

The feeling of the age: A quantitative analysis of the correlation between novelistic and economic sentiment

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September 9, 2019

Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between quantified sentiments of award-winning novels and economic short and long-run sentiments. In an era where the value of literature is increasingly questioned in favor of quantifiable data, we use quantitative methods to demonstrate the importance of literary material for the understanding of the social world. In particular, we show that novels contain much useful insight for the analysis of the economic conditions of society at a particular time.

We conduct a sentiment analysis of prize-winning novels of the Pulitzer, National Book Award, PEN Faulkner, PEN Hemingway and Book Critics Circle awards from the years 1948-2018. We assign the novels quantitative sentiment scores, and correlate these data with expressions of economic sentiment such as financial market data and structural macroeconomic indicators. We hypothesize that while novels may not function as predictors of economic developments in the short run due to the time it takes to write and publish them, they do become valuable descriptors of the structural conditions of the economy at a particular time, as well as of medium-run optimism/pessimism regarding the economy.

Our project contributes to American studies in two important ways. First, we foster a new methodology for the study of the post-45 period by pairing quantitative textual analysis with economic analysis of statistical time series, adding an explicitly econometric dimension to the study of literary and cultural history. Second, this new approach allows us to gain insight into the broader contribution of novels to social and economic developments. Because we find that novels capture valuable information on the economic zeitgeist of an era, we conclude that literary analysis should be part of any serious attempt to understand social developments in the post-45 United States. To our knowledge, our project is the first to demonstrate using quantitative methods the usefulness of qualitative literary analysis.