

'I am a corporate sinner'

Who is Ray Anderson? The U.S. executive is the darling of anti-corporate activists, the 'mahatma' of business bashing and star of the film *The Corporation*. But who is he?

Peter Foster

Financial Post

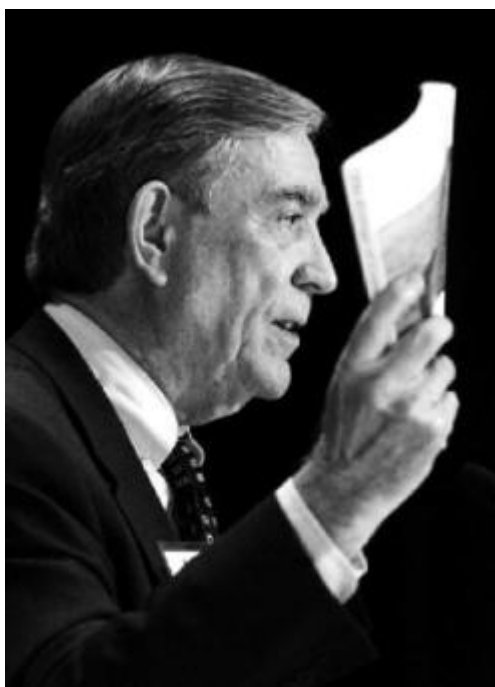
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Ray Anderson is a businessman and a sinner. That combination is hardly likely to shock anybody these days. The media has for years been chock-a-block with tales of insider trading, cooking the books, and living large at shareholders' expense. But Ray Anderson's self-confessed sin puts mere greed, exploitation or malfeasance in the shade. It is that, as an industrialist, he is a "plunderer" of the Earth's resources and a polluter of its environment, not to mention a "thief from future generations."

As the founder and chairman of Interface Inc., one of the largest carpet companies in the world, the Georgia-based businessman appears to be a powerful witness for his own prosecution, not to mention that of the capitalism more generally. Since an "epiphany" in the early 1990s, Anderson has been sharing his massive mea culpa with appreciative congregations of the environmentally concerned all over the world. This week, he beat his breast at the Shared Air Summit in Toronto and at the International Conference on Gross National Happiness in Antigonish, N.S.


Last year, Ray Anderson began to reach a wider audience via his starring role in the award-winning Canadian documentary *The Corporation*. Based on a book by Joel Bakan, *The Corporation* promotes the thesis that large businesses are fundamentally evil and destructive. If they were individuals, they would be psychopaths. The corporate system is analogous to slavery. Corporations are claimed to have been handmaidens of fascism and dictatorship, promoters of birth defects and cancer epidemics that seek to privatize rainfall and gag free speech. The film is replete with images of sharks and Frankenstein monsters, with scenes of smokestacks and smog.

Celebrity left-wingers old and new, from Noam Chomsky to Michael Moore and Naomi Klein, are trotted out to make the case against corporate capitalism. But the most surprising -- and perhaps even most eloquent -- condemnation comes from Ray Anderson, with his arresting admissions of sin and plunder.



CREDIT: Peter J. Thompson, National Post
Ray Anderson flogs his anti-business bible, Paul Hawken's *The Ecology of Commerce*, at Toronto's Shared Air Summit this week.

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In the movie (and in all his speeches, including those he made in Canada this week), Anderson explains how he came to the cause. After 21 years as an entrepreneur, he was called upon to speak to his employees about what the company was doing for the environment. He had never given the matter a thought. Desperate for inspiration, he received a copy of a book called *The Ecology of Commerce*, by Paul Hawken. Anderson was horrified by Hawken's catalogue of alleged environmental destruction and species extinction. He was particularly haunted by the phrase "the Death of Birth," which had been coined by controversial Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson. Anderson described it as a "spear in the chest." A subsequent address to employees reportedly left everybody in tears, and led to a "change of paradigm" for his company. Anderson realized that he had been taking "the way of the plunderer." He says in the film that he believes the day will come "when people like me will wind up in gaol." He concludes, "The Industrial Revolution is not working."

This week he told his Toronto audience that unless businessmen got aboard his crusade, then our descendants faced "a hellish world." As usual, he stepped from the podium to thunderous applause.

