Organised Spinozism in the Netherlands (1897–2022):
Growth, Flourishing, Decay and Revival

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Abstract
This paper gives an outline of the history of organised Spinozism in the Netherlands, divided into three periods. In 1897 the Vereniging het Spinozahuis (VHS) was established. On the one hand, it wanted to preserve the physical and spiritual heritage of Spinoza, being an essential part of Dutch identity, and on the other hand, it strived for the propagation of Spinozism, which might fill the void left by the end of Christianity. This double aim precluded the transformation of the VHS into an international society to disseminate Spinozism. To that end the Societas Spinozana was established in 1920. It had to contribute to the solution of the spiritual crisis created by the WWI which had divided humanity. By the time of National-Socialism and during the post-war reconstruction period, in which philosophies incompatible with Spinozism dominated, the VHS successfully returned to the initial aim of preserving Spinoza’s heritage, but in the 1970s Spinozism once more became a viable alternative to traditional religion.

Keywords: Organised Spinozism in the Netherlands, Spinozahuis, Johannes van Vloten, Societas Spinozana, Carl Gebhardt

1 Inception and development of organised Spinozism (1865-1920)

Although the Vereniging het Spinozahuis (the ‘Spinozahouse Society’), established in 1897, is by far the oldest Spinoza Society of the world with its more than 125 years of history, it was not the first Spinozistic organisation in the Netherlands. Johannes van Vloten (1818-1883) was the first activist who had created such a Spinozistic organisation some decades earlier. Van Vloten studied theology at Leiden during the 1830s, where he had discovered Spinoza by means of the late

1 The first two sections of this paper are based on my Spinoza, een paradoxale icoon van Nederland (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2014), ch. 6 and 9. The last section makes use of the research reflected in chapter 11.

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Enlightenment theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. In 1849 he left the Reformed Church, arguing that “the historical mission of Christianity was completed and theology had to be dissolved into philosophy and the science of man and nature.” As a consequence he argued: “My church is society and my religion is practised in life itself; none of my religious concerns will not be satisfied there.” Spinoza announced this upcoming end of Christianity for his philosophy was the first to reject all transcendence in metaphysics and morality. In 1865 Van Vloten established a journal to propagate Spinoza’s philosophy, which he called De Levensbode (Messenger of Life) (figure 1).

Figure 1. Title page of De Levensbode’s first volume

The title refers to what Van Vloten considered to be the summing-up of Spinoza’s morality: philosophy should not consist in thinking on death and on that which leads us to eternal bliss in some transcendental reality, but in meditation on life (E4p67). Since 1875, the journal’s goal is defined in its subtitle as “creating a civilisation without religion which enhances human life.” The final page of the twelfth volume included ‘a conclusion’ which stated that finally this process of secularisation had reached its final state, that “man without faith” had replaced the Christian: the Age of Christianity came to an end, and that the Age of Mankind was beginning. For this reason, Van Vloten argued it was the right moment to change the title of the journal into De Humanist. Such a philosophy of history made Spinoza—the prophet of this new secular age—extremely relevant to contemporary society, and up till the Second World War it motivated many people to join Spinozist organisations.

Van Vloten also established a second organisation. This was a fifteen-member committee to erect a statue of Spinoza in The Hague. Such statues of so-called heroes of the Dutch Golden Age

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2 Johannes van Vloten, “J. van Vloten,” in Nederlandsch dicht en ondicht uit de negentiende eeuw, bijeenverz. en gerangschikt (Zwolle: Tjeenk Willink, 1870), 462.
3 Johannes van Vloten, Over de leer der Hervormde kerk en hare toekomst (Schiedam: Roelants, 1849), 94.
were erected by the triumphant liberalism of the day to show, as a historian once observed, the “dependent and unlettered masses the message of a glorious past in which the emancipation of the mind and the people began.”

A circular letter sent to local committees inside and outside the Netherlands called Spinoza a luminary of this small country to be compared with Erasmus, Rembrandt and William of Orange and referred to the moral and spiritual greatness of the philosopher who tirelessly fought for tolerance, freedom and truth. The comparison of Spinoza’s significance for the Netherlands with Kant’s for Germany underlined the patriotic ring the committee wanted to convey.

The idea that Spinoza has been and still is of the utmost importance for Dutch intellectual history once again motivated governmental organisations and the public to contribute to the maintenance of Spinoza’s heritage. In 2007 he became one of the fifty parts of the canon of Dutch history, which all pupils must learn about in school (figure 2).

The second influential organiser was Willem Meijer (1842-1926). Like Van Vloten he had studied theology, and he also concluded that the Era of Christianity was over and that “free thinking” will replace ecclesiastical thought. As a result, he also left the Church. However, unlike Van Vloten, he rejected nineteenth-century positivism, convinced that contemporary science is no longer able to guide twentieth-century human life. Positivist science caused “the spiritual crisis of modern man” which only philosophy can solve. Such a philosophy was developed by Spinoza, the first to free philosophy from its traditional bondage to theology and make it “free not only from Rome, but also free from Geneva, free from Jerusalem,” as Meijer discovered in the 1890s.

