



Norman Cohn

Author: Lorenzo Ferrari

Published: 18th January 2021

Lorenzo Ferrari. 2021. "Norman Cohn." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 18 January 2021. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/norman-cohn.

Introduction

Norman Cohn (1915–2007) spent the better part of his life as a historian and academic delving into the darker side of human history, looking at areas such as religious intolerance, racism, and barbarity. For the duration of his academic career, from the publication of his acclaimed and distinguished work *The Pursuit of the Millennium* in 1957, he studied the coming of the millennium invoked by the destitute and heretics of the Middle Ages, the messianic and revolutionary hopes present in ancient times, in the modern era, and in the present day. More generally, he examined the influence of the fantastic in history and in the minds of individuals and societies. Thanks to his role as director of the Centre for Research in Collective Psychopathology (1966–1980) at the University of Sussex, he was able to coordinate research activity in religious and political fanaticism, and personally contribute to the analysis of these phenomena in two works which were highly influential in the historiographical landscape of the second half of the 1900s: *Warrant for Genocide* (1967) and *Europe's Inner Demons* (1975). In later life, he explored the more remote origins of the apocalyptic tradition (*Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come*, 1993) as well as the impact of ancient myths and ideas on the history of Western thought (*Noah's Flood*, 1996). His books have been translated into numerous languages, enjoying considerable success among a wide-ranging audience.

Biographical Account

The British historian Norman Rufus Colin Cohn was born on 12 January 1915 at 41 Alleyn Park, in West Dulwich (London) to August Sylvester Cohn (1866/7–1947), a barrister-at-law at Middle Temple, and Daisy Ann Reimer (1872/3–1951) (Lamont 2011). His father had been a liberal-minded German Jew from Neustrelitz (today in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania) who met his future wife Daisy Ann, a Roman Catholic born in Cologne but who had grown up in Cape Town, while travelling in South Africa. Following the birth of their first two sons—Alfred Herman (1895–?) and Felix Augustus (1896–1917)—the Cohns moved to London, where four more sons were born: Edgar Stanley (1899–1963), who would go on to be a Fellow and senior history tutor at Oriel and Brasenose (Oxford), Harold Charles (1900–?), Leslie John Sylvester (1903–?), and, lastly, Norman.

Cohn grew up feeling 'a man between all worlds' with his German-Jewish surname, his mother's Catholic

faith (although she never had him baptised), and his numerous German relatives (Cohn 2001, 1-2). On completing his schooling at Gresham's in Holt (Norfolk), in 1933 Norman won a scholarship to read French at Christ Church (Oxford). In 1936 he graduated in Medieval and Modern Languages (first-class degree) and was rewarded with a further three-year scholarship from Christ Church to read German. Between January and July 1939, he participated as a full-time observer to an enquiry conducted by Mass Observation on antisemitism in the East End.

With the onset of World War II he voluntarily joined the East Surrey Regiment, and attended the officers' course at Sandhurst (Berkshire) before being assigned to the Queen's Royal Regiment as Second Lieutenant. On 3 September 1941 he married Vera Broido (1907-2004), born in Saint Petersburg to a leading militant Menshevik family but who had spent her youth in exile in Siberia, Germany, and France. In 1942 Cohn joined the military intelligence as Lieutenant and was transferred to Tunbridge Wells, Kent. He worked in an army signals unit for a few months before being promoted to Captain in 1944, following which he was assigned to Bletchley Park's *Station X*. At the end of the war, he was initially sent to the Allied headquarters at Caserta (Italy) and then to Vienna to interrogate several members of the SS and secretly listen in on conversations among the prisoners (Cohn 2001, 3). While in Austria, he also met refugees who had fled the Red Army, and in this way became aware of first-hand accounts of the atrocities of war. During this period—which would make a deep impression on both his life and his academic career—he was also able to access works written by many of the Reich's ideologues. This led him to the opinion that many of the crimes committed by totalitarian regimes before and after the conflict 'would not have occurred without a large measure of ideological fanaticism' (Cohn 2001, 3).