Anti-business businessmen are a much less rare phenomenon than might be imagined, but Anderson is a figure that demands, rather than invites, psychological analysis. More intriguing is how people could take his metaphorical self-flagellation seriously. If you think you are sinning, there is surely only one moral solution: to stop. Ray Anderson's answer, however, seems to be to go on a regimen of industrial "sin lite" on the path to personal and corporate salvation. His performance in *The Corporation* has attracted hardly a trace of skepticism. Indeed, Anderson has been singled out in reviews as the film's "hero." *BusinessWeek* described him, apparently without irony, as "the movie's mahatma." *Newsday* declared that Anderson's commentary was "a breath of fresh air, given the litany of societal crimes elsewhere committed by slaves of the bottom line." *The Globe and Mail* painted him as a "hopeful" example of "business leaders who have faced the ugly facts." A *Globe* review of Bakan's book suggested that Anderson was an example of a man of "integrity and social conscience," and that *Interface* was "extremely successful financially."

Almost everybody seems inclined to take Anderson at his word, but it's hard not to notice that, for a sinner, he seems mightily self-satisfied. Few people appear to have read his Bible, *The Ecology of Commerce*, looked into the psychological roots of his epiphany, or examined what he has actually achieved. Least of all does it appear to have occurred to anybody that somebody should be defending the system to which Ray Anderson is putting the boot.

Is capitalism destroying the Earth? Has Ray Anderson really discovered a new and more benign approach to business? What does his status as a media hero tell us about the intellectual tenor of our times. Above all, where, exactly, is this guy coming from?

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Ray Anderson was born in the sleepy little Georgia town of West Point, an hour's drive southwest of Atlanta. Sitting astride the Chattahoochee River, West Point was the site of the last fort to fall in the Civil War. Today, it is a mix of struggling industrial enterprise, old Southern money, and bedroom community for Atlanta.

Anderson, the third son of an assistant postmaster, was always ambitious and competitive. He won a football scholarship to Georgia Tech, then went to work in the carpet business for a company named Milliken. (Around 80% of the carpet manufactured in the United States is made in Georgia). As he rose through the management ranks, one of his jobs had been to start up a carpet tile operation, a concept that had been developed in England. Anderson saw that carpet tiles had a big future -- a future that would get much bigger with the need to access the underfloor wiring so necessary to the computer and telecommunications revolutions.

He left Milliken to develop his idea in partnership with a British company, Carpets International. Over the coming two decades, Carpets International would be one of the dozens of acquisitions Anderson made on the way to building *Interface* into one of the largest carpet

companies in the world.

I interviewed Ray Anderson last spring in Vancouver. He inevitably started by telling his tale of sin and plunder, complete with the spear in the chest, and the epiphany. I asked him if he didn't underplay the huge amount of human wealth and welfare generated by the capitalist system.

"But it's all at the expense of the Earth," he said. "What kind of wealth is that, generated at the expense of the Earth?"

I asked him if Earth had a value independent of human values.

"If all that wealth destroys the Earth," he replied, "what will be left for the next generation? What economy can survive without air? What economy survive without water and energy and materials and pollination and seed dispersal and flood control and climate regulation?"

I noted that when I looked around (particularly on a beautiful spring day in Vancouver), I didn't see a plundered world.

"You're looking in the wrong place," said Anderson.

I asked him if he considered himself a capitalist.

"Absolutely," he said. "I'm also an industrialist and an entrepreneur and as competitive as anybody you're likely to know. Hawken would say that the only problem with capitalism is that nobody's tried it. We think of capitalism and we focus only on financial capital. We ignore human capital and natural capital."

Who is this "we"? I asked.

"The members of this industrial system," he said.

"But you don't think that way," I suggested.

"I'm called a radical industrialist," replied Anderson. "I'm still a plunderer, but only two-thirds as much as I was."

Despite my, at times, obviously skeptical questions, Anderson's genial, charming good ol' boy persona slipped only once during the interview. In *The Corporation*, Anderson suggested that "not a single scientific paper in the past 25 years has indicated anything but that the biosphere is in decline."

"Have you read Bjorn Lomborg's *The Skeptical Environmentalist*?" I asked.

"Enough to know that it's bullshit," he snapped.

I pressed on, noting that Lomborg's well-documented conclusion was that the world was not going to hell in a handbasket.

"And he's dead wrong," said Anderson. "I haven't read the book myself but I've read the opinion of people I respect who say it is not scientifically based, it's not good science, and he's wrong."