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6 This text is easily accessed in Frederick Pollock, *Spinoza, his Life and Philosophy* (London: Kegan Paul & Co, 1880).


8 See the preface to the first Dutch philosophical journal written by the Spinozist Bierens de Haan, the *Tijdschrift voor wijsbegeerte* (1907-1932). Meijer was one of the co-editors.

Between 1895 and 1901 Meijer translated Spinoza’s works into Dutch. He used a purist language so that it would be comprehensible even to readers without a classical education, arguing that this is necessary in an age where pupils were attending schools that educated them for commercial and technical professions. Meijer’s translations were sold in cheap editions, which brought them within the reach of the emerging labour class. He used these translations in popular courses he taught to propagate Spinoza’s philosophy outside academia. In the beginning of the twentieth century some regular visitors of these lectures created local study groups, which in due course became local philosophy societies. In 1907 these societies established the first philosophical journal in the Netherlands, called the *Tijdschrift voor Wijsbegeerte* which had to provide a “general world orientation” for the public and “lay a theoretical foundation for social action” as the introduction of the first volume stated. In this journal, both ‘Spinozists’ and ‘Hegelians’ collaborated together and they declared themselves to be part of a ‘philosophical movement’.

This broad philosophy of history, generally cherished at the end of the nineteenth century, and Spinoza’s vital contribution to Dutch identity, explain why Meijer, right when he heard that the house where Spinoza lived during his Rijnsburg years was for sale, immediately took action and decided that it should be bought and preserved (figure 3).

Figure 3. The Spinozahouse at Rijnsburg in the early twentieth century

He established a new society, which was called in English ‘The Spinozahouse Society’. In that restored house it sought to “collect all things relevant for the knowledge of [Spinoza’s] life and works” as stated in the first article of the society’s bylaws. The goal to merely preserve Spinoza’s heritage implied that many board members were not ‘Spinozists’. Of the first board of six members,

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10 In 1897 the weekly *Nederlandsche Spectator*, 246 wrote about “Meijer’s longing to make Spinoza’s philosophy accessible to a broad public”. See also Willem G. Van der Tak, “Dr. W. Meijer,” in *Spinoza 1897-1922, bevattende uittreksels uit de jaarverslagen van den secretaris der Vereeniging Het Spinoza-huis: benevens een levensbericht omtrent Dr. W. Meijer en eene lijst van diens geschriften* (Heidelberg-Amsterdam: Winter-Hertzberger, 1922), XIX.

for example, only Meijer may be called a Spinozist in a strict sense. The circular letter sent by the new board with a request for contributions expressed a wish to enable “fellow country men and foreigners to admire the spiritual heritage of Spinoza.” The main motivation to establish the Society, therefore, had a ‘patriotic’ dimension.\footnote{Bolland on the last page of his inaugural address (note 13) refers to this phrase.}

Since no relics of Spinoza survived with the exception of some letters, the new board decided to collect editions of all the works Spinoza presumably had in his personal library. The Amsterdam banker George Rosenthal (1828-1909) made this possible. He bought the house, largely contributed to the costs of restoration, and paid for the acquisition of almost all the books needed to recreate Spinoza’s library.

On 24 March 1899 the Spinozahouse was opened and nearly all Dutch newspapers reported on it. The president of the new Society, the Leiden professor of philosophy Gerard Bolland, delivered the opening address. Bolland, himself a Hegelian, argued that the restoration of the Spinozahuis was part of the preservation of the material relics of the Dutch Golden Age, which he sees as basic to Dutch identity because of the fight for freedom by the ‘Calvinists’. Therefore “notwithstanding his Jewish descent,” it is obvious to the official speaker that Spinoza, “this wise Jew, to a large extent is to be seen as consistent with the intellectual history of the Dutch seventeenth century.”\footnote{G. J. B. J. Bolland, \textit{Spinoza. Rede tot inwijding van het herstelde Spinozahuis te Rijnsburg op den 24 Maart 1899 uitgesproken} (Leiden: Brill, 1899), 5.}

In his address delivered twenty years earlier during the unveiling ceremony of the Spinoza-statue in The Hague, Van Vloten had also linked Spinoza to the ‘geuzen’, the freedom fighters during the first years of the Dutch Revolt, which marked the beginning of the Golden Age.\footnote{Johannes van Vloten, “An oration,” in \textit{Spinoza, four essays}, Knight ed., (London-Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1882), 132.} However, in harmony with the argument that Spinoza largely contributed to the creation of Dutch identity, Van Vloten did not mention Spinoza’s Jewish descent. Bolland did, and his puzzling phrase is explained by his later personal biography. At the end of his life Bolland became a full-blown anti-Semite. The second argument Bolland developed to justify the opening of the Spinozahouse museum is Spinoza’s unique place in the history of human thought. His doctrine of the one and only substance is and will be the starting point of all philosophy, Bolland stated, referring to Schelling and Hegel, who had extensively argued for it. Connecting both arguments, he pleaded for a house dedicated to “the memory of this great man, which is of great use for our nation” in order to stimulate philosophical reflection and guide our mind to the greatest questions it could face.\footnote{Bolland, \textit{Spinoza. Rede tot inwijding} (see note 12), 36–39.}

