



Whistleblowing, Parrhesia and the Contestation of Truth in the Workplace

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Abstract

In this paper, we develop an approach to the study of whistleblowing as a critical practice that is involved in the contestation of truth and power in the workplace. We situate our analysis in the context of practice-based thinking and specify the social practice of whistleblowing with reference to Michel Foucault's concept of 'parrhesia' (frank speech). We then introduce the case of Guido Strack, a former European Union official who worked as section leader at the *Office des Publications Officielles des Communautés Européenne* from 1995 to 2002. Strack spoke out against malpractice in the EU in 2001 and officially reported alleged financial misconduct in 2002. In our analysis, we focus on the interplay between and effects of different modes of truth-telling in the context of this specific organization – a context marked by the uneasy coexistence of different normative and discursive frames. We argue that the parrhesiastic modality of truth-telling threatens the established 'working solutions' that reconcile the tensions inherent in the regime of practices and thus introduces a 'critical opening' that harbours the potential for both personal and organizational transformation. We conclude by highlighting the potential of a nuanced understanding of parrhesia for studying 'critical practices' more generally.

Keywords

case study, parrhesia, power, practices, whistleblowing

Introduction

'The whistle-blower speaks out about illegal or unethical behaviour within his or her organization' (Alford, 1999, p.266). Such 'speaking out' is often discussed in the context of (business) ethics where it appears as a 'moral duty' (Vandekerckhove & Tsahuridu, 2010), as an expression of

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'ethical autonomy' (Alford, 2001) or 'moral impulses' (Painter-Morland & ten Bos, 2011) or is discussed and/or judged from the point of view of normative ethics (when and under which circumstances is whistleblowing justified or even demanded? What are the rules to be followed? (e.g. Bowie, 1982; Hoffman & Schwartz, 2015). Many authors depict whistleblowing as an ethical dilemma resulting from conflicting loyalties (Andrade, 2015; Larmer, 1992; Vandekerckhove, 2006). According to this view, 'organizational loyalty versus preventing public harm' features as 'whistleblowing's essential aporia' (Andrade 2015, p.328). Others have discussed it as a political act or as a form of resistance in organizations that seeks to transform established practices and normative orders (e.g. Contu, 2014; De Maria, 2008; Mansbach, 2007, 2009; Monk, Knights, & Page, 2015; Rothschild, 2008, 2013; Rothschild & Miethe, 1994). Within this stream of literature, whistleblowing is interpreted as 'political behaviour' that 'is intended to change the way that the work gets done in the organization' (Rothschild & Miethe, 1994, p.255).

In public debate, 'whistleblowers' are variously portrayed as 'heroes' standing up against a morally corrupt system or as 'traitors' who threaten the moral integrity of this very same system (Grant, 2002). As Perry has noted, the dualistic opposition of 'moral wo/man against immoral organization; the spirited resistance of the precariously sovereign individual against repressive social control' (Perry, 1998, p.236) is frequently reproduced in analyses of whistleblowing which interpret it as an expression of individual motives or choices that characterize the 'whistleblower personality' (Miceli & Near, 1992). The 'ethical resister' (Glazer & Glazer, 1989), 'men and women of conscience' (De Maria, 2008), 'principled individuals' with 'strong moral convictions' (Avakian & Roberts, 2012; Graham, 1986) are positioned in opposition to the repressive organization, which is 'dedicated to the destruction of ethical autonomy' (Alford, 1999, p.274; Alford, 2001). Perry offers an alternative interpretation of whistleblowing as a 'historically determined, institutionally shaped, culturally mediated *practice*' (1998, p.239, emphasis added). Such an approach eschews a priori assumptions about the nature of the individual or the nature of the organization and sees the opposition of 'individual' and 'organization' not as a given but as one possible outcome of practices that need to be investigated. We contribute to the development of this approach by conceptualizing whistleblowing as a 'critical practice' (Messner, Clegg & Kornberger, 2008; Weiskopf & Willmott, 2013) that questions and problematizes established practices and regimes of truth. More specifically, we contribute to understanding whistleblowing as a form of 'truth-telling in the workplace' (Mansbach, 2009). While such truth-telling is tied to the subjectivity of the speaker, we argue that it needs to be understood as formed and shaped, yet not determined, by the discursive context in which it emerges and by the normative frame that governs it.

The paper is organized as follows. We first explicate our conceptualization of practice(s). Next, we specify the social practice of whistleblowing with reference to Michel Foucault's concept of 'parrhesia'¹ which broadly refers to a specific modality of truth-telling (veridiction) in the context of asymmetrical power relations. This concept is situated 'at the meeting point' (Foucault, 2010, p.45) of discourses, governmental procedures and subjective self-formation and allows us to discuss the speaking out of the whistleblower in relation to various other modalities of truth-telling that are involved in the 'contestation over "truth" (and power) in the workplace' (Rothschild, 2013, p.890). We then introduce the case of Guido Strack, a former section leader at the *Office des Publications Officielles des Communautés Européenne* (OPOCE) who spoke out on malpractices in the European Union in 2001 and officially reported alleged financial misconduct in 2002. The case allows us to discuss truth-telling in the context of an uneasy coexistence of contradictory discourses and 'games of truth' in this specific organization. Furthermore, focusing on this case enables us to illustrate the effects of transforming parrhesiastic truth-telling that threatens established 'working solutions' into a regulated form of veridiction that is bound to specific procedures

of governmentality. We conclude by highlighting the potential of a nuanced understanding of parrhesia for studying ‘critical practices’ in organizations more generally.

Parrhesia and Whistleblowing as Social Practice

Our conception of ‘practice’ is broadly consistent with Schatzki’s influential formulation in which practices are characterized as ‘embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding’ (Schatzki, 2001, p. 2). For us, ‘shared practical understanding’, including how ‘individuals’ are defined and understood, is a product of power-invested closure rather than an outcome of spontaneous, symmetrically negotiated consensus. In other words, practices are *infused* with relations of power. Power is not above or beyond practices; rather, it circulates *through* complex webs of possible actions. The way power circulates through these webs has effects that are contingent and indeterminate. Practices here are understood as ‘places where what is said and what is done, rules imposed and reasons given, the planned and the taken for granted meet and interconnect’ (Foucault, 1991, p. 75). ‘Regimes of practices’ are historically contingent ways in which diverse elements are assembled into relatively stable forms. In an elementary sense, they are ‘fairly coherent sets of ways of going about doing things’ or ‘more or less organized ways’ (Dean, 2010, p. 31) of doing things such as administering, punishing and educating. The convergence of certain practices around specific understandings of phenomena constitutes a historically specific ‘regime of truth’ which comprises ‘ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements’ (Foucault, 1984, p. 132). Such ‘regimes’ become accepted at specific historical moments: they provide specific legitimate ways of seeing and of speaking, of defining and of dealing with ‘problems’; they set the terms for enacting lay and scientific understandings of specific modes of practice, modes of being and relations to self and others (see Weiskopf & Willmott, 2013). While they constitute historical conditions, they are never closed systems. In fact they are continuously modified in a ‘complex interplay between what replicates the same process and what transforms it’ (Foucault, 2003, p. 277).