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Reaction to the name of Bjorn Lomborg has become a litmus test on environmental issues. A

Danish academic of leftist and environmentalist bent himself, Lomborg was, around 1997, affronted by the rosy projections for the future of capitalism made by economist Julian Simon. He set his students to an exhaustive examination of the facts on resource depletion and environmental degradation. To his surprise, he discovered that Julian Simon was right and the environmental alarmists were wrong. Everywhere he checked out the environmental "litany" of death and destruction, he found it had been either greatly exaggerated or entirely falsified. Wealth was not bought at the expense of the environment. On the contrary, above a certain level of income, increased wealth went with environmental improvement.

This finding begs an intriguing question: Why would Ray Anderson and so many others -- including prominent scientists -- be so violently opposed to the notion that the world isn't going to hell in a handbasket? The superficial reason, in the case of Anderson, was because he had embraced a book -- *The Ecology of Commerce* -- whose message was precisely the opposite of Lomborg's.

Paul Hawken's book carries a stark and simple message: "Business is destroying the world." The culprit? "The greed of the rich and powerful."

"Quite simply," wrote Hawken, "our business practices are destroying life on Earth. Given current corporate practices, not one wildlife reserve, wilderness or indigenous culture will survive the global market economy. We know that every natural system on the planet is disintegrating."

The book reflects a troubled world and an even more troubled mind, a world of teeming masses breeding exponentially, of foetuses with impaired immune systems, of mothers with toxins in their milk, of human bodies too toxic to be put in landfills, of creatures poisoned by the industrial system, of ancient forests wiped out, of species eliminated wholesale, of mountains of waste, of a globe threatened by climate change and environmental apocalypse.

According to Hawken, many of whose ideas would be reflected in *The Corporation*, industrial society equals "waste, degradation and dehumanization." And even if all businesses adopted the best practices of allegedly "good" companies, such as Ben & Jerry's, Patagonia, or 3M, the world would still be heading for Hades.

"The degradation of our habitat," wrote Hawken, "could include the drying up of traditional breadbaskets, rapid desertification, empty reservoirs, collapsing coastlines, hurricane winds of 300 miles per hour, increased pestilence, famine and droughts."

But Hawken's image of commerce is a demonic parody that nobody could, or would, possibly defend. "The conservative view of free-market capitalism asserts that nothing should be allowed to hinder commerce," he writes, without citing anybody who actually holds such a view. He goes on to say that "Defenders of the status quo sometimes cite the Book of Genesis ... " But he doesn't say who such blinkered Bible thumpers are.

Unspecified "business ideologues" apparently regard species extinction as a "so what" issue. However, "We can't turn our backs on the web of life that sustains us, and live in a biological vacuum engineered by technology." We aren't told who is recommending that we live in this biological vacuum.

Hawken claims that, "Business often invokes the Darwinian maxim of 'survival of the fittest' to defend its competitive actions." Just that, yet again, we aren't given any names.

It's not just business as usual that Hawken doesn't like; it seems to be people more generally. Humans are depicted as weeds and parasites, are compared to other thoughtless life forms, such as algae or reindeer, and castigated as merely "one species" that is taking more than its "fair share."

In Hawken's world, trade, in particular international trade, is bad. Small, local and labour intensive are all good. Also -- astonishingly -- poor is good, or at least better than rich. "A

restorative economy," writes Hawken, "is not going to lead to a life of dulling comfort and convenience."

Competition is to be banned as "impractical, wasteful, expensive and degrading to all involved." Governments will "set the conditions for the market." In particular they will promote taxes to reflect "real" costs, after, that is, assuming the Solomon-like role of determining what "real" costs are.

All this implies a level of rigid economic and social control that Hawken never explicitly acknowledges. He speaks vaguely of a "consensus-building, collaborative approach." Except that the decisions have already been reached. In any case, according to Hawken, anybody who disagrees with his view is "in denial."

The culprits of present and future disasters are clearly identified. "We have spent too much time and money," writes Hawken, "making the world safe for upper-middle-class white men." Men, presumably, such as Ray Anderson. Which makes it all the more astonishing that Anderson would embrace Hawken's thesis so enthusiastically, especially since the thesis was, as Lomborg subsequently demonstrated, so utterly flawed.

So here we have to ask another key question: Why did Hawken's book evoke such a profound response in Anderson? Was there some particular reason why he was primed for an epiphany, for a damascene conversion?

Next Saturday: Peter Foster on the truth behind the green face of Anderson's Interface carpets.