Bolland did not mention the main motivation we nowadays associate with organized Spinozism, that is, to spread Spinozism. This aim was endorsed by the only Spinozist in the board, Willem Meijer, the secretary who kept office between 1897 and 1922. In the first annual report Meijer wrote, he did not cherish a pure historical interest in Spinoza, since Spinoza laid “the foundations of all philosophising now and the future.”\footnote{Meijer, \textit{Verslag omtrent de lotgevallen van; and Spinozana, 1897-1922}, 17.} However, the General Meeting of 1900 rejected a proposal to change the name of the society into ‘the Spinoza Society’. It was argued that even Germany was not big enough to host a philosophical society. By way of compromise, the members decided to hang
a portrait of the philosopher and organize a lecture during the yearly General Meeting.\textsuperscript{17} The tradition of a two-part annual meeting, which includes a lecture and a business gathering, has continued for 122 years now, and was interrupted only during the second world war.

However, Meijer added to his annual report a commentated overview of all literature on Spinoza published during that year. Although the annual reports remained relatively short during Meijer’s secretariat (ranging from eight to twelve pages), their quality apparently justified a reissue in the first volume of the \textit{Bibliotheca Spinoza} under the name \textit{Spinozana 1897-1922}, which amounted to a small booklet of one hundred and nineteen pages. What is more, the lectures were often published in the new \textit{Tijdschrift voor Wijsbegeerte}. In this way, even during its early years, the Society was more than just the manager of a small museum in which Spinoza’s heritage was preserved.

Notwithstanding its efforts to popularise Spinoza’s thought, the Society remained a small ‘elitist’ organisation.\textsuperscript{18} With the exception of the first year, the number of visitors of the Spinoza house varied between hundred and two-hundred and its members remained around fifty people.\textsuperscript{19} This is not surprising since the annual fee amounted to three guilders (€1.35), which was equivalent to a week’s salary of a schooled labourer at that time. However, after the first world war the social support of organized Spinozism broadened.

\section{Flourishing (1920-1940)}

In 1919 the German Spinozist Carl Gebhardt wrote a letter to Meijer suggesting to transform the Spinozahouse Society into a real Spinoza Society. After the end of the disastrous war and the revolution in Germany such a transformation was needed, he argued, “to restore the unity of mankind and reconnect the nations divided by walls of hatred.”\textsuperscript{20} The transformed society would become a centre connecting Spinoza societies established in different countries. Moreover, the Rijnsburg library would be expanded to a Spinoza library containing copies of all books on Spinoza and would be made available for loan to Spinoza scholars all over the world. Thirdly, Gebhardt suggested that the new society would become the editor of a new scholarly journal comparable to \textit{Kant-Studien} containing papers on Spinoza and the early modern context of his thought.

Gebhardt’s letter marks the beginning of the second period of organized Spinozism, which lasted some twenty years. Although the Spinozahouse Society rejected these proposals, as it did in 1900, since “it had a clear Dutch character and its members were in majority not Spinozists,”\textsuperscript{21} Gebhardt and Meijer realised their plan and created the international \textit{Societas Spinozana}, which held its first meeting on 1 July 1920. The first board consisted of luminaries of international Spinozism,
such as Frederick Pollock, Léon Brunschvicg and Harold Höffding, and was rounded out by four Spinozists living in The Hague. None of these last four was a professional philosopher (figure 4).

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Societas Spinozana.

Ut Spinozana philosophiae ad vitam agendam præcepta valeant et vigant, utque doctrinæ cognitio augæatur, Societas Spinozana est constituta. Quapropter ut fiant fœdæs, admonitio sicut epigramma prœnuntiat nostræ Societatis: Omnibus.

Actum mensie Decembri MCMXXI

a Curatoribus

Harald Höffding / Willem Meijer
Sir Frederick Pollock / Leon Brunschvicg
Carl Gebhardt

a Moderatoribus

Willem Meijer / W. G. Van der Tak
Carl Gebhardt / E. E. Eckstein
J. H. Carp / A. J. Paulus / Adolphe S. Oko
Leon Roth

Figure 4. Last section of the statement of principles in the first volume of the Chronicon Spinozanum and the daily board members. In between the emblem of the society.

In 1922 the Italian Adolfo Ravà and the Pole Ignacy Myslicki joined the board. During the commemorative congress of 1932 it decided to propagate “Spinoza’s ideas more than until now in different countries separately” and a Dutch committee was formed, which in 1936 became a new society, called the Societas Spinozana, Dutch Branch. Unlike the international Societas Spinozana, but like the Rijnsburg Society, it had members. In 1938 it counted about one hundred and eighty

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22 “Verlevendiging en verbreiding der Spinozistische gedachte,” Het Vaderland (23 March 1933): 3. This article was occasioned by a circular letter on the new Dutch branch written by Carp.
people. After 1932 the international *Societas Spinoza* did not organize any activities anymore, and after their death board members were no longer replaced. On 21 October 1940 the Dutch Branch was forced to end its activities.\(^{23}\) German civil servants of the *Einsatzstab Rosenberg* confiscated its possessions and made an end to this short-lived but glorious period of organized Spinozism in the Netherlands.

