

The future of agriculture

Posted on **October 31,2018** by **admin**

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[wheat](#) I've been thinking about the future of agriculture this week. This first arose since I read a very interesting article on the use of robots in agriculture. They are already in use to a limited extent. At the moment robots are pruning grapes, milking and picking lettuce and strawberries. They are also mapping farmland in a forensic manner. Soil varies over farmland due to the underlying geology, topology and physical features. This affects light, shade, moisture and soil pH. Small robots are mapping farms in incredible detail which allows precision agriculture. But all this is only the start. Two British companies are developing robots that will do precision weeding and add fertilizer in precise ways at the level of the plant and harvest broccoli. All this raises a whole series of ethical and other questions. Precision agriculture using robots offers clear environmental benefits at the plant level. The weeding robot identifies the weeds and blasts them with a laser rather than using pesticide. Robotic farming according to its proponents offers less ploughing, ripping out hedgerows as well as less pesticide use (and presumably higher yields). However I see some big potential drawbacks. First robots will require energy. Both to run and also to make (often forgotten). Some of the small ones could be fitted with solar PV but this vision is one of a high energy future which is not necessarily the way things are going to go. The second issue is that of employment. The number of people employed in agriculture has been falling for the last 200 years and is pretty minimal now. The areas where large numbers of people are employed is in seasonal fruit picking. Brexit has thrown this into sharp relief since British people do not seem to want to do this anymore and many of the workers are from the EU (reports have suggested they are not always well treated). Wherever the production is done the process at the moment creates some employment. At least one of the companies involved recognises this and is determined its products will not put people out of work although how they can do this is unclear to me. The future of agriculture has another vision that I saw on the TV news tonight. That is rewilding. The vision is non intensive agriculture with the land turned over to free foraging cattle, pigs and tourism. Unlike the vision above its a high employment vision with the farmer talking about the farm now having 1870's levels of employment. Its a reasonably low energy vision. The problem is this is not about feeding the world. There you have it two different futures. Diametrically opposed. Neil

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