This approach allows us to explore whistleblowing as a practice that is conditioned, but not determined, by the configuration of practices in which it is embedded. Similar to Perry (1998, p. 239), we stress that whistleblowing incidents are ‘explicable not as the manifestation of prior ontological certainties or universal truths, but [are] constituted in and through the social order that generates them, the discourses that articulate them and the subject positions which realize them’ (Perry, 1998, p. 239). Going beyond Perry’s understanding we also consider that ‘the alarm of the whistleblower is meant to *disrupt the status quo*: to pierce the background noise, perhaps the false harmony, or the imposed silence of “business as usual”’ (Bok, 1989, p. 214, emphasis added), thus a poststructuralist focus on the “breaking” and “shifting” of structures in everyday crises and routines’ (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 255) is pertinent. Such disruptions and breakdowns reveal the contingency of practices and need to be seen as spaces of potential transformation that allow a reconfiguration of practices (Rabinow & Stavrianakis, 2014).

While the reproduction of practices is governed by discourses as ‘regulated forms of veridiction’ (Foucault, 2010, p. 4) and by ‘procedures of governmentality’ (p. 5) that constitute the normative matrix of behaviour, it always depends on some element of subjectivity. This makes it less than fully predictable and somewhat ‘out of joint’ with the smooth functioning of routine actions and the *modus operandi* that reproduces social and organizational relations (Contu, 2014, p. 2). A regime of practices may also be challenged and its reproduction interrupted by ‘critical practices’ (Messner et al., 2008) that question and problematize it. In Foucault’s terms, the regime of practices that governs our relation to the self and others is supplemented by ‘critical practices’ that seek ‘not to be governed like that and at that cost’ (Foucault, 2003, p. 265). Foucault’s concept of ‘critical

practices' enables us to consider how people who speak out 'necessarily operate within powerfully determining and institutionalized regimes of truth' (Ibarra-Colado, Clegg, Rhodes & Kornberger, 2006, p. 48) yet can also become active and position themselves in relation to dominant discourses and procedures that are assumed to guide action. In working through regimes of practices, in confronting obstacles and limitations, in struggling with and within power relations, subjects are continuously formed, deformed and reformed. In the active process of 'stepping back' and reflecting on the given as a problem (Foucault, 1997b, p. 117), individuals can develop an 'ethical subjectivity' in the sense of becoming the subject of their own moral action (Ibarra-Colado et al., 2006; Iedema & Rhodes, 2010; Loacker & Muhr, 2009; Weiskopf & Willmott, 2013). Foucault's concept of parrhesia, which we now introduce, complements our understanding of practices. It interlinks critique, subjectivity and freedom (Folkers, 2015) and allows specifying the 'space of freedom' (Crane, Knights, & Starkey, 2008; Barratt, 2008) within power-infused practices.

Parrhesia

Foucault interprets parrhesia as 'fearless speech' (2001a), 'free spokenness (*franc parler*)' (2011, p. 2), a 'profession of truth' (2010, p. 188) or a specific 'modality of truth-telling' (2011, p. 15) that emerges in the context of asymmetrical power relations. According to Foucault, who studied the problematization of parrhesia and the role of the parrhesiast in Greek antiquity, the term parrhesia was 'first of all and fundamentally a political notion' (2010, p. 8). It referred to speaking the truth in public, in front of the assembly. Later, from Socrates to the Cynics, parrhesia increasingly played an important role in the context of ethics and ethical self-formation (Catlaw, Rawlings, & Callen, 2014; Luxon, 2008). Political and ethical parrhesia differ in many respects. What they share is the 'parrhesiastic function' of disrupting and opening up established practices rather than reproducing them. In the political context, the parrhesiastic function is to 'introduce the difference of a truth-telling into the debate' (Gros, 2010, p. 382) and produce a *dissensus*, that is a condition of possibility for the democratic game to be played. In the sphere of ethics the parrhesiastic function is to allow a reflection on the habitualized practices and modes of life (as a basis for ethical self-formation). In this sense, parrhesia is an *ethico-political practice* that opens up possibilities of new ways of relating to the self and others (the ethical dimension) and new ways of organizing relations to others (the political dimension).

The irruptive force associated with its ethico-political nature differentiates parrhesia from other modalities of truth-telling. Foucault (2011, p. 15) identifies four 'basic modalities of truth-telling' or 'veridiction' that were relatively clearly distinguished in antiquity: the modality of prophesy, the ontological modality of the sage, the technical modality of the technician/expert or professor and the parrhesiastic modality. In contrast to the prophet and the sage, the parrhesiast speaks *clearly and says everything* that is on his mind (as long as it is related to the truth he is speaking). In contrast to the prophet and the expert, he or she speaks *in his own name* and 'personally signs' (Foucault, 2011, p. 11) the truth he or she states. In contrast to all other modalities of veridiction, parrhesia *intervenes* in the material context in which it emerges. The parrhesiast 'says what is' with respect to singular individuals, situations or circumstances (Foucault, 2011, pp. 18–19) and does not speak in general terms about fate, future or principles. The four major modalities of truth-telling can be clearly distinguished and they may correspond to distinct institutions, practices or personages but, Foucault insists, they are 'modes or veridiction [that] are combined with each other, and we find them in forms of discourse, types of institutions, and social characters which *mix the modes of veridiction* with each other' (Foucault, 2011, p. 26, emphasis added).

The basic characteristics of the parrhesiastic modality of truth-telling are frankness, truth, risk, criticism, freedom and duty (Foucault, 2001a, 2010). Contrary to the use of rhetoric, parrhesiastic

speaking means not concealing anything and speaking openly while making it clear that what is said is the speaker's own opinion. The parrhesiast 'acts on other people's minds by showing them as directly as possible what he actually believes' (Foucault, 2001a, p. 12). This frankness implies a certain relationship between the speaker and the spoken. By entering the 'parrhesiastic pact of the subject with himself' (2010, p. 65), the speaker binds himself both to that which is spoken (content of the statement) and to the fact of being the one who has spoken the truth (the act of making the statement).

Parrhesia is tied to *truth*. It means 'telling the whole truth, hiding nothing of the truth, telling the truth without hiding it behind anything' (Foucault, 2010, p. 10). In the Greek conception of parrhesia, the ability to speak the truth was tied to 'certain moral qualities' (2001a, p. 15) of the speaker and to 'courage'. The very fact that the speaker has the courage to speak against the majority or a more powerful interlocutor is taken as an indication that this speaker is a parrhesiast.

