 'Hinweisgeber' (hint- or tip-givers) via incentives and appealing to employees as 'good organizational citizens' helping manage crises. As 'Hinweisgeber' they are supposed to be vigilant and become 'dutiful informers' contributing to 'organizational betterment' in terms of efficiency, problem solving or quality (Contu 2014, 7).

The example raises many questions concerning how *parrhēsia* can become an 'element within an institutional structure' (Foucault 2014b, 28). Namely, can the courage or energy that is the precondition for truth-telling be organized (Vandekerkhove and Langenberg 2012)? Can truth-telling be ordered or incentivized? Can it be defined and morally prescribed so that employees become 'dutiful informers'? In short, can truth-telling be institutionalized and transformed into a management or government technology? Such questions are discussed intensively in current whistleblowing research, but mostly within a functionalist framework and without fully grasping the scope of *parrhēsia*. Indeed, this concept radically breaks with this frame and leads way beyond that. It entails a new image or understanding of the 'open organization'.

## OPEN(ING) ORGANIZATION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF MANAGERIAL GOVERNMENTALITY

An 'open organization' is an oxymoron, since every organization comes into being through closure. It is created by the inclusion of certain things and the exclusion of others. Luhmann (2000) points out that organizations are constantly engaged in (re)defining and maintaining their boundaries to the environment. They counter 'extensive and intensive transgressions' through 'operational closures' and install 'safety nets' to prevent their own deconstruction (Luhmann 2000, 79). Protecting autopoiesis and closed self-reproduction requires an 'immune system', enabling them to determine boundaries and conditions for success on the basis of the system's own codes, and at the same time to protect themselves against 'foreign', or 'external', claims, norms, values, and so on (Lemke 2000, 408).

With *parrhēsia*, Foucault brings an element of otherness into play that cannot be fully incorporated, regulated, and governmentalized (thus preventing 'closed self-reproduction'). For, what characterizes it 'is precisely that, apart from status and anything that could codify and define the situation, the parrhēsiast is someone who emphasizes his own freedom as an individual speaking' (Foucault 2010, 65). In this sense, *parrhēsia* points to an openness of organization that results from an excess of otherness within all rule-governed practices. It does not only occasionally – when courageous persons seize the word – disrupt practices but destabilizes the normative matrix that regulates behaviour as an immanent provocation, a disorganizing force that supplements the process of organization. In this sense it represents a 'surplus energy that can sometimes overflow governmentality and unsettle, however briefly, a given state of affairs' (Walters 2014, 298).

In a second sense, *parrhēsia* points to procedures that open organizations to internal and external criticism. Practices that enable and force the organization to listen to critical voices and respond to the 'call of the other' (Butler 2005; Catlaw et al. 2014), along with procedures that allow or even encourage the articulation of dissent, are complementary practices at the heart of open organization, creating a generative space in which differences can come into productive exchange. In contrast to normative ideals of overcoming difference and conflict and formulating organizing principles in a collective, consensual voice, Foucault points to a dynamic interplay of forces in agonistic relations. With the notion of 'agonism' he refers to a struggle between forces, in which moves are not predetermined; rather they are 'at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation' (Foucault 1981b, 222). While Foucault did not fully develop it, I suggest that the agonistic character of the 'parrhēsiastic game' (Foucault 2011, 12–13; Foucault 2010, 156) and the idea of the 'parrhēsiastic pact', which both binds the speaker to the truth spoken (Foucault 2010, 64–5) *and* the listener to his or her promise of accepting being told an even unpleasant truth, point to an 'ethics of openness to the other' (Falzon, 1998) that potentially

allows a productive exchange of differences. This is the fundamental organizing principle of an open organization in this sense:

> Thus, the true game of *parrhēsia* will be established on the basis of this kind of pact which means that if the parrhēsiast demonstrates his courage by telling the truth despite and regardless of everything, the person to whom this *parrhēsia* is addressed will have to demonstrate his greatness of soul by accepting being told the truth. (Foucault 2011, 12–13)

*Parrhēsia* is not a management tool, it rather denotes a 'critical attitude' toward established truths and practices, including the will 'not to be governed *like that* and at that cost' (Foucault 2003, 265). Disruptive truth-telling makes taken for granted practices 'problematic' and inhabits the potential of opening up possible other worlds and inspiring activities towards different forms of conduct and modes of organizing social relations (cf. Dey and Mason 2018). The transformation of (managerial) governmentality is contingent on *questioning* established truths by interrogating discursive practices and modes of veridiction which constitute certain forms of knowledge; *disrupting* the normative matrix of behaviour by exposing the power-effects of specific procedures of (managerial) governmentality; as well as on critical reflection of prescribed modes of being and *experimenting* with practices of the self. Thus, *parrhēsia* is 'situated at the meeting point of the obligation to speak the truth, procedures and techniques of governmentality, and the constitution of the relationship to self' (Foucault 2010, 45).

Ultimately, I propose, the challenge of *parrhēsia* is to reclaim an ethical-political space of contestation and possible transformation *within* the organizational complex as a contingent stabilization of practices and technologies that have been invented for governing the conduct of people in diverse 'laboratories of government' (Miller and Rose 2008). Organizing is not a linear process of imposing order on an inherently undecidable world by using various technologies of management (as early work on managerial governmentality had it), but a complex process in which practices and technologies of managing and governing conduct are used, adapted, questioned and modified in the process enacting them. Since organization – as a reflexive process of ordering our relations to self and others – is intrinsically bound up with a whole range of practices of ethical and political counter-conduct, it is never fixed and finalized but always open to a becoming, which allows new forms of organizing and managing conduct to emerge.

## NOTE

1. The Ellsberg Archive Project at the University of Massachusetts Amherst provides detailed information on the case of Ellsberg (https://www.umass.edu/ellsberg/about/).

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