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Heaven can wait: U.S. industrialist Ray Anderson sees himself as a corporate saviour, but his impact on his own company, Interface, is questionable. His target for 'sustainability' is now 2020

Peter Foster
National Post

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Last week, Peter Foster looked into the background of Ray Anderson, carpet manufacturer, self-confessed "sinner and plunderer," and star of Canadian award-winning anti-business documentary, *The Corporation*. In this, the second of a two-part series, Foster looks more closely at Georgia-based Anderson's environmental "epiphany," examines his "Eco Dream Team," and assesses whether Anderson's company, Interface, is destined to be stuck in the foothills of "Mount Sustainability."

Ray Anderson's oft-cited environmental "epiphany" reminded me of another, that of former U.S. vice-president Al Gore. In his book, *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit*, which Anderson regards as required reading, Gore noted that in 1989 he saw his son almost killed in a car accident, not long after he had lost a presidential campaign and turned 40. "This life change," he wrote, "has caused me to be increasingly impatient with the status quo, with conventional wisdom, with the lazy assumption that we can always muddle through." Henceforth Gore had wholeheartedly embraced hellwards-in-handbasket environmentalism.

When I met Ray Anderson last year, I mentioned Gore's experience and asked him if there had been any similar personal loss or tragedy related to his own epiphany. He had avoided the question. But when I read the book that Anderson had written a couple of years into his new corporate paradigm, *Mid-Course Correction*, there it was, right in the prologue. Just like Gore, Anderson had lost his job. Well, not exactly lost it. He had effectively been forced to kick himself upstairs following problems at Interface during the recession of 1991-93 and the introduction of a new management team, led by a charismatic manager named Charlie Eitel.


Anderson had had some problems letting go of the reins of power. To ease the transition, Eitel had brought in a psychologist, J. Zink, who was a specialist in marriage counselling and family therapy. Those skills were appropriate because Anderson frequently referred to Interface as his "child." Few people give up custody of their offspring easily.

Part of the therapeutic transition process was a series of "conversations" between the



CREDIT: Peter J. Thompson, National Post
Ray Anderson, chairman of Interface, at the recent Shared Air Summit in Toronto: His "moral" stance may prove, ironically, "unsustainable."

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- :: [Stelco and the insolvency mess](#) 
- :: [Conrad's capitalism](#)

managers and the psychologist, which were turned into a book, called *Face It: A Spiritual Journey of Leadership*. The book contains some fascinating insights into the obvious problems that any corporate founder has in handing over under such circumstances: the struggle with acknowledgment of at least partial failure; jealousy of the new "saviour;" and, above all, what to do next.

In Anderson's own words, "The new management team took hold of operations quickly and effectively, and my job became one of turning loose, getting out of the way, staying out of the way, and being head cheerleader. That's a big change after 21 years of 'nose to the grindstone,' autocratic, hands-on management. I began seriously to question my role, what it should be, and if indeed I had one.

"Then ... I discovered an urgent calling and an unexpectedly rewarding new role for myself." (my italics).

Ray Anderson had to save the world from capitalism. After all, according to his new bible -- Paul Hawken's *The Ecology of Commerce* -- the industrial system was decimating the biosphere and threatening the future of life on Earth.

As a first step, Anderson rapidly attracted a group of environmentally concerned consultants and advisors who confirmed that the world needed saving, and that he could be in the vanguard of saving it. He dubbed them the "Eco Dream Team."

The Eco Dream Team was -- and is -- a weird and wonderful mix of genius, '60s convictions, mysticism, opportunism, and flim-flam. It offered huge and expansive visions. In the event, it proved much better at taking ideas than providing them. Hawken was a leading member. Other key players included alternative energy maven Amory Lovins and his wife, L. Hunter Lovins; a Los Angeles-based environmental design expert named John Picard; and architect William McDonough.

The Dream Team developed enormous power, and became a de facto board of environmental directors. Under their guidance, Anderson's "vision" became to cut out all use of petroleum and replace it with solar energy, and to install "closed-loop" production systems leading to zero waste, harmless emissions, and resource efficient transportation. It wasn't just a commitment to do better, it was a dedication to invent a corporate perpetual motion machine.

This overarching concept, as peddled by the Lovinses and Paul Hawken, was called "Natural Capitalism." But when it came to practical ideas, the examples that the three used came almost entirely from what companies were already doing, that is, from capitalism's existing and ongoing "natural" process of resource-saving and technological innovation.

