Belief in human overpopulation is not just factually incorrect. It also leads otherwise decent people to endorse policies that are pure evil. How the British responded to the Irish Potato Famine serves as a case-in-point.

Several years ago, when I first became a science communicator, I was giving a talk in Seattle about GMOs. I described many of the benefits -- such as increased yields and fewer insecticides -- and why many of the concerns were overblown or fabricated.

During the Q&A session, one lady raised her hand and asked, "Aren't we just feeding the monster?" Given the context of the conversation, what she meant by this question is if GMOs are helping poor, overpopulated people survive, isn't it counterproductive to feed them? After all, they'll just reproduce, creating more poor people.

My response to her astonishing question was, "What are we supposed to do? Not feed hungry people?"

Her question really was astonishing because it displays that, in the name of saving the planet, some people are okay with letting fellow human beings starve to death. This is a viewpoint that can only take hold in someone's mind if they are fundamentally misanthropic; that is, they view the
lives of "other people" (usually brown and black people in poor places on the other side of the planet) as unworthy. My biggest problem with modern environmentalism is that it encourages otherwise intelligent, decent people to endorse policies that are pure evil.

The British Helped the Irish Starve During the Potato Famine

This abhorrent view goes back a long way and is shared by many, which is why somebody can verbalize it without feeling ashamed. Two people in particular deserve the most blame for popularizing these beliefs, Thomas Malthus and Paul Ehrlich [2].

Famously, Malthus is the person after whom we have derived the term "Malthusian catastrophe," which refers to out-of-control population growth that results in food shortages and starvation. A lesser known fact is that Malthus was a Protestant (Anglican) minister who didn't think too highly of Irish Catholics. The British, in general, weren't fond of the Irish. At best, they were perceived as a backward, Stone Age culture; at worst, as subhuman.

In his excellent book Twelve Diseases that Changed Our World [3], professor Irwin Sherman writes:

"According to Malthusian doctrine, any increase in the Irish population would be due to their carnal and vicious nature. Famine would control this population explosion, and in Malthusian terms this was deserved. The Irish, the British opined, were hopelessly inferior and incurably filled with vice and so they deserved the famine, which would exert control over their excessive breeding. In effect, the Malthusian theory was used to reinforce British prejudice against the Irish and to justify the British failure to provide relief."

The British didn't just fail to provide relief. They actively undermined the Irish food supply through various laws [4] meant to boost the power and wealth of absentee landlords. Such laws resulted in food being exported from Ireland to England while Irish peasants were literally starving to death. Did the British feel guilty about any of this? Not really. There were too many Irish people, and they deserved whatever happened to them.

That twisted, evil view of humanity remains alive and well today. Just ask an environmentalist.

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