Following the birth of his only son Nik (b. 1946), he left the army and became lecturer in French at Glasgow University (1946-1951) and then professor of French at Magee University College in Londonderry (1951-1960) and at King's College, Durham University (1960-1963). Between 1962 and 1963, in the wake of the media coverage of the Eichmann trial, David Astor (1912-2001)—the owner of *the Observer*—financed the creation of a Centre for Research in Collective Psychopathology, later known as the Columbus Centre (1966-1980), an institution affiliated with Sussex University and with Cohn as its sole director. The centre's purpose was to explore, through a multidisciplinary approach, all political and psychological processes that had given rise to phenomena of mass disorientation and extermination in the course of history.

In 1973 Cohn was appointed Astor-Wolfson Professor of History at Sussex, and five years later he was elected Fellow of the British Academy. He was Visiting Fellow at numerous institutions within the country and abroad, including the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (Stanford 1966) and the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (1975-1976). On his retirement in 1980 he was appointed Emeritus Professor and left academia, while continuing to pursue his own wide interests. In the early 1980s Concordia University (Montreal) sought his involvement in setting up The Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies. Following the death of his wife Vera, in December 2004 he married Marina Voikhanskaya (b. 1935), a psychiatrist of Russian origin who had protested in the 1970s against the forcible detainment of political dissidents in the Soviet Union. Norman Cohn died in Cambridge on 31 July 2007 from a heart condition.

The Pursuit of the Millennium from Middle Ages to Totalitarian Ideologies

After devoting himself to French poetry (1944), the translation of ancient Siberian legends (1946), the study of the Saint-Simonians (1952; 1953b), the works of Johann Georg Hamann (1953a), and of a number of radical thinkers (1954), the British historian spent the rest of his life examining the origins of a distinct phenomenon which he believed to be specific to many chiliastic movements both old and new: 'the urge to purify the world through the annihilation of some category of human beings imagined as agents of corruption and incarnations of evil' (Cohn 1975, xiv). In 1957 he published *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, a 'seminal work' on a field 'at a very early stage' (Cohn 2001, 5, 6) which established his renown among both the general public and in academia. Influenced by the works of historians Henry Charles Lea, Herbert Grundmann, Marc Bloch, and Henri Pirenne, as well as by those of the theologian Ernst Troeltsch, Cohn traced the history of heretical and revolutionary doctrines present throughout northern and central Europe from the eleventh to the sixteenth century, underlining the key role of an apocalyptic and messianic tradition in the history of Western culture.

As the Italian sociologist Franco Ferrarotti so aptly summed up, Cohn's primary interest lay in the study of 'the process by which traditional beliefs in a future [or ancient] golden age or messianic reign, would in certain periods of mass disorientation and anxiety, become the ideologies of particularly "anarchical" popular movements. In other words, his book describes the medieval roots of the "revolutionary messianism in Europe"' (Ferrarotti 2000, 3).

In the first chapter of *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, Cohn examined the raw material provided by both Hebrew and Christian cultures that would go on to form the basis of medieval millenarian and apocalyptic thought, from the book of Daniel to the book of Revelation, and in a few pages Cohn succeeded in summarising the works of Papias of Hierapolis, Tertullian's Montanism, the beliefs of Irenaeus of Lyons, Lactantius, Commodianus and the early church fathers, alongside the traditions of the Sibylline Oracles, the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius, the legends of the Emperor of the Last Days and of the Antichrist. In his subsequent chapters, Cohn pieced together the lives of the false prophets Tanchelm of Utrecht and Eudes de l'Étoile; the creeds of the Tafur beggars, of the Pseudo-Baldwin, and of the Master of Hungary; the teachings of the Joachimites and of the Flagellant hordes; the heresy of the Brethren of the Free Spirit; the ideas of the Taborites, the Amaurians and the Anabaptists; Thomas Müntzer's egalitarian millennium; the preachings of the Drummer of Niklashausen; and the messianic kingdom of John of Leiden. The book's *Appendix* contained a number of testimonies on the Ranters dating back to Cromwell's Protectorate with reproductions of their texts, which Cohn would revert to in the future (Cohn 1970b; Lamont 2009, 98).