The *risk* that the parrhesiast takes is an essential characteristic of this practice. What the parrhesiast says is dangerous to him or herself and may entail 'costly consequences' (Foucault, 2011, p. 56). The danger lies in the inferior position of the parrhesiast in relation to the interlocutor and the fact that the truth that is spoken potentially hurts, irritates or angers the interlocutor, 'provoking him to conduct which may even be extremely violent. So it is truth subject to the risk of violence' (Foucault, 2010, p. 11). The involvement of risks also links parrhesia to the subjective disposition of courage: the courage to speak the truth and to expose oneself without exactly knowing all the consequences.

Parrhesia is a specific form of *criticism*. It 'comes from "below", as it were, and is directed towards "above"' (Foucault, 2001a, p. 18). The speaker is in a relatively weak position and risks his or her life in the extreme case. Parrhesia thus implies a specific relation to others *and* a specific relation to oneself. The critical self-relation connects parrhesia to ethics as a specific relation to oneself (see also Catlaw et al., 2014; Luxon, 2008). Without the ability to reflect on one's own self and to risk one's own given self-understanding, parrhesiastic truth-telling can easily slip into dogmatism. The parrhesiast *exposes* him or herself and thereby becomes open to criticism by others. The character of parrhesiastic critique is one of reflexive 'insolence' (Folgers, 2015; Foucault, 2003) rather than rational argumentation based on evidence or universal norms. It is not a right given but rather a 'movement by which the subject *gives himself the right* to question the truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth' (Foucault, 2003, p. 266, emphasis added). The two final characteristics of parrhesia are *freedom and duty*. Parrhesiastic truth-telling is thus a voluntary act in which the subject uses his or her freedom to follow his or her own duty ('the duty to challenge and speak' (Foucault, 2011, p. 27) in the sense of a moral obligation. In effect, parrhesia is a 'dangerous exercise of freedom' (2010, p. 67).

Foucault (2010) further clarifies the distinctiveness of parrhesia by contrasting it to performative speech acts. Performative speech acts are speech acts in which the content is realized as it is pronounced. For example, when a chairperson states 'the meeting is open', this person is 'doing things with words' (Austin, 1962). The meeting *is* in fact open at the very moment when the chairperson enunciates these words. The value and effectiveness of performative speech acts thus depend on (a) a certain context, which is more or less institutionalized, and (b) a person who possesses a specified institutional position. If these conditions are met, performative speech produces 'codified effects' (Foucault, 2010, p. 62), i.e. effects that are predictable and calculable. We know in advance that the meeting will be open when the chairperson declares it so. In contrast, parrhesiastic speech produces a series of effects which cannot be known in advance. Instead, what defines parrhesia is that the 'introduction, the irruption of the true discourse determines an open situation, or rather opens the situations and makes possible effects which are, precisely, not known' (Foucault, 2010, p. 62). Furthermore, the institutional status of the speaker is secondary: 'What characterizes

Table 1. Core differences between performative speech and parrhesia.

Performative speech	Parrhesia
Codified effects (predictable and calculable)	Opening up of the situation and of an undefined risk
Institutional position of the speaking subject at the centre of speech	Courage of the speaking subject at the centre of speech
Inner attitude of the subject irrelevant	Inner attitude of the subject important 'Pact of the subject with himself'

the parrhesiastic utterance is precisely that, apart from status and anything that could codify and define the situation, the parrhesiast is someone who emphasizes his own freedom as an individual speaking' (Foucault, 2010, p. 65). At the centre of the parrhesiastic speech is therefore not the status of the subject but rather the *courage* of the speaker. Additionally, indifference about the content of speech is impossible in parrhesia but has little relevance in performative speech (e.g. the inner attitude of the chairperson is irrelevant for the opening of the meeting). In parrhesiastic speech, truth is spelled out on two different yet intertwined levels. On one level the parrhesiast truthfully says what the case is ('this is wrong', 'this is unfair', 'this or that happened', etc. and 'that's it') and thus binds him or herself to the statement and the content. On a second level, which is indispensable, the parrhesiast makes it clear that the truth he or she is telling is also what he personally holds as true. He or she thus binds him or herself to the act of stating the truth and takes on the risks of its consequences (Foucault, 2010, p. 65).

The core differences between performative speech and parrhesia are summarized in table 1 above.

The truth-telling of whistleblowing

A number of studies have related whistleblowing to Foucault's concept of parrhesia (e.g. Mansbach, 2007, 2009; Rothschild, 2013; Vandekerckhove & Langenberg, 2012; Weiskopf & Willmott, 2013). Mansbach (2009), for example, has theorized whistleblowing as 'truth-telling in the workplace' and argues that it 'is similar to parrhesia in that it is an act intended to create change in the decisions made by more powerful actors, such as management and superiors' (p. 367). Apart from that, it is similar in that it usually involves a high risk for the speaker, who may not always risk his or her life but often their livelihood. Like the parrhesiast, the whistleblower says what he or she 'knows to be true' (Foucault, 2001a, p. 14) and thereby challenges established, accepted truths. Many whistleblowers in different areas report how their speaking out was motivated by a personal sense of moral duty (e.g. Armenakis, 2004; Scheuerman, 2014). After talking with a group of whistleblowers over a period of one year, Alford concluded that 'all have acted morally at risk of themselves' (2001, p. 403). Similar to the parrhesiast, the whistleblower speaks out in singular situations rather than on general principles (Contu, 2014) and the very act of speaking out and making things public is an intervention in the material context of asymmetrical power relations. We stress, however, that the speaking out of the whistleblower is not just 'similar' to parrhesia. It also needs to be seen as a modification or reinvention of truth-telling in the particular context of modern organizations where truth-telling is linked to modern forms of governmentality and related to formal obligations associated with membership in organizations (Bok, 1989). While it may be true that the 'whistleblower today does not enjoy the same social recognition or status as the Greek parrhesiastes' (Mansbach, 2009, p. 367), it does need to be considered that in many cases whistleblowing 'is protected by the right of free speech and often encouraged in codes of ethics and other statements of principle' (Bok, 1989, p. 214). Vandekerckhove (2006; Tsahuridu & Vandekerckhove,

2008) observed an increasing ‘institutionalization of whistleblowing’ over the past 30 years. This is associated with a proliferation of legal rules, whistleblowing policies that define channels and procedures for raising concerns and classifications that are used in distinguishing legitimate and illegitimate speaking-out. Taking this into consideration is crucial as it points to the ways in which the act of truth-telling is regulated in legal terms and constructed for administrative purposes. While truth-telling in the workplace can take many different forms (see e.g. Karfakis & Kokkinidis, 2011), modern discourses of whistleblowing tend to limit the range of possibilities and to impose the alternative of either following prescribed modes of truth-telling or remaining silent (Teo & Caspersz, 2011). Contu (2014) argues that the legitimation of whistleblowing in functionalist terms involves attempts to constitute whistleblowers as ‘dutiful informers, guaranteeing an organizational betterment’ (p. 7). This is particularly reflected in compliance-based approaches that define whistleblowing as a duty of employees to report suspected wrongdoing (Leys & Vandekerckhove, 2014). Truth-telling cannot be understood independently of this context in which the willingness or urgency to voice uncomfortable truths is produced and the ‘contestation over “truth” (and power) in the workplace’ (Rothschild, 2013, p. 890) takes place.