Of the objectives mentioned by Gebhardt in his letter to Meijer, the second was quickly realised through the publication of several volumes. The first series included works of Uriel da Costa, Leone Ebreeo’s *Dialoghi d’Amore* edited by Gebhardt, the latter’s edition of Freudenthal’s *Spinozas Leben und Lehre*, and Höffding’s monograph on the *Ethics*. The second series was the *Chronicon Spinozanum*, a journal that appeared in five volumes between 1921 and 1927. Its first volume set forth a declaration of principles, which clearly demonstrate the intellectual framework within which the organisation operated. It stated that “true philosophers are the creators of mankind. By them the foundations of human culture is laid.” The statement continued by underlining the actual significance of Spinoza’s philosophy which, as the first modern philosophy, combines a traditional word view with a modern scientific one and “teaches people to solve the contradiction between the moral law deriving from human nature on the one hand and the passions on the other.”\(^{24}\) It also restated the importance of teaching Spinoza’s doctrine of intellectual love to all people, for it could be stronger than conflicts between states and nations and traditional prejudices.\(^{25}\) That is why the *Societas Spinozana* chose as its motto *pro omnibus* for all (figure 4 above).

The volumes consisted of dissertations, articles, *adnotationes* (short, mostly biographical remarks), and *scripta exposita* (reviews). The first volume had fourteen articles: four in German, three in Dutch, two in Latin, French and English and one in Italian, but notably they were nearly all written by board members. The last volume is devoted to the 250\(^{th}\) commemoration of the year of Spinoza’s death. It consisted of seventeen articles that outlined the actual significance of Spinozism in the authors’ respective countries. Some of these articles were papers delivered at the commemoration, but the volume ends with a call in Dutch, English, French and German to donate money towards the restoration of the *Domus Spinozana*, the house in The Hague where Spinoza had lived during the last years of his life, on the occasion of the upcoming commemoration.\(^{26}\)

The careless composition of this volume signalled the end of this journal. After 1927 all incoming money was used for the restoration of the *Domus*, which the *Societas* bought in order to realise its first goal, namely, to establish a Spinoza centre. It was managed by a separate foundation, the *Domus Spinozana*.\(^{27}\) The goal was to host in this space a library containing all Spinoza literature, and to that end Gebhardt decided to donate his personal collection. Moreover, it was to be a meeting place for Spinozists from everywhere and a room for courses. The higher floors were fixed up as a museum, but Gebhardt’s fear expressed in 1927 that the *domus* would become a dead museum was
unwarranted (figure 5). In the 1930s it frequently housed courses and festive celebrations of Spinoza’s anniversary. The Spinoza Society created a lively centre of philosophical life there.

Figure 5. The reconstructed living room in the Domus Spinozana. Photo from the 1930s.

The third objective was the organisation of conferences, which the Societas Spinozana successfully accomplished as well. In 1927 the commemorative conference lasted four days. The official part was held at the Binnenhof, then and now the political centre of the Netherlands. Representatives of the German, French, Italian and Polish governments were present as well as academics from Dutch and foreign universities: this time even scholars from outside Europe were included. The next day a tombstone referring to Spinoza’s burial place in the adjacent Nieuwe Kerk was solemnly unveiled. The scholarly part of the conference too lasted two days. At the end of this four-day conference Gebhardt concluded that unlike regular philosophical conferences this meeting made obvious the ‘synthetic force’ of the philosopher’s ideas which was installed in the minds of the peoples, and which created an ‘organic life’ and a harmonious spirit which would contribute to “the happiness of mankind.” Hence the Societas Spinozana did not buy only “old walls”, which might be “the object of mere curiosity” and of “death scholarship,” but a centre which would revive society. The public nature of this conference was underlined by Dutch newspapers, which reported the official commemoration and provided daily abstracts of the addresses delivered. This made the social impact of the conference visible for the general audience.

The second conference organised by the Societas Spinoza was the commemorative week held in September 1932 celebrating Spinoza’s birth three centuries before. Preparations started in 1930 already with the composition of an organising committee representing Dutch academia, with, for example, the famous historian Johan Huizinga. The president of this committee was the Groningen professor of philosophy and Spinozist Leo Polak. Since the retirement of Meijer in 1922 the relationship between the two Spinoza Societies became disturbed. For example, the secretary of the Spinozahuis wrote an article in a newspaper denouncing the upcoming conference as an unlucky

effort to compete with the scheduled commemoration in Amsterdam organised by the Rijnsburg Society. He wrote that the Societas Spinoza conference was the result of a ‘liberal-Jewish clique’, who employed a foreigner (Gebhardt) to organise a conference on the Dutch philosopher Spinoza. How would Germany react if a Dutchman organised a Kant conference in Köningsberg?—the writer asked rhetorically.\(^{31}\)