As he wrote about the poor and exploited masses overwhelmed by the charisma of all manner of preachers able to interpret collective grievances and aspirations, Cohn was also aware of other commotions closer to his own period. According to him, the same 'subterranean revolutionary eschatology' (Cohn 1957, xiv-xv) that had disrupted the structure of medieval societies could be found in modern political ideologies. In his conclusion for *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, he emphasised the nature of those psychic forces that in specific economic and social circumstances—increases in commercial exchanges,

rapid industrialisation, growth of urban centres and overpopulation, job insecurity, poverty, social marginalisation, the breakdown of traditional social groups, a loss of trust in institutions—could reawaken the potential for traditional end-time fantasies as fully-fledged dynamic social myths. In every place and period of major upheaval the already precarious individual and collective psychological balances can be shaken by almost any occurrence—a rebellion, a call for a crusade, an inter-regnum, a plague or a famine—to trigger violence among the restless.

There were obviously differences between the revolutionary eschatology of the late Middle Ages and modern totalitarian ideologies: while the former contemplated—and periodically systematically reshaped—the Judeo-Christian [prophetic](#) message, the latter adapted recent speculations in the fields of history, biology, and sociology. But Cohn identified features under the pseudo-scientific veneer of national-socialist racism and Marxist-Leninist Stalinism, common to fantasies already present in the Middle Ages. Hitler's attacks on Jews—transformed into demons in the pages of *Mein Kampf*—were not such a far cry from the visions that had driven Emicho of Leiningen or the Master of Hungary when they preached against the Jews and sent murderous hordes of *pauperes* against them. Cohn paid attention, for example, to Friedrich Engels's admiration for Thomas Müntzer and the similarities between Lenin's thoughts and those of the Taborite preacher Martinek Hauska, especially in the second edition of his book (1961). In his view, both the urban masses gathered around medieval prophets and the masses following Hitler and Lenin shared symptoms typical of a 'paranoiac delusion' (Cohn 1957, 309). Delusion that contributed to altering perceptions of reality, thereby rendering auspicious the emergence of a Salvationist group led by a *propheta*. Common elements included an egocentric belief in the embodiment of a race or elected class destined to triumph, attributing enemy forces with immense and frightening powers together with a refusal to accept the limits and imperfections of human nature, an obsession with prophecies considered infallible.

Allusion to Max Weber's studies on charisma is clear (Vauchez 2012), but Cohn was also a keen reader of thinking on modern secular eschatology by Vera Brodov's journalist friend, Frederick Augustus Voigt (*Unto Caesar*, 1938), of the works of Eric Voegelin (*The New Science of Politics*, 1952), and of the studies by the Romanian-British sociologist Zevedei Barbu (*Democracy and Dictatorship*, 1956). *The Pursuit of the Millennium* was received with great enthusiasm by intellectuals of varied training and approach (Trevor-Roper 1957; Berlin 1963), earning praise from such respected persons as Bertrand Russell, whose appreciation was printed on the dust-jacket of the first edition; but it also drew some criticism for its radical psychoanalytical speculations (Hill 1957; Debord 1967, 116).

Cohn's thoughts on what he understood as medieval 'millenarism' also appeared in academic publications (Cohn 1958) despite a cultural and historiographic climate that was not always favourable (Ferrari 2019, 64). By the late 1950s Cohn found himself considering these issues alongside anthropologists Max Gluckman and Peter Worsley and the historian Eric Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm 1959, v). It is against this background of criticisms and advice that Cohn defined his field of research: 'the term "millenarism" is clearly intended to be understood here in that wider sense which in recent years has become customary amongst anthropologists and sociologists and to some extent among historians too. Understood in this sense, "millenarism" becomes simply a convenient label for a particular type of salvationism' (Cohn 1962).

This fantasy of a collective, terrestrial, imminent, total, and supernatural salvation side-by-side with the myth of the Emperor of the Last Days were themes of great importance to him.