While the sharp distinction that Foucault draws between performative speech and parrhesia is contestable (Waldenfels, 2012), in the context of our understanding of whistleblowing as a critical practice this distinction is important as it serves to distinguish parrhesiastic truth-telling from whistleblowing as a form of ‘institutionalized critique’ (Vandekerckhove & Langenberg, 2012, p. 39) that is organized by specific procedures and regulated by specific legal and/or organizational norms. The ‘binding power’ (Butler, 1993, p. 225) of institutionalized critique relies on the reproduction (recitation, reiteration) of the tradition or institutional frame that supports it. Consequently, whistleblowing as institutionalized critique is typically assessed and judged legitimate only if it follows the right procedures (e.g. voicing concerns internally before going public externally, speaking on specified issues that are defined as relevant; e.g. Hoffman & Schwartz, 2015). Its truth value and possible reality effect depend on its compliance with the rules of the truth game attached to this speech. Parrhesiastic acts, in contrast, lack institutional support and are not bound to any specific form. Their ‘binding power’ relies on the personal integrity and moral quality that is attributed to the speaker. This explains some of the ‘classical responses’ (GAP, 1997, p. 27) to the truth-telling of the whistleblower. Strategies for undermining the credibility of the whistleblower, of branding him or her as a ‘troublemaker’, as ‘unreliable’, ‘untrustworthy’, ‘morally dubious’, etc. typically emerge as a (counter-)reaction to truth-telling that harbours a parrhesiastic element.

In the context of specific regimes of practices, these forms of truth-telling are entangled or ‘mixed’ with one another. In the following section we will analyse the case of Guido Strack’s ‘truth-telling’ on perceived financial misconduct in the EU administration. It is a ‘critical case’ in Flyvbjerg’s (2006) sense as it has a ‘strategic importance in relation to the general problem’ (p. 229) of understanding how different forms of truth-telling are different in their effects and relate to one another as well as to specific forms of governmentality that involve different ‘games of truth’ (i.e. ‘set(s) of rules by which truth is produced’ (Foucault, 1997a, p. 297). Moreover, it is a particularly interesting case as it allows us to study how parrhesiastic truth-telling is transformed into a regulated form of veridiction and how this affects both the truth-teller and the established practices. We now briefly introduce the case.

Introducing the Case

Guido Strack was a German official who worked as a section leader at the *Office des Publications Officielles des Communautés Européenne* (OPOCE) from 1995 to 2002. He voiced his concerns about alleged financial misconduct internally in 2001 and formally reported the alleged

misconduct in 2002 to the *Office Européen de Lutte Anti-fraude* (OLAF) after the European Commission passed a decision, on 4 April 2002, that obliges officials and civil servants to report on financial (and other) misconduct in their workplace.²

The series of events, which Strack classified as financial misconduct, is quite complex and highly technical. For the purposes of our analysis we only refer to the most important occurrences that are indispensable to the main arguments of this paper.³ OPOCE outsourced a part of one of its projects to a company called Advanced Document Logistics (ADL) which, according to Strack, failed from the beginning to deliver the contractually agreed quantity and quality of service (producing consolidated texts of European legislation). OPOCE did not make use of the contractually agreed financial sanctions in case of deficient services but changed the contract in favour of ADL, thereby 'potentially misleading' (OLAF Final Case Report) *Comité Consultatif des Achats et Marchés* (CCAM), the central committee responsible for changes in contracts. Strack perceived this as mismanagement by his superiors and calculated the financial damage as 4 million Euros for the EU budget and, ultimately, the European taxpayer.⁴

After having voiced his concerns internally, Strack formally reported the alleged financial misconduct via an email (dated 30 July 2002) to the director general of OLAF, an institution set up to prevent financial and other misconduct detrimental to the financial interests of the EU. As a consequence, OLAF opened case OF/2002/0356 on 18 October 2002. The case was closed again in February 2004, finding that no 'follow-up action' was required. For Strack, however, the matter was not resolved. Despite his formal obligation to report on financial misconduct and the protection against reprisals promised in the European Commission's decision of 4 April 2002, he became the victim of organizational retaliation. In 2005 he was invalidated by the EU and had to retire early at the age of 40. At time of writing, he has initiated more than 20 lawsuits to claim his rights.

Data and Analysis

A semi-structured interview with Strack was conducted by one of the authors in February 2012. This interview material was supplemented by official EU documents (the OLAF Final Case Report, the statement of Strack for a public hearing of the budgetary control committee of the European Parliament on 25 May 2011, summaries of EU legislation relating to officials' obligation to report on misconduct and the CCAM Avis), email correspondence (Strack's email to the director general of OLAF), other public hearings in which Strack acted as referee (e.g. the public hearing of the German Committee for Labor and Social Affairs on 5 March 2012), unofficial EU documents (the report of the OLAF supervisory Committee on OLAF's investigations of Strack's case), newspaper articles about the case, interviews with Strack available online and extensive documentation of the case by the *Dokumentationszentrum Couragierte Recherchen und Reportagen*, a project from the Institute of Design, Medien und Information at the Hamburg University of Applied Sciences.⁵

In our analysis we draw on this material, not in order to produce a representationalist account of 'what is true or false, founded or unfounded, real or illusionary' (Foucault, 2003, p. 273) but in order to demonstrate how the activity of truth-telling emerges in the context of multiple and inter-linked 'games of truth', how truth claims are raised and established, (re)created or disrupted. We first situate the truth-telling in an institutional context which is characterized by an uneasy coexistence of different normative and discursive frames and focus on the interplay of different modes of veridiction in establishing truth. We then contrast Strack's parrhesiastic critique to his performance of critique in his institutional role as an official. Our focus here is on how truth-telling is linked to different procedures of governmentality and how this affects the *modus operandi* and the subjectivities involved.

The modus operandi: tensions and working solutions

The purchase of goods and services and the ordering of works by a public authority ... are *public contracts*. Opening up these *contracts* ... has allowed an increase in *competition* ..., *reducing prices and guaranteeing better quality of services for citizens*. Over the years, the EU has introduced *legislative* provisions which *modernise* and facilitate the award of contract process. It has increased *transparency, fairness and interoperability* in this respect through tools such as ... (European Union, n.d., emphasis added)

The excerpt above is from a description of the public procurement system found on an official EU website. Referring to the discursive frames of economics and bureaucracy, the excerpt exemplifies the creation of a truth about the nature of good public institutions in an ontological modality of veridiction (first and second sentences). According to this ontological truth claim, a good public institution is characterized as an embodiment of the economic ideal of efficiency and the bureaucratic ideal of neutrality.