Nevertheless, the Societas Spinozana planned to organise a scholarly conference inviting the participants to discuss either the relationship between physics and metaphysics or the relationship between religion and philosophy. Yet, the Latin letter of invitation emphasized the basic themes of the Societas Spinoza concerning the social significance of Spinoza’s ideas: “The philosopher [Spinoza] is a vir oeconomicus that is to say a cosmopolitan man, because his thought transcends the boundaries between nations but is also connected to all people.”\(^{32}\) Hence, every speaker was urged to communicate in their own language. Moreover, Spinoza was seen a martyr for the ‘new spirit’. Since the Renaissance human beings began to react all “dogmatic authority” and “adopt methodological thinking in science.” In this sense Spinoza was, Polak argued in his opening address, a pioneer of modernity (figure 6).\(^{33}\)

![Figure 6. Leo Polak addressing the delegates. To the right Spinoza’s picture, a gift by Van Vloten to the municipality of The Hague in 1877](image)

Moreover, as Gebhardt stated, Spinozism is the answer to the economical and cultural crisis of the 1930s. Crisis is the result of a revolution, which destroys all fixed relations and reduces dramatically the number of things considered to be unproblematic. According to Gebhardt, in these circumstances Spinoza would be our guide, since being a marrano his thought is the outcome of disruption. Furthermore, his political thought, which focuses on the notion of community and solidarity, is still of an utmost actuality.\(^{34}\) Beyond any doubt the Septimana Spinozana was (until this moment) the largest Spinoza conference ever organized in the Netherlands. Gebhardt and Meijer could not have foreseen the success of their initiative.

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34 “Spinoza in unsrer Zeit,” Septimana Spinozana, 22.
Nevertheless, even if the history of the older organisation, the Spinozahouse Society, between the wars was less spectacular, it was also capable of realising Meijer’s dream to transform the Spinozahouse in Rijnsburg into a centre for Spinoza studies. Meijer’s annual reports were expanded by his successor to small booklets of some fifty pages each, and the annual lectures delivered at the General meeting were from 1934 onwards printed in a series called ‘Mededelingen’ (communications), which appear to this day and which present, in small print, new developments in Spinoza research to the general public (these contributions were and still are included in the membership fee). However, the six Mededelingen that appeared before the second world war were of a strictly historical nature.

3 The low-tide of organised Spinozism (1940-1970)

The end of organized Spinozism in the Netherlands, as already said, came suddenly. After the German invasion of May 1940, life initially seemed to continue as usual and both Spinoza museums remained open, although the annual meeting of the Spinozahouse Society was cancelled in order to stay off the radar of the German authorities who “were ill-disposed against the philosopher.”\(^{35}\) In October 1940, however, the German occupier confiscated the Domus in The Hague and in January 1941 “out of the blue” the Spinozahouse at Rijnsburg.\(^{36}\) The stolen possessions were sent to Germany. The Einsatzstab Rosenberg argued that the Domus was related to freemasonry, which unlike Spinozism was a criminal offence in National-Socialist Germany. However, at the end of the first year of the war Dutch national-socialist papers began to denounce the destructive influence of Judaism on Dutch culture and Spinoza was used as their main argument. “Although as a person he was free of the typically Jewish greed for money,” an anonymous author stated, “he taught the Dutch a selfish and calculating morality without respect for the notions of duty and honour by identifying the good with what is useful.” This explained, the author argued, the complete lack of idealism in the Dutch character. Furthermore, Spinoza defined religion poorly as “obedience” and “compassion” (sic), which is totally opposed to “the Aryan conception, which considers religion to be the source of all inner life, a creative force and an awareness of the great mystical union between men, between man and the earth and between mankind and the Infinite.”\(^{37}\)

Another national-socialist author argued that a Spinozistic conception of the state as merely an association of self-interested individuals unrestrained by law became dominant in the Netherlands. Both liberalism and Marxism underwent Spinoza’s devastating influence, they concluded.\(^{38}\) This called for an elimination of Spinoza’s disastrous influence in Dutch Society, on account of the Jewish heritage that affected his thought. This call was put into action when, together with other streets named after Jewish persons, the Spinozastraat was re-baptised in Amsterdam.\(^{39}\)

\(^{35}\) It was mentioned for the last time in the agenda of an exhibition in The Hague in Het Vaderland, 8 August 1940, 4. The visitor’s book had as its last entry on 30 August 1940, see Spinoza’s sterfhuis aan de Paviljoensgracht, 88.
\(^{36}\) Verslag omtrent de lotgevallen van de Vereniging het Spinozahuis 1940-1946 (Leiden: Brill, 1946), 1.
\(^{39}\) “Gewijzigde straatnamen te Amsterdam,” Het Vaderland, (19 August 1941). It goes without saying that all the original names were restored after WWII.
However, in their efforts to ‘de-spinozize’ Dutch society, the national-socialists were far from consistent. The Amsterdam Spinoza-hospital for example, established in the re-baptised Spinozastraat retained its name as well as the Amsterdam Spinoza-school.\(^{40}\) Also no plans were made to pull down the statue of Spinoza in The Hague and in the non-national-socialist newspapers Spinoza’s name continued to be mentioned with respect as one of the main figures in European and Dutch intellectual history.\(^{41}\)

The quick revival of organised Spinozism after the war was supported by the fact that people directly or indirectly sympathetic to Spinoza bought back the Spinoza museums from the Einstatzstab Rosenberg. The board of the Rijnsburg of the Society tried to buy the Spinozahouse back, but during the negotiations it was bought by the Wassenaar industrialist A.M. Mees, the owner of the Sikkens paint-factories. He wanted to hide some of his Jewish employees there, and he returned it to the Society after the war.\(^{42}\) Curiously, two members of the Dutch National-Socialist party bought the Domus in The Hague (figure 7).