While reflecting on his academic career, Cohn had met David Astor, who had expressed a desire to contribute to the establishment of a research centre for enquiring into 'the pathological possibilities of the normal mind', or 'what might be called political psycho-pathology' (Astor 1962, 61, 62). After several months of discussions, Astor, Cohn, the historian and Conservative politician Max Beloff, the South African journalist Colin Legum, the economist Andrew Shonfield and his wife Zuzanna, psychiatrist Alexander T. M. Wilson, and Eliahu Eilat, ex-Israeli ambassador to the United Kingdom, would go on to form the founding nucleus for the Centre for Research in Collective Psychopathology.

According to the *memoranda* drafted by the work committees, the institution—which became affiliated to the newly-established University of Sussex—was meant to finance 'an analytic and comparative study of certain outbreaks of mass violence characterised by important elements of phantasy or irrational prejudice and the social controls by which such occurrences have been averted' ("Towards a Study of the Scourge" 1962). All of the projects developed within the framework of the Columbus Centre concerned two basic issues: the socio-psychological preconditions for the massacres in a Europe dominated by Hitler and the phenomena of collective psychosis of the witch-hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thanks to Astor and Cohn, who collaborated with and entered agreements with major institutions both in the UK and abroad, some important material was published on the role and nature of violence and racism: *Sanctions for Evil* (1971) edited by the American psychologist Nevitt Sanford and his assistant Craig K. Comstock; *Licensed Mass Murder* (1972) by the psychiatrist Henry Victor Dicks; *Human Destructiveness* (1972) by the psychoanalyst Anthony Storr; *The Destiny of Europe's Gypsies* (1972) by Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon; *Justice in South Africa* (1973) by the South African anti-apartheid activist Albert Louis Sachs (Albie Sachs); an English translation (1974) of *Le Mythe Aryen* (1971) by the French historian Léon Poliakov; *Psychodynamics of Race* (1980) by Rae Sherwood; and *Enemies of God* (1981) by the historian and sociologist Christina Larner (Cohn 1980).

Cohn's own two contributions to the Columbus Centre's venture were *Warrant for Genocide* (1967) and *Europe's Inner Demons* (1975). In the first book, Cohn sought to shed some light on the long and tortuous advance of a prejudice against the Jews developed by Medieval Christianity, transformed and modernised after the French Revolution, with endless discrimination and violent pogroms. Under the supervision of historians such as James Parkes (*The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue*, 1934), Léon Poliakov (*Histoire de l'Antisémitisme*, from 1955), Walter Laqueur (director of the Wiener Library in London), and George L. Mosse (*The Crisis of German Ideology*, 1964)—whom he thanked in his *Acknowledgements*—Cohn concerned himself with studying the origins of those buried pathological fantasies of a global Jewish conspiracy spread by antisemitic fanatics of every kind: holy men, secret agents, racist authors, and Nazi officials. Central to his work lay an analysis of 'exterminatory anti-Semitism', a complex bundle of century-old beliefs according to which Jews were viewed as the devil incarnate, a sect of conspirators ready to destroy and dominate the world (Cohn 1967, 252).

In *Warrant for Genocide*, Cohn did not deal directly with millenarian movements but with contemporary versions of these fantasies—the outcome, he said, of unconscious negative projections—designed to demonize the other, something which he had already partially treated in *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. The bibliography that Cohn drew on was extremely broad. In addition to the numerous editions of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and works on those infamous forgeries by Lucien Wolf (*The Jewish Bogy*, 1920),

Philip Graves (*The Truth about the Protocols*, 1921), and Herman Bernstein (*The History of a Lie*, 1921), he was influenced by—among others—the works of rabbi Joshua Trachtenberg (*The Devil and the Jews*, 1943), the historian Jules Isaac (*Genèse de l'Antisémitisme*, 1956), as well as research on antisemitic psychology and sociology by the Frankfurt School (*The Authoritarian Personality*, 1950) and by the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim and the sociologist Morris Janowitz (*Dynamics of Prejudice*, 1950). *Warrant for Genocide* was very well-received and was accorded the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award (1968) in the United States for its contribution to the analysis of race relations, although the final chapter—titled “A Case-study in Collective Psychopathology” and subsequently deleted from later editions beginning in the 1980s—aroused some puzzlement among historians for the emphasis given to the continued antisemitic hate and its pathological and paranoid nature (Laqueur 1967; Trevor-Roper 1967b; Arendt 1968, xi). It is also true that the book belonged to a complex historiographic moment, which saw numerous attempts to apply the methods of psychoanalysis to historical knowledge and the analysis of society (Ferrari 2019, 75).