Apart from constituting the truth about the nature of a 'good public institution', the excerpt expresses the claim that the institution concerned is in fact a '*good* public institution'. Using a technical modality of veridiction (third and last sentence) it advances the claim that specific 'tools' installed in practice ensure the implementation of the bureaucratic ideal of neutrality and the economic ideal of efficiency. Specific 'tools' that increase 'transparency', 'fairness' (the bureaucratic discursive frame) and 'interoperability' (the economic discursive frame) are mobilized as proof that confirms the truth that the public institution concerned is what it should be: an efficient bureaucracy. Using the terminology suggested by Perry (1998, p.250), this constitutes a 'mythic public face' that grants legitimacy to the institution.

There is, however, a tension between ideals generated by the 'clash of rationalities' (Messner et al., 2008, p. 73) that results from the interlinking of different truth games: whereas the bureaucratic game highlights the importance of employing established means and following calculable rules 'without regard for persons' (*sine ira et studio*) (Weber, 1978, p.225), the economic game highlights the importance of efficiently achieving specified ends. Formal rules of the organization, like the public procurement system, reflect the public face of the organization and thus incorporate the tensions generated by different truth games.

These tensions also come to the fore on the level of specific procedures that are associated with them. Arguably, OPOCE faced a situation in which contradicting demands resulting from different truth games became pressing. As the OLAF Final Case Report makes clear, OPOCE tried to 'avoid the embarrassment of admitting that ... [it] was failing its task of providing the "raw material"' (OLAF Final Case Report, p. 10) in due time and depended on ADL's services in achieving this task. OPOCE did not enforce the contractually mandated penalties on ADL which, according to the tender specifications, 'should automatically follow delays or defects' and which 'during the life of the contract ... might have been considered appropriate' (OLAF Final Case Report, pp.8–9). Instead, OPOCE gave in to pressures from ADL, changing the contract in favour of ADL and thereby 'potentially misleading' CCAM, the committee responsible for changes in contracts.

To maintain legitimacy and keep the modus operandi of the institution going, the tensions generated by different truth games and the tensions between the demands of specific situations and formal rules and regulations need to be reconciled. As Perry (1998, p. 250) observes,

The continued uneasy co-existence of formal structures with both effective practices and such localized and specific interests thus depends upon a variety of decoupling devices (Weick, 1976). For example inspections are ceremonialized and effective evaluation is avoided. Goals are made ambiguous or vacuous. Since coordination is both important and likely to be in violation of the rules, informal interpersonal competences are highly valued. Anomalies are ignored and discretionary behavior tolerated or encouraged.

Such practices are well known to practitioners in organizational contexts while their public discussion is often tabooed (Schoemaker & Tetlock, 2012). In the interview, Strack refers to an example of such working solutions that he observed:

... if they have the budget, no one cares ... and *if they spend everything* [the budget] *and if they successfully got the project done then nobody cares about what happened backstage.*

According to Strack, the contract between OPOCE and ADL could be modified more or less deliberately 'behind the scenes' as long as the project was realized in time and the budget was not exceeded.⁶

The tensions between ideals drawn from economic and bureaucratic discursive frames and the tensions between demands of specific situations and formal rules and regulations create a context marked by inconsistencies. While the 'clash of rationalities within the organization' harbours the potential for 'criticism related to organizational practice' (Messner et al., 2008, p. 73), the case material indicates that specific 'working solutions' (Perry, 1998) were established as practical accomplishments that reconcile these tensions, maintain the organization's legitimacy and keep its *modus operandi* in place. As will be argued in the next section, it is precisely these working solutions that are threatened by whistleblowing and with them the truth claims about the nature of the organization.

The critical opening of parrhesia and strategies of closure

According to Strack's official statement to the Budgetary Control Committee of the European Union and the interview with him in 2012, Strack tried his best to somehow 'get the project done' despite the difficulties with the underperforming contractor. During this time, he frequently informed his superiors about the problematic situation and continuously demanded that ADL fulfil the contract. They denied his frequent requests to make use of the contractually agreed financial sanctions and instead gave in to pressures from ADL. In summer 2001, Strack found out that his superiors were negotiating with ADL without informing him. At that time, he also discovered an email in which ADL threatened to walk away from the project if OPOCE did not pay them more money. When Strack came to know that his superiors had applied for a change in contract and saw in the document how they had managed to convince CCAM to accept this change, he confronted them directly and questioned their integrity. He recalls the accusation as follows:

What you are doing is *unacceptable* ... *you are violating legal norms* if you are doing this *in this way*. (Interview, 2012)⁷

In this utterance, Strack clearly speaks his truth about the deficient behaviour of his superiors ('what you are doing is *unacceptable*') and backs up this parrhesiastic truth claim through a technical modality of veridiction drawing on the juridical discursive frame ('*you are violating legal norms* if you are doing this *in this way*'). While this act mobilizes categories from authoritative discourses (in this case the law) for questioning the established regime of practices, it also goes beyond them by introducing a parrhesiastic element. Strack does not speak in his institutional role as an official, nor is he speaking in the name of the law; he is speaking in his own name. His truth-telling here is not 'authoritative speech' (Butler, 1993, p. 225) that is bound to and supported by his institutional position as head of sector at OPOCE or his status as EU official. By speaking truth in his own name, he exposes himself and makes himself vulnerable as a subject. He binds himself both to that which is spoken (content of the statement) and to the fact of being the one who has spoken the truth (the act of making the statement).

His parrhesiastic speech is neither 'objective' nor 'neutral'; it is perspectival and articulates that which he perceives as 'intolerable' (Foucault, 2001b). It is a critical questioning that combines the *tekhné* of the (juridical) professional with the duty of the parrhesiast to voice an uncomfortable truth in a particular way. Strack refuses to ignore the 'anomalies' prevalent in the application for the change in contract and decries the ceremonialization of the formal rules and regulations which officially function to control budget-related issues.

The interruption introduced by parrhesiastic acts creates a space for potential transformation. The actualization of this potential, however, depends on the contingent reactions of others and on how the 'parrhesiastic game' is taken up in its context. Parrhesia is relational (Contu, 2014). It is an activity which involves several other people: a speaker, a listener and perhaps a wider audience. The 'true game of parrhesia' (Foucault, 2010, p. 12) is an interactive game enabled by a 'double pact' which involves the courage of the speaker taking a risk *and* the courage of the listener in accepting being told an uncomfortable truth (see also Catlaw et al., 2014; Vandekerckhove & Langenberg, 2012).

While a 'true' parrhesiastic game opens up an antagonistic struggle in which truth claims are negotiated, various strategies of closure may seek to keep things going as usual. This is what Strack experienced:

... my boss told me more or less clearly *this was politics and I should keep out of this*. (Interview, 2012)⁸

Strack's superior does not negate the truth claim put forward by Strack. Instead, he remains silent about the critique of his behaviour and reframes the situation in an ontological modality of veridiction as being 'political' in nature ('this is politics') and consequently not the business of Strack as EU official. Furthermore, he admonishes Strack to (re)adhere to the established working solutions and ignore the irregularities addressed ('keep out of this'). This strategy of closure consists thus in reframing the nature of the situation by outflanking the critique advanced by the parrhesiast and in attempting to restore the *modus operandi* by postulating (re)adherence to established working solutions for managing the tensions prevalent in the institutional setting.