In a book that the three Dream Teamers wrote, they talked up Interface as "leading the way to this next frontier of industrial ecology." They touted a new wonder floor covering called Solonium. It allegedly used 40% less material and lasted four times longer than ordinary carpet, "an 86% reduction in materials intensity." Within a couple of years, however, due to technical problems and lack of consumer interest, the wonder product had been discontinued. The three Dreamers also claimed that there was high demand for carpets from Interface's "recently opened solar-powered carpet factory." The problem was that Interface didn't have a solar-powered carpet factory. Interface's California plant has an array of photovoltaic cells that provide around 2% of the plant's electricity and a fraction of 1% of its overall power usage. This minimal amount of solar energy was "dedicated" to the manufacture of the tufting in a certain type of carpet, the remainder of which was manufactured with conventional non-renewable energy. Again, the three dreamers talked up Interface's "shift to service-leasing business," via the concept of the "Evergreen Lease," which left Interface as the custodian of its carpet tiles in perpetuity. But the leasing scheme flopped too.

Although Interface has certainly cut waste and emissions, and improved its efficiency, the

practical contributions of the Eco Dream Team appear to have been somewhat marginal. The only one that gets cited these days is that of Janine Benyus, originator of the concept of "biomimicry." She apparently contributed the idea for a carpet designed to look like a forest floor. Hardly a "New Industrial Revolution."

Perhaps the most telling contribution made by the Dream Team was their input to Interface's 25th anniversary celebration at the Wailea resort on Hawaii. The first reaction of anti-development doomster Paul Hawken when he heard about the location -- which had been selected by new Interface CEO Charlie Eitel -- was outrage. He claimed that tourism was "destroying the islands and the native culture." Eventually, however, the Dream Team decided that they would turn up, but only if they could set about changing the resort's culture. They would submit it to an eco-audit and demonstrate how you could live in five-star modesty. They would turn off the air conditioning, shut down the fountains, cut down the number of bath towels, suspend pesticide use, compost restaurant wastes, and even suggest that guests take their garbage home with them! The conference itself was organized as a massive guiltfest about the state of the Earth. It received an award for being the corporate meeting of the year, but success didn't come cheap. The Eco Dream Team's intervention at Wailea wound up more than doubling the cost of the meeting, to US\$8-million. Despite their distaste for industrial combustion, the culprit of alleged global warming, the Eco Dream Team had an extraordinary penchant for burning money. Which brings us, appropriately, to the bottom line.

How far has Interface managed to climb up "Mount Sustainability" in the 10 years since Ray Anderson's epiphany? More important, what impact has the new paradigm had on the company's financial performance? Despite soaring to US\$20 in 1998, Interface's share price, at just under US\$8, is pretty much where it was 10 years ago. Significantly, the man who brought the share price to its peak, Charlie Eitel, departed the company in mid-1999, when it was announced, without elaboration, that he had "resigned to pursue other interests." In fact, according to insiders, Eitel was fired by Anderson for his reluctance to go off the environmental deep end, and his unwillingness to impose the costs of Anderson's crusade on shareholders. Still, there seems to be little or no overt shareholder discontent about the flagging share price. It appears the perfect stock for "ethical" investment funds.

What about progress on saving the Earth? Anderson claims cumulative savings of US\$262-million since 1994, but one key question is how much the company might have saved without any epiphanies. The employment of cost-effective, resource-saving technologies is not a moral imperative, it is just good business. The law is there to prevent corporations from externalizing their costs at the expense of others. Some companies may wish to go beyond the law for marketing or even "moral" reasons, but then we get into problematic territory, since such convictions -- unless they attract sufficient customers -- will carry a cost in terms of lost market share, employment, and profitability. Ultimately they may threaten the survival of the company itself.

Anderson's "moral" stance may prove simply, and ironically, "unsustainable." His commitments lead not merely up the path to "Mount Sustainability" but down the road to criticism and inevitable failure. Ray Anderson has fallen under the sway of those who claim that all resource extraction is unsustainable. Thus being 25% of the way to sustainability merely serves to emphasize that you are 75% unsustainable. Moreover, the easiest savings have already been made, from what Anderson calls "low-hanging fruit." Now what? And remember, Anderson isn't just talking about increasing efficiencies, he is talking about avoiding sin and plunder.

Most glaringly, the great commitment to ditch petroleum and embrace alternatives, mainly solar, has stalled. Indeed, the percentage of renewable energy the company uses is actually down since 1996. The recent surge in petroleum prices will provide a fillip to renewables, but it will provide an incentive to everybody, not just to sinners and plunderers.