![Figure 7. Domus Spinozana during the occupation with a billboard saying: ‘for sale’](image)

The last president of the Dutch branch of the Societas Spinozana and president of the Domus Spinozana foundation Johan Carp had asked them to do so. They pretended to establish a centre there to promote national-socialist scholarship, which they never intended to materialise.\(^{43}\) However, the memorial stone that mentioned Spinoza’s stay in the Domus was removed. In order to understand this intervention one should understand that in 1940 Carp, a civil servant, became a member of the Dutch national-socialist party as soon as the Dutch law that forbade civil servants to adhere to national-

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\(^{40}\) The temporary address of the son of a Dutch National-Socialist ‘group-leader’, Volk en Vaderland (13 November 1942).

\(^{41}\) Even in national-socialist journals. Ernst von Hippel in “III. Leibniz als Philosoph”, Deutsche Zeitung in den Niederlanden (17 August 1944), for example, dealt with Spinoza in a neutral way and grouped him with Descartes and Bacon as one of the fathers of modern philosophy. In the “In Memoriam of Huizinga” in De Waag, 23 (February 1945): 4, Spinoza was even reintegrated into the history of Dutch humanism, heralded by Erasmus, which the author at the occasion of “this last great representant” deemed to be “dying.” Its ideal of detached objectivity, cherished by the Dutch intelligentsia is characterized by Spinoza’s famous phrase “neque ridere, neque lugere etc.”

\(^{42}\) Verslag omtrent de lotgevallen van de Vereniging het Spinozahuis 1940-1946, 2–3.

\(^{43}\) Roelofsz, Spinoza’s sterfhuis, 80–83.
socialist parties was revoked. However, unlike the fascist critics of Spinoza just mentioned, it was Spinozism that brought Carp to national-socialism. He argued that Spinoza’s metaphysics implied a communitarianism, which held the golden mean between the liberal individualism and communist totalitarianism and which predated the national-socialist view of the state.

After the liberation in 1945 Carp was convicted as a collaborator, which made possible the appointment of a new board of the Domus Spinozana foundation. The stolen inventory of the two Spinozahouses was recovered in Frankfurt, where the Germans planned to establish a museum of Judaism. The American occupation forces in Germany returned their possessions. However, although the Domus Society received a subsidy of the city and provincial government, it lacked sufficient funding to recreate the museum and re-establish the pre-war Spinoza-centre. The foundation had to sell its recovered possessions and the house was let to a legal firm, because otherwise it could not cover the costs of maintenance. Only occasionally the Domus remained available for Spinozist activities such as a small exhibition commemorating the 280th anniversary of Spinoza’s death in 1957 and in the same year the General Meeting of the Spinozahouse Society.

At the end of the 1960s the Spinoza organisations merged because the board members were almost identical. A new restoration was effected in the 1970s and the Domus was solemnly inaugurated on 21 February 1977. However, the problem of funding remained unsolved and until recently a tenant hired most of the rooms of the Domus. Now it is administrated by a newly established foundation Domus Spinozana, which is linked to the Rijnsburg Society, and, reminiscent of Gebhardt’s and Meijer’s intentions with the establishment of the Societas Spinozana, has as its goal the setting up of an international centre for Spinoza studies and gatherings.

After the war the Spinozahouse Society continued its history, which had been dramatically suppressed since 1940. In 1946, after the recovery of the looted inventory and Spinoza’s reconstructed library, the museum reopened its doors, and in 1947 the Society held its first General Meeting. The lectures delivered were in line with pre-war Spinozism, discussing for example the relationship between Spinoza and Goethe or Spinoza’s conception of freedom, providing an answer to the challenges of liberalism and communism. However, the pre-war surveys of Spinoza’s literature in the annual reports were largely reduced, and they completely disappeared after Willem van der Tak stepped down as secretary in 1954. His full retirement with two other board members in June 1956 out of protest left the board of the Society with no Spinozist at all. In October 1956 the other members had to step down. The Leiden professor of philosophy Ferdinand Sassen, the first Roman Catholic in the board, and Louise Thijsen-Schoute, a famous historian of Dutch Cartesianism and Spinozism, who was the new secretary that was inaugurated the preceding year, both refused to accept the candidacy of a staunch Anti-Catholic Rotterdam lawyer, A. Dirkzwager, who was supported by a small majority of the General Meeting of 12 May. In an extraordinary meeting a majority

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44 “Provinciale Staten van Zuid-Holland,” Het Binnenhof 25 (Jun 1947): 2. The proposal was rejected by the S.G.P., an ultra-orthodox Reformed party, the paper recorded.
46 Spinoza’s sterfhuis aan de Paviljoensgracht, 80–83.
47 See J.J. Boasson, Mededing 8: De Rechtsidee en de Vrijheidsidee bij Spinoza; W.G. van der Tak, Mededeling 9: Spinozistische gedachten in Goethes Faust; T. C. van Stockum, Mededeling 13: Goethe and Spinoza.
disapproved the decisions of the board and hence all the remaining members retired. Consequently, until January 1957 the Society had no board, and new members of the Society could not be welcomed. At that time Dutch-organized Spinozism reached an all-time low. 49