In addition to this discursive strategy of closure, a series of procedures of governmentality (see also below) and disciplinary strategies were mobilized for closing the opening that was introduced by the parrhesiastic act. According to Strack, he was 'consciously excluded', no longer kept informed and notified about meetings and his team was spatially separated from the rest of the department. In the interview he summarized these disciplinary strategies as 'a lot of oddities ... which cannot be retrospectively described ... but where it was clear, ... you did something which you must not have done. ... there was *subliminal bullying* ...'

These 'oddities' resemble the disciplinary strategy of 'organizational shunning' (Anderson, 2009), a process in which individuals are transformed from insiders to outsiders by excluding them from everyday rituals that signify organizational membership. Such strategies of closure discipline and normalize the truth-teller and restore the normality that was interrupted. Refusing to pass information to the whistleblower may not only punish the person for having violated the rules-in-use but may also signal to him and to others that a parrhesiastic act such as the one performed by Strack does not fall within the range of institutionally expected or acceptable behaviour. As Alford (2001, p. 118) puts it: 'It is the power to move the whistleblower so far to the margins that keeps the rest of us in line.'

The critical opening of parrhesia and its (self-)transformative effects

Even though these strategies of closure restored the immediate organizational *modus operandi* at OPOCE, Strack's truth-telling did have self-transformative effects which, in turn, had an impact on the emergence and transformation of practices of regulating and problematizing 'whistleblowing'

in the wider institutional context. Strack reconstituted himself as a subject by negating the dominant discourse and counter-identifying with discourses of professionalism that supported his self-identity as a legal practitioner.

But somewhere there was a *red line* where I said: *It is not acceptable* that we force money down their throats [ADL] and let ourselves [OPOCE] be blackmailed by them [ADL] ... *they have to play according to the rules* ... (Interview, 2012)

The 'red line' that is crossed stands figuratively for a boundary that has been crossed in his identity struggle, resulting from his positioning within the different and contradictory discursive frames of bureaucracy and economics. Working through and struggling with various regimes of truth, and facing obstacles and contradictions, appears to have triggered intensified 'identity work' in which Strack reconstituted himself as a subject of legal professionalism. Such self-transformative effects were also observed in other whistleblowing cases (e.g. Mansbach, 2009). By frankly speaking *his* truth and binding himself to the fact of being the one who has spoken this truth, Strack enters a 'parrhesiastic pact of the subject with himself' (Foucault, 2010, p. 65). In the very instance of this parrhesiastic act, Strack steps out of his institutional role as official and behaves in a way that is not supported by the institutional context in which he finds himself. In this process, he constitutes himself (and is constituted by his interlocutors) as the one who has spoken an uncomfortable truth that violates accepted practices and the norms they embody. He voluntarily follows his personal sense of moral duty, 're-appropriates' (Mansbach, 2009, p. 369) his identity and reinvents himself as an ethical subject. While he literally sacrificed (or was made to sacrifice) his organizational identity as EU official (he had to retire early), Strack reconstituted himself as an expert on whistleblowing who actively works in the public interest. After his disablement in 2005, in 2006 he founded the Whistleblower Netzwerk e.V. (<http://www.whistleblower-net.de/>; an association with approximately 100 members today), gave a number public speeches and acted as an expert on legal issues associated with whistleblower protection (for example, in hearings of the German *Bundestag*).

While the 'parrhesiastic game' was interrupted by a refusal or inability to listen to the parrhesiastic voice on the side of those who were addressed and by various strategies of closure recuperating the *modus operandi*, Strack's truth-telling left clear traces beyond the immediate organizational context and contributed to a problematization and reformation of the institutionalized practices of treating whistleblowing in Germany and in the EU context.

Institutionalized critique and the modus operandi

In an email which he sent to OLAF on 30 July 2002, Strack reports the very same concerns that he had voiced before to his superior in his parrhesiastic critique.⁹ He explicitly refers to Commission decision C(2002)845 passed on 4 April 2002 which obliges any EU 'official or servant, who becomes aware in the course of or in connection with the performance of his or her duties of *evidence*, which gives rise to a presumption of the existence of *illegal activities* including fraud or corruption, detrimental to the interests of the Communities' to 'inform without delay his or her Head of Service ... or ... the European Anti-Fraud Office [OLAF] direct' (Commission decision C(2002)845, emphasis added).¹⁰ Strack's email to OLAF is backed up with 101 pages of documentation (e.g. email correspondence of various OPOCE officials, minutes of meetings, emails from ADL, statistical data on the costs of the change in contract) that seek to provide 'evidence' and proof for the illegality of certain acts. In this email, Strack seeks to create a truth about the past occurrences being against the law.

Strack's critique here is organized and linked to various 'procedures of governmentality' that specify truth-telling on various levels and 'conduct the conduct' (Foucault, 1982, p. 221) of the speaker. Within the legal discourse, truth-telling is framed as a 'duty to inform without delay'. The modality of speaking is defined ('providing evidence' in written form), the circumstances under which disclosures need to be made are specified ('facts discovered in the course of or in connection with his or her duties'), the channels for critique are laid out ('clearly defined channels of internal reporting' and 'accepted routes' for raising concerns outside the organization) and the addressees are fixed (inform the 'head of service' or OLAF directly). Procedures of governmentality also define and regulate the process of dealing with critique ('investigations'). Strack's truth-telling here represents a form of 'institutionalised critique' (Vandekerckhove & Langenberg, 2012, p. 39) that is channelled by organizational procedures rather than a parrhesiastic act which is by its very nature an 'irruptive event' (Foucault, 2010, p. 63) that is unpredictable and not bound to any specific form. The characteristics of performative speech acts we have outlined above can easily be identified here. The critique was performed in and supported by a certain institutionalized context (in the context of the Commission decision C(2002)845), it was performed by a person with a specific institutional status (Strack in his role as official) and it resulted in a codified effect. The happenings in the organization were no longer simply happenings but were to be turned into a 'case' to be opened and followed up with 'investigations'.

Although this institutionalized critique did indeed point to the same (perceived) malpractices as the parrhesiastic practice discussed in the previous section, it did so within a governmental rationality and followed an officially preset and recognized path. It transformed the speaking out and linked it to the wider bureaucratic-economic game of truth.

In the interview Strack stated that he did '*anticipate that they would retaliate*' against him and as such he 'also wanted to *have it documented by informing OLAF*'. Informing OLAF was thus an act aimed more at prophylactically protecting Strack against possible retaliation than a parrhesiastic act in which he would have put his own freedom at risk.