In *Europe's Inner Demons* Cohn sought to examine the accusations of child-eating and orgies made against some minorities in the past: the Christians of the second century, medieval heretics, and ostensible witches. The book dealt with the origins of the fantasies that the establishment (monks, bishops, popes, kings, the nobility, theologians, inquisitors) developed around the Sabbath. In many respects, the work concluded that the project began with *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (Cohn 1975, xiv) with its exploration of the impact of the myth of Satan and his human acolytes in European history (Cohn 1970c). Once again, the bibliography relied upon by Cohn was vast and included classic works by Margaret Murray (*The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, 1921) and Montague Summers (*The History of Witchcraft and Demonology*, 1926), as well as important new works in the historiographic landscape, such as *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (1970) by Alan Macfarlane, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) by Keith Thomas, or *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (1972) by Jeffrey Burton Russell. These were the products of years of deep meditation on the theme of witchcraft and according to the historian Peter Burke, ‘Cohn was part of a trend in witchcraft studies that followed the social context approach and focused on the history of the collective imagination’ (pers. comm.). As had been the case for his first two books, the first edition of *Europe's Inner Demons* also closed with some psycho-historical speculations. According to Cohn, fantasies of cannibalistic infanticide had their origin in repressed and unconscious childhood wishes and anxieties (Cohn 1975, 261). This type of explanation left some scholars unconvinced (Hill 1975) but sparked curiosity in those who, like Hugh Trevor-Roper, had already begun examining these beliefs (*The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 1967; 1975).

Last Works

On his retirement, and with the closure of the Columbus Centre, Cohn was free to concentrate on themes of millenarism and apocalypse. Leaving behind the project he and Astor had created, he came to the conclusion that he had had enough of horrors and genocides and became convinced that ultimately the psychoanalytic approach was incapable of explaining social phenomena (Cohn 2001, 9, 10). In the meantime, thanks to the works of Romana Guarnieri (*Il movimento del Libero Spirito*, 1965), Marjorie Reeves (*The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages*, 1969), and other scholars (Cohn 1970a, 9, 10), many more writings on the tradition of revolutionary millenarism and heretical movements were beginning to appear.

For Cohn, the moment had come to delve further into the origins of the apocalyptic tradition. His resulting work—which took fifteen years to complete—was *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come* (1993). Until around 1500 BCE, even the more diverse populations, such as Egyptians, Sumerians, Babylonians, Indo-Iranians and their descendants, and Canaanites or pre-exilic Israelites, believed that the order in which god (or the gods) had created the world was essentially immutable and indestructible, although frequently beset by dangerous and malignant forces, often manifested through floods, famines, epidemics or invasions by hostile populations. In this way, Cohn held, various versions of the combat myth existed in the Ancient Near East, centred around the eternal and cyclical conflict between the cosmos and chaos, respectively embodied by a valorous warrior and a chaos-monster (Cohn 1972).

For Cohn, it was the Iranian [prophet](#) Zoroaster—who was said to have lived between 1400 and 1000 BCE in what was a predominantly pastoral society—who radically altered this static vision of the world, transforming the ancient combat-myths into the first eschatological faith (Cohn 1995b, 21, 34). The battle between the god Ahura Mazda and the destructive spirit Angra Mainyu narrated in the Avesta sacred writings was in fact destined to end with a final and definitive combat that would bring about the destruction of the forces of evil and their allies, and the arrival of an era of peace and harmony. The final chapters of the book dealt with the monumental impact that this vision of history would have on both Hebrew and Christian cultures. A short-lived debate followed in the pages of the *London Review of Books*, raised by those who queried the direct influence of Zoroastrianism on Judaism and Christianity (Bull 1994; Cohn 1994), leading the author to rethink his final chapter and provide an appendix for the new edition (2001).

Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come was inspired by the research and advice of Mary Boyce, an expert on Iranian languages and Zoroastrianism, and Robert Carroll, an Old Testament/Hebrew Bible scholar, as well as by bibliographic suggestions from Géza Vermes, who had translated the Dead Sea Scrolls into English (1962), and the Assyriologist Henry Saggs (Cohn 1993a, x). The book was given the reception appropriate to a future classic (Storr 1993), at a time that was (coincidentally) marked by a return of apocalyptic hopes (Griffin 1994) and fundamentalist groups such as the [Branch Davidians](#).

In 1996 Cohn published what would be his final book—*Noah's Flood*—which dealt with the numerous interpretations around the Universal Flood in Western belief. The author retraced the origins of this tale in Mesopotamian mythology, and specifically in the poem known as The Atrahasis Epic, but its significance—Cohn held—changed several times over the centuries: for the Jews it became a message of hope, while for the Christians it presaged salvation. With the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century, the myth narrated in the book of Genesis became the point of departure for those early intellectuals engaged in developing theories as to the Earth's origins. The process was far from straightforward and obstacle-free, given the complex ties between faith and original scientific theories present in the works of scholars such as Thomas Burnet (1635–1715) and William Whiston (1667–1752). Also, by the end of the eighteenth century, the story of the Great Flood would be taken up by fundamentalist thinkers—convinced in the 'literal truth of Genesis' and of the 'scriptural timescale' (Cohn 1996, 121)—to bolster their own beliefs. In the course of the twentieth century the tale would be interpreted in turn as a solar, lunar, then fertility myth or—in psychoanalytical terms—as the expression of male aggression towards women. Yet none of these more modern interpretations of the myth has shown awareness of the concerns that obsessed man in ancient times: 'the thought of a wrathful God intent on punishing a sinful mankind, cleansing a corrupted world, and making a fresh start' (Cohn 1996, 133).

Noah's Flood was not envisaged for only an expert audience. Its multiple illustrations, its narrative style, and a more limited set of annotations confirm a desire on the part of the author to accurately trace the story of an idea—the Great Flood—that could intrigue a wider readership. Cohn skilfully summarised works by other scholars, such as Ernest Tuveson, Paolo Rossi, or Martin Rudwick, omitting many issues and points of discussion (Levine 1998, 501), but achieving for the most part what was understood to be a well-balanced and successful overview (Di Lella 1997).

Cohn's Legacy

Cohn would continue to focus on apocalyptic traditions and biblical studies, delving further into the fate and links of those visions contained in the book of Daniel, the book of Revelation, and the Second Epistle of Peter (Cohn 1999). In the meantime, the *Times Literary Supplement* (1995) had inserted *The Pursuit of the Millennium* in its list of the hundred most influential books of the second half of the twentieth century, placing its author alongside such varied and illustrious figures of the time as Camus, Churchill, Foucault, Pasternak, and Sartre.

The writings of Norman Cohn have gone on to influence entire generations of readers and scholars, from all sorts of backgrounds and vocations. Through their works, historians Stuart Clark (*Thinking with Demons*, 1997), Michael Burleigh (*The Third Reich*, 2000; *Earthly Powers*, 2005; *Sacred Causes*, 2006), Daniel Pick (*The Pursuit of the Nazi Mind*, 2012), philosophers Pierre-André Taguieff (*L'imaginaire du complot mondial*, 2006), John Nicholas Gray (*Black Mass*, 2007) and novelists William Gibson and Ian McEwan have evidenced their intellectual debt to Cohn, who—in the words of psychiatrist Anthony Storr—dedicated his entire life to 'the important parts of history other historians do not reach: the collective myths that underpin the assumptions, prejudices and beliefs which shake and shape human societies' (Lamont 2009; Ferrari 2019, 81, 82).

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Article information

Lorenzo Ferrari. 2021. "Norman Cohn." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 18 January 2021. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/norman-cohn.

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