In those years the Society might well have perished without the Rijnsburg museum and the unchanged canonical status of the philosopher. In the 1950s for example a second statue of Spinoza in the Netherlands was commissioned by the city government of Amsterdam and finally erected before the Spinoza lyceum in Amsterdam South far from the city centre in 1958 (figure 8). 50

![Figure 8. Statue of Spinoza by Hildo Krop, Spinoza Lyceum Amsterdam](image)

It was created by Hildo Krop, the city sculptor. In 1956 a committee wishing to reconcile Spinoza with the Jewish people by placing a remembrance stone inscribed with the Hebrew word *amcha* (‘עמך’, your people) on it after the tombstone near the Nieuwe Kerk in The Hague. This reconciliation was made possible by a modernized Judaism open to ‘the spirit of Messianism’. In the West it expressed itself as a return to ‘the spirit of Goethe’ and in the East in the staving-off of one-sided materialism as the Dutch initiator and Rijswijk industrialist H. K. F. Douglas and the Israeli poet Malech Ravitsch observed, echoing the ideas of the pre-war *Societas Spinozana* (figure 9). 51

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50 Krop, *Paradoxe icoon*, 635–636. The Mayor and Aldermen commissioned the statue in 1953. In 1956 the proposal by some prominent Amsterdam citizens to change the *Weteringsschans* into the Spinoza-plein (square) and to erect Krop’s statue there was rejected by the city council.

51 Krop, *Paradoxe Icoon*, 639.
Between 1945 and 1967 only fifty publications on Spinoza appeared in Dutch, which indicates that Hegelianism and Spinozism, which dominated philosophical life before 1940, had completely disappeared from the philosophical scene and was replaced by existentialism and phenomenology. Sassen called the Spinozism of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century a philosophy providing a worldview and an orientation in life to the laymen, attracting especially those estranged from traditional religion. This public visited the courses of Meijer and later the courses in the Domus. After the second world war, it apparently vanished. However, on 18 January 1957, Guido van Suchtelen the third lifelong secretary of the ‘Spinozahouse Society’ was appointed and gradually organized Spinozism was revived. In him the Society, once again, had an ardent Spinozist as a board member. Hubbeling situates the revival of Spinozism in the Netherlands both in connection with the study of Spinoza’s philosophy and with the activities of the Society in the 1960s, which corresponded to the growing international interest in Spinoza’s thought.

4 The renaissance

The numbers of members of the ‘Spinozahouse Society’ remained long unchanged. However, in the 1980s it began to rise rapidly. In 1987 it reached 359 members, in 1991 651 and in 2000 880, while in 2005 the Society counted one thousand members.

According to Sassen ‘an Academic Spinozism’ developed around 1970 at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam and the University of Groningen, and in 1971 the Groningen professor of

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55 These figures in the annual reports of Theo van der Werf are preserved in the archives of the Society at the Domus.
philosophy H. G. Hubbeling became the president of the Spinoza Society, a task he retained until his untimely death in 1986.\textsuperscript{56} Other professors of philosophy such as Cornelis de Deugd, Herman de Dijn and Wiet van Bunge succeeded Hubbeling. They were all Spinoza scholars but they did not call themselves Spinozists and they did not consider Spinoza’s philosophy to be the only true one. As Hubbeling wrote: “For many scholars Spinoza is only an interesting object of study. For many others Spinoza means more, however. I do not believe that anyone of us is an ‘Orthodox’ Spinozist, but his person and philosophy give more than purely intellectual enjoyment.”\textsuperscript{57}

‘Academic Spinozism’ was also international in character and accordingly the Spinoza Society between 1966 and 1982 organised several Spinoza conferences with scholars from all over Europe.\textsuperscript{58} This internationalization is reflected in the Mededelingen. Since 1990 about a third of the contributions is not in Dutch. The number of the Mededelingen expanded quickly, since the annual General Meeting that lasted a whole day had two speakers, and since 1985 the Society also organised a meeting in the fall without a business part. The last number of the ‘Mededelingen’ edited by Guido van Suchtelen was number 60. His successor, Theo van der Werf (1944-2023), who was secretary from 1989 to 2017, edited fifty Mededelingen.