The OLAF Final Case Report is a continuation of the truth game. Mobilizing categories from the repertoire of the economic discourse, the OLAF investigator reframes the truth about the nature of the situation in an ontological modality of veridiction, stating that what occurred were 'nothing more than *commercial decisions in the context of a difficult contract*' (OLAF Final Case Report, p. 1, emphasis added). In this reframing the '*pressing need to do whatever was necessary to achieve the purpose of the Contract fully explains the series of compromises made by OPOCE officials*' (p. 11, emphasis added).

What counted in this situation was 'the need to accelerate the production of consolidated legislation' (p. 11) and to '*achieve the purpose of the Contract*'. Everything else, if referred to at all, is given the status of collateral damage.

As such, the OLAF Final Case Report somewhat confirms and provides legitimacy to the working solutions mentioned above with reference to practical necessities. This interpretation is supported by an internal, unofficial report of the *Comité de surveillance de L'OLAF* (an institution in charge of monitoring OLAF's investigative function) on OLAF's investigation of Strack's case. This internal document from June 2004 criticizes the investigation as reported in OLAF's Final Case Report and states that it leaves an 'unsatisfactory impression' ('*l'examen de ce dossier laisse une impression insatisfaisante*').¹¹ Furthermore, the *Comité de surveillance de L'OLAF* problematizes OLAF's limited attempts at gathering evidence and investigating the 'anomalies' in OPOCE's application for the change in contract.

OLAF's investigations are thus entangled with 'working solutions' and served to protect the organization rather than the truth-telling. Strack's institutionalized critique was thus enabled and limited by Commission decision C(2002)845, reframed with reference to dominant discourses and

mitigated by a formal investigation. It is precisely because this institutionalized critique followed officially preset and recognized paths and was channelled in the existent organizational frame that it did not 'disrupt existing limits, conventions, norms' (Vandekerckhove & Langenberg, 2012, p. 43). The 'organizational deafness organized through procedures' (p. 40) protected and reproduced the modus operandi of the organization.

Concluding Discussion

In this paper, we have argued for an understanding of 'whistleblowing' as a social practice that is institutionally shaped and conditioned by diverse discourses and 'games of truth'. We have drawn on Foucault's later work on parrhesia and have conceptualized the truth-telling of the whistleblower as a critical practice that questions and problematizes established regimes of practice and the 'truths' that govern their reproduction. According to this understanding, the speaking out of the whistleblower is not an expression of 'ethical autonomy' (Alford, 1999), nor is it universally correct to say that 'the organization is prepared to sacrifice anyone who commits the truth' (Alford, 1999, p. 269). The effect of truth-telling on both the individual and the organization is a contingent outcome of the specific discourses that frame it, the procedures that govern it and the subjectivities that enact it. Within specific regimes of practices, various modalities of truth-telling emerge in mixtures rather than in pure forms; they are entangled rather than separated.

We have looked at the case of Guido Strack's speaking out against perceived malpractices in the EU administration as an instance of truth-telling. It emerged in the context of the uneasy coexistence of competing discourses and practices. The interlinking of various 'games of truth' entailed a set of moves and countermoves, risks and interactions. We have shown how parrhesiastic truth-telling runs counter to established 'working solutions' that reconcile tensions and contradictions and how it is transformed into a regulated form of veridiction that binds truth-telling to specific procedures that govern it.

By way of conclusion, we discuss how the study of whistleblowing in terms of modes of veridiction may help to refine the understanding of 'critical practices'; we briefly reflect on the role of parrhesia in relation to institutionalized critique and discuss the 'critical opening' associated with parrhesia as an ethico-political space of potential transformation.

Refining the understanding of 'critical practices'

Messner, Clegg and Kornberger (2008) have developed the concept of 'critical practices', defining them as 'those discursive practices that subject other practices to critical scrutiny' (p. 71). The analysis of whistleblowing in terms of parrhesia may help to refine the understanding of 'critical practices' by bringing non-codified acts that go beyond 'the routine enactment of a specific rationality' (p. 72) into play.

To understand whistleblowing in this sense does not mean attributing (a priori) a higher moral value or status to such a practice, nor does it mean reducing whistleblowing to 'a solo voice strategy' coming exclusively from 'a concerned citizen, totally or predominantly motivated by notions of public interest' (De Maria, 2008, p. 866). Foucault's writings on parrhesia alert us to the fact that the subjectivity of the whistleblower associated with the voicing of uncomfortable truths is not given. Instead, it is constituted in the process of truth-telling. In the context of his or her workplace, a person perceives some procedure, processes or practices as unacceptable or 'intolerable'. In voicing this truth and speaking in his or her own name, the parrhesiastic subject *comes into existence*. The person becomes responsible for his or her acts and, in contexts of modern organizations, is then defined as a 'whistleblower'. In the case of Strack, at the time of voicing his concerns he did

not even know of the term ‘whistleblower’. But when he articulated his claims and reported them, when steps were taken against him, steps that were intended to retaliate against him, he came to be defined as a ‘whistleblower’. This led not only to a dis-identification with a given organizational identity, but also to a counter-identification with alternative discourses and to the affirmation of a new identity in which ‘notions of public interest’ (De Maria, 2008, p. 866) became central. This was not only a precondition, but also an outcome and effect of engaging in parrhesiastic practice. We note, with Contu (2014), that the attempt to transform truth-telling into ‘dutiful informing’ (which is predictable and manageable) and to normalize the subjectivity of the speaking subject is a project inherent to functionalist discourses rather than an achievement. As we would put it, it involves the possibility of ethical self-formation that interrupts functional necessities and goes beyond institutionalized expectations of how to relate to self and others.

Relatedly, understanding critical practices in terms of forms of veridiction may open up the question of the role of parrhesia in relation to the critique of the professional as one who draws on the traditional or codified knowledge of his or her profession ‘to scrutinize other practices’ (Messner et al., 2008, p. 71). In this context it is important to note that parrhesia is a ‘way of being which is akin to virtue’ (Foucault, 2010, p. 14) rather than a (professional) skill. Yet, the professional who reflects on the limits of technical knowledge and associated truths and makes (self-)critical use of these skills could be seen as a ‘parrhesiastic expert’ (Hoskin & Anderson-Gough, 2007). It is along these lines that Sementelli (2009) proposes that we rethink the role of the professional in public administration as including, rather than excluding, the parrhesiastic element. In this context it may be useful to see parrhesia not as a distinct practice but rather as a specific way of making use of established practices and discourses. One may think of the professional as playing a ‘parrhesiastic role’ by making critical use of expert knowledge. In our analysis, we observed a parrhesiastic use of juridical discourse in questioning ‘the waste of taxpayers’ money’.

