

'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?

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BYLINE: Peter Foster

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ILLUSTRATION: Black & White Photo: Peter J. Thompson, National Post / RayAnderson flogs his anti-business bible, Paul Hawken's The Ecology of Commerce, at Toronto's Shared Air Summit this week.; Colour Photo: 'I AM A SINNER': Peter Foster on the Ray Anderson myth.: (Photo ran on pg. FP1.)

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

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.

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?

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?