The revival of Spinozism resulted also in a new series of translations. In 1979 Guido van Suchtelen revised the translation of the Ethics by his father Nico van Suchtelen dating from 1915. It formed part of a series of versions of all Spinoza works published by the Wereldbibliotheek which is permanently available. The first part was an annotated version of Spinoza’s Correspondence by Hubbeling and two Groningen Latinists, Fokke Akkerman and Westerbrink. It was presented to the mayor of The Hague during the commemoration of 1977 (figure 10).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{hubbeling.png}
\caption{A commemorative stamp presented to Hubbeling, president of the Spinoza-Society, 1977.}
\end{figure}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\setlength{\itemsep}{0pt}
\bibitem{Spinozism} “Spinozism and Spinozistic Studies,” 390.
\bibitem{Krop} Krop, Paradoxale icoon, 670.
\end{thebibliography}
The second new volume in this series was the Short Writings presented to the mayor of Amsterdam during the 1982 commemoration.\(^5\) The third volume was edited by Akkerman alone and contained a new Dutch version of the Tractatus theologicopoliticus, which was also presented to the Mayor of Amsterdam during the commemoration of the first century of the Society’s existence in 1997. This series, when completed, will replace Meijer’s translations of the end of the nineteenth century. However, outside the Spinozahouse Society and occasionally even outside academia, new translations or modernized versions of Spinoza’s works appeared. In 2011 for example, the Assen minister Jan Knol published a modernized version of the Short Treatise, because Mignini’s scholarly edition of the Korte Verhandeling in the Short Writings apparently was unreadable for the interested non-specialist. His example was imitated in the next year by the engineer Rikus Koops. Another retranslation was by Miriam van Reijen, who in 2012 published the so-called ‘Letters on Evil’ included in the original seventeenth-century Dutch in Akkerman’s edition of the Correspondence. These examples show how Spinozism once again reached the general public outside of the university. In order to address this public interest in Spinoza, the new secretary of the ‘Spinozahouse Society’, Theo van der Werf, like the Societas Spinozana before the war, began to organize courses in which Spinoza’s works were studied.

From 1993/1994 onwards the members were invited to the Spinozalyceum at Amsterdam (where the Krop-statue is standing) to discuss Spinoza’s works in small groups after an introduction by a specialist. Until the 2019 pandemic, the Ethics was read no fewer than six times, the TTP four times and the TP and the TIE were both read three times, while the Short Treatise and the Correspondence two times. The PPC was read only once. In 2000 the Society started to organise its so-called summer weeks. The first theme was ‘life and works of Spinoza’. Other topics discussed were ‘Spinoza and literature’, ‘Spinoza’s sources’, ‘Spinoza and modern science’ and in 2023 it was ‘Spinoza and Arabic philosophy’. Spinoza’s works were also studied outside of the Society in small groups. They were locally organised and often referred to themselves as a Spinoza circle combined with the seat of their activity. For example, there is a Spinoza circle Soest, in South of Limburg. And in Amsterdam another Spinoza circle was established to make the philosopher the standard bearer of the city due to his biography and central ideas of tolerance, freedom and democracy. Yet, it is interesting to note that in this case the ideal of ‘democracy’ replaced that of ‘truth’ mentioned in the circular letter of the committee chaired by Van Vloten, which had invited people to contribute to the erection of the Spinoza-statue at The Hague.\(^6\)

In the beginning of 2008, some inhabitants of Amsterdam created a foundation in order to erect a statue of Spinoza in the centre of Amsterdam. Founded by the city government, the commissioned statue was revealed on 24 November 2008. The political impact of Spinoza’s philosophy was underlined by a quotation from the TTP on the pedestal “the goal of the state is freedom” (figure 11).

\(^6\) See p. 11 above.
These Spinoza circles, which sometimes cherish their aversion to ‘academic philosophy’, are part of a revival of philosophical interest outside academia, manifesting themselves in the organisation of philosophical cafés, vacations, magazines and even walks. Like the philosophical societies of pre-war Holland, these circles look to Spinoza for orientation in a world in which all traditional ideologies and religions had lost their meaning.

However, the Spinozahouse is not only a Spinoza Society but also the landlord of a building that hosts a museum. Keeping it in good condition has been a significant ongoing duty. In 2002 the last caretaker died. At first there was a search for candidates to fill this role, but another serious restoration seemed necessary. In 2007, Theo van der Werf sent an open letter to a prominent Dutch national newspaper announcing that the house could collapse any moment if no immediate measures were taken. The Minister of Culture and Education responded in parliament that “indeed the conservation of the Spinozahouse was of great importance, but even more the immaterial heritage of his philosophy, which continues to work on in the nature and thought of the Dutch, is of a basic value.”

Despite appearances, this answer did not foretell a bureaucratic postponement of funds. Instead, from that moment it became possible to make plans to transform the whole building into a museum. In 2012 the house was reopened with an enthusiastic team of volunteers and the museum now has regular opening hours.

To summarize, in its 125 years of history the Society fostered the organization of both Spinozists and non-Spinozists who wanted to preserve the material and immaterial heritage of Spinoza. It promoted the values of freedom, democracy, and tolerance within society and between nations, and Spinoza’s philosophy also provided inspiration for those seeking it. It not only addressed academic specialists but everyone who was interested in a rational guide to living. However, until recently, organized Spinozism was led by central charismatic figures such as its four secretaries: Willem
Meyer (1897-1922), Willem van der Tak (1922-1954), Guido van Suchtelen (1957-1989) and Theo van der Werf (1989-2017), all of whom played a key part in the organization, as Van Vloten did in the nineteenth century. Fortunately, in the recent decades Spinozism not only attracted more persons, but also involved more persons in the organization: people who do not adopt Spinozism as their lifelong sacred duty, but as one of their goals in life. In this sense we may speak of a professionalization of Dutch-organized Spinozism that had completed its democratization.

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