More generally, a deeper understanding of parrhesia might also open up an avenue of research which looks at how the parrhesiastic modality of truth-telling becomes entangled with the disembodied, abstract methods of *tekhne* and its regime of production (Walters, 2014, p. 295). In modern organizations there is a dominance of the technical modality of veridiction, which is institutionalized, for example, in accounting and auditing regimes (Power, 1999), in abstract management systems (Townley, 2002) or in numerical operations which increasingly become accepted ‘conveyors of facts’ and ‘objective truths’ (e.g. Hansen, 2015). While the dominance of such regimes delegitimizes other modalities of veridiction, the parrhesiastic modality at times meshes with and backfires on them, as a number of famous cases (not least the Edward Snowden case) vividly testify. A more nuanced understanding of parrhesia might thus increase the attentiveness to critique that ‘comes from elsewhere’ (Messner et al., 2008, p. 77): from no specific institutional position, not bound to any authoritative form and contingent on the courage of individuals to speak out against ‘the intolerable’ (Foucault, 2001b).

Institutionalized critique vs. parrhesia

We have drawn on Foucault’s distinction between performative speech and parrhesia and have linked it to two forms of critique which are different in nature and associated with different effects.

Institutionalized critique is supported by a normative frame and can draw on rules of legitimate discourses. We have illustrated this form with Strack’s performing of the role of an EU official who had the formal duty ‘to inform without delay his or her Head of Service [...] or [...] the European Anti-Fraud-Office direct’ (Commission decision C(2002)845). This form makes the reporting of ‘illegal activities including fraud or corruption’ a formal duty. It provides legitimacy to speaking out against malpractices and at the same time binds this act to a conventional form. It defines the

possible content of critique, the legitimate speaker, the legitimate addressees, the circumstances under which critique may occur and the modality in which it has to be articulated. Critique in this case is linked to governmental procedures, it is channelled authoritatively and it is made expected and intended. The institutionalization of critique in the form of whistleblower rules, regulations and policies may (promise to) reduce the risk for the truth-teller. On the other hand, it may (as in the case of Strack) also normalize the truth-telling, involving it in a procedural apparatus that protects the *modus operandi* rather than the truth-teller. Our study confirms Vandekerckhove and Langenberg's (2012, p.41) view that this may paradoxically result in 'actively discouraging the speaking of truth' in the parrhesiastic sense.

Parrhesiastic critique lacks institutional support and draws on the speaker's personal perception of the singular situation as 'intolerable' or 'unacceptable'. The irruptive effect of parrhesiastic critique does not lie in the fact that a truth is revealed that has not been known before (e.g. that certain practices are in tension with the law) or that this truth is proven by 'evidence'. It lies rather in the fact that a truth is spoken that *is* already known but which *must not* be spoken in order to keep things going. The logic of the parrhesiastic critique is neither proof of facts, nor persuasion, nor instruction. It is contestation in which the speaker 'takes the risk of provoking war with others' (Foucault, 2010, p. 25). We have illustrated this form of critique with Strack's questioning of established working solutions in the context of local power relations. This questioning violated the taboos that surrounded and protected the local working solutions and challenged the integrity of his superiors. It provoked hostile reactions experienced as 'bullying' as well as a series of disciplinary measures that are well-known from other studies of whistleblowing (e.g. Rothschild, 2013).

While parrhesia relies on the courage of the individual to speak out, it is also necessarily a matter of social interaction (Andrade, 2015; Contu, 2014). Our example shows as well that the effect of parrhesia depends on others and is contingent on the courage to listen (Catlaw et al., 2014; Vandekerckhove & Langenberg, 2012). If the parrhesiastic voice is not heard or is silenced, the parrhesiastic game is interrupted and the transformative effects of parrhesia may be limited. Further research within the framework of parrhesia could look not only at the way parrhesiastic voices are silenced but also at how the organizational capacity to listen to critical voices 'that come from elsewhere' is shaped and how it might be improved on a practical level (e.g. recent research in whistleblowing has linked managerial and organizational responsiveness to the 'courage to hear' (Vandekerckhove, Brown, & Tshuridu, 2014).

Critical opening

Looking at both the overwhelming evidence from empirical studies that report the bleak fate of the whistleblower (e.g. Rothschild, 2013) and our own analysis, one might conclude that, in the context of modern organizations, parrhesia is at best a heroic fantasy that reproduces the narrative of the 'moral man against amoral system' (Perry, 1998). Courageous truth-telling could appear as self-sacrificing act, with little effect and highest personal costs for the truth-teller. Nevertheless it is possible to maintain that 'despite, or even in conjunction with the forces of instrumentalization and recuperation, there is an excess to parrhesia, a surplus of energy that can sometimes overflow governmentality and unsettle, however briefly, a given state of affairs' (Walters, 2014, p. 298). We call such 'unsettling', which (however briefly) interrupts a given state of affairs, a 'critical opening' that harbours the potential for organizational and personal transformation. What Butler (2005, p. 24) remarked in another context can be transferred to the practice of whistleblowing: 'certain breakdowns ... mark a site of rupture within the horizon of normativity and implicitly call for the institution of new norms, putting in question the givenness of the prevailing normative horizon'. It is here that the political *and* ethical significance of the whistleblower's truth-telling is located.

It interrupts ‘business as usual’ and thus creates a space in which established practices, institutional arrangements and/or modes of being can be reflected and renegotiated. Truth-telling is not a solution to problems but a possibility to rethink established solutions. Nothing can guarantee that what emerges is ‘better’, ‘more progressive’ or ‘more just’ than what was there before; yet ‘to respect it [truth-telling] in all its complexity is an obligation which no power can do without – except by imposing the silence of slavery’ (Foucault, 1990, p. 267).

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Notes

1. In different publications and translations the term ‘parrhesia’ is spelt in different ways: as *parrhesia* (Foucault, 2001a), as *parrêsia* (Foucault, 2010) and as *parrêsia* (Foucault, 2011). For reasons of consistency we have adopted ‘parrhesia’.
2. EU Commission Decision C(2002)845 dated 4 April 2002 obliges officials to report misconduct to the Head of Services or to OLAF directly.
3. For a comprehensive summary see e.g. http://www.anstageslicht.de/index.php?UP_ID=14&NAVZU_ID=127&STORY_ID=137
4. Available online at http://anstageslicht.de/dateien/OLAF_FINAL_CASE_REPORT.pdf
5. http://www.anstageslicht.de/index.php?UP_ID=14&NAVZU_ID=127&STORY_ID=137
6. This claim is supported by email documentation (correspondence between ADL and OPOCE and between OPOCE officials) and by the OLAF Final Case Report.
7. This sentence coincides with the assertions made in his official statement before the Budgetary Control Committee of the European Parliament.
8. This statement coincides with his assertions made in his email to OLAF on 30 July 2002, to be discussed later.
9. Available at: http://www.anstageslicht.de/DokZ_files/GS/STRACK_eMailBRUENER_20020730.pdf
10. Available at http://www.anstageslicht.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Bilder/K2002_845_EN.pdf
11. Available at http://www.anstageslicht.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Bilder/STRACK_OLAFUEBSEK_BERICHT.pdf

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