Does Ray Anderson see any problem with his -- or rather the Eco Dream Team's -- ideas 10 years into his epiphany? Apparently not. He has just shifted the target date for Interface's sustainability (originally the year 2000) to 2020, although, of course, he wants to be there

to celebrate its achievement.

The greatest charge against Ray Anderson is that he is a hypocrite, not in wanting to use less resources, but in his claims about sin and plunder. When Ray Anderson says he's a sinner and a plunderer, what he is really saying is that other industrialists are sinners and plunderers. His breast beating is in reality chest thumping. Also, although Ray Anderson sees himself as a maverick, his views and attitudes are depressingly conventional in a corporate world increasingly consumed by appeasement of the radical environmental lobby.

Adam Smith noted long ago that we tend to give far more weight to the opinions of the rich and powerful than they deserve. I asked Anderson if anybody ever criticized his views. "I've heard people say 'I just don't want to believe it.' A sort of denial. But I don't remember ever been confronted by anybody who said that I was full of it." Perhaps it's time somebody told him that he is.

Anderson remains Interface's controlling shareholder, so he's not likely to receive much opposition from the board or employees, at least to his face. Given his saintly profile, there's not much in it for rivals to suggest that he's merely doing the same things they are, although they do privately grumble about Anderson's "greenwash." Those who come to his speeches tend to be The Converted. Also, it's important to remember that Ray Anderson is talking about many phenomena that nobody can possibly directly experience (including himself), such as species extinction. He quoted to me the wildly exaggerated figure of 60,000 species going extinct yearly, but he couldn't name one. Those who regard him as a guru are taking his word for the state of the biosphere, just as he has taken the word of Paul Hawken, his Eco Dream Team, and other environmental alarmists. And which casual observer is going to take a stand against somebody who claims to be "saving the world?"

There would be little point in attempting to engage Anderson in a dialogue on the complexities and definitional problems of sustainability, a thoroughly muddled neo-Malthusian notion invented by self-confessed socialist diehards at the United Nations. For Anderson, as for most environmental extremists, anybody who disagrees with him is -- as noted -- "in denial." To challenge him with statistics -- such as those produced by Bjorn Lomborg in his book *The Skeptical Environmentalist* -- would be naive. Ray Anderson has seen the light. All others dwell in darkness. Meanwhile, if he can't find real examples of gruesome environmental devastation, he simply makes them up, as he did in his book *Mid-Course Correction*. After all, he's doing it in the noblest of causes.

The historical figure to whom Anderson perhaps bears the most resemblance is Robert Owen, the British mill owner who in the early part of the 19th century crusaded against child labour and earned himself the inaccurate title of "Father of Socialism." A key tactic of Owen's crusade was to blacken the motives and exaggerate the sins of his competitors, and to denigrate the emergent capitalist system, although Owen never went so far as to declare himself a sinner. Owen became involved in more and more grandiose schemes to create a Utopian society, including an American colony at New Harmony in Indiana. Like Anderson, Owen was a skilled industrialist, but assumed the weight of muddled ideas from his turbulent radical zeitgeist. Those ideas were significantly based on a failure to comprehend the self-correcting and even ultimately moral nature of capitalism. In the end, Owen went a little batty. Still, there was considerably more excuse for failing to grasp the benefits of the system in the middle of the 19th century. Given the phenomenal growth of wealth and welfare in the intervening period, there is surely less excuse for demonization today, except that the focus of discontent has moved from the system's allegedly grinding the faces of the poor to allegedly destroying the biosphere.

Ray Anderson doesn't appear to realize that he has allied himself with people who ultimately aim at not the reform but the destruction of the industrial system, even though that fact is laid out fairly and squarely in *The Ecology of Commerce*. Mark Achbar, one of the producers of *The Corporation*, noted in an interview that although he was "impressed" by Anderson, "We cannot rely on the CEOs of the world all having epiphanies while simultaneously reading Paul Hawken's *The Ecology of Commerce*... One way or another, corporations must be forced into sustainability, or else we are collectively doomed [my italics]."

Some suggest that Ray Anderson is a hypocrite who has wrapped himself in a "Cloak of Green" as a marketing tool. Catering to his customers is certainly part of his environmental stance, but there is nothing wrong with green marketing. Anderson's real sin may be that he has become what Lenin called a "useful idiot," blithely peddling ideas whose dangerous or even disastrous implications he -- like most people -- simply doesn't understand.

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