TORSION OBSTRUCTIONS FOR CLOSED MANIFOLDS WITH RATIONALLY ACYCLIC UNIVERSAL COVERS

Abstract. We prove a purely topological obstruction to torsion in fundamental groups: if M^n is a closed connected topological manifold and its universal cover $\widetilde{M}$ is acyclic over $\mathbb{Q}$, then $\pi_1(M)$ is torsion-free. In particular, a uniform lattice in a real semisimple Lie group that contains 2-torsion cannot be isomorphic to the fundamental group of any closed manifold whose universal cover is $\mathbb{Q}$-acyclic. The argument uses Poincaré duality with compact supports to compute $H_c^*(\widetilde{M};\mathbb{Q})$ and a Lefschetz fixed point theorem for proper maps on locally compact ENRs (in particular, manifolds) to rule out fixed-point-free finite-order deck transformations.

Contents

2020 *Mathematics Subject Classification.* 57N65, 55N91, 20F65.

Key words and phrases. compactly supported cohomology, Poincaré duality, Lefschetz number, torsion, lattices.

1. Introduction

Let G be a real semisimple Lie group and let $\Gamma < G$ be a *uniform lattice*, i.e. a discrete subgroup such that G/Γ is compact. If Γ has torsion, then G/Γ is a compact orbifold rather than a manifold. This motivates the following problem.

Problem. *Suppose that Γ is a uniform lattice in a real semisimple Lie group, and that Γ contains some 2-torsion. Is it possible for Γ to be the fundamental group of a compact manifold without boundary whose universal cover is acyclic over $\mathbb{Q}$?*

We answer this in the negative, and in fact show that the lattice hypothesis is unnecessary: *any* fundamental group of a closed manifold with $\mathbb{Q}$-acyclic universal cover must be torsion-free.

Definition 1.1 (k-acyclicity)**.** Let k be a field. A space X is *k-acyclic* if $\widetilde{H}_i(X;k) = 0$ for all $i \geq 0$, equivalently $H_0(X;k) \cong k$ and $H_i(X;k) = 0$ for all $i > 0$.

Theorem 1.2. *Let M^n be a compact connected topological manifold without boundary and let $X = \widetilde{M}$ be its universal cover with deck group $\pi_1(M)$. If X is $\mathbb{Q}$-acyclic, then $\pi_1(M)$ is torsion-free.*

Corollary 1.3. *Let Γ be a uniform lattice in a real semisimple Lie group. If Γ contains an element of order 2 (indeed, any nontrivial torsion), then Γ is not isomorphic to the fundamental group of any closed manifold whose universal cover is $\mathbb{Q}$-acyclic.*

Remark 1.4. The proof of Theorem 1.2 works verbatim over any field k in place of $\mathbb{Q}$; see Remark 7.1.

Conventions. All manifolds are Hausdorff, second countable, and without boundary unless explicitly stated otherwise. Cohomology is singular cohomology unless specified. Throughout, coefficients are in a fixed field k (specialized to $k = \mathbb{Q}$ in the main statements). All group actions are by homeomorphisms.

2. Compactly supported cohomology

We recall the compactly supported cohomology of a locally compact Hausdorff space.

Definition 2.1 (Compactly supported cohomology)**.** Let X be locally compact Hausdorff and k a field. Define

$$H^i_c(X;k) \ := \ \varinjlim_{K \subseteq X \text{ compact}} H^i\big(X,\, X \setminus K;\, k\big),$$

where the direct limit is taken over compact subsets ordered by inclusion using the maps induced by inclusions of pairs $(X, X \setminus K) \hookrightarrow (X, X \setminus K')$ for $K \subseteq K'$.

Lemma 2.2 (Functoriality for proper maps)**.** *If $f : X \to Y$ is a proper continuous map between locally compact Hausdorff spaces, then pullback on relative cohomology induces natural maps*

$$f^* : H^i_c(Y;k) \to H^i_c(X;k) \qquad \textit{for all } i \geq 0.$$

Proof. For each compact $K \subseteq Y$, properness implies $f^{-1}(K) \subseteq X$ is compact, and f restricts to a map of pairs

$$f : (X,\, X \setminus f^{-1}(K)) \longrightarrow (Y,\, Y \setminus K).$$

Thus we obtain pullback maps $H^i(Y, Y \setminus K; k) \to H^i(X, X \setminus f^{-1}(K); k)$ compatible with the directed system in K. Passing to the direct limit gives $f^* : H^i_c(Y; k) \to H^i_c(X; k)$. ☐

Definition 2.3 (Compactly supported Euler characteristic)**.** Assume $H^i_c(X; k)$ is finite-dimensional for all i and $H^i_c(X; k) = 0$ for $i \gg 0$. Then the *compactly supported Euler characteristic* is

$$\chi_c(X; k) := \sum_{i \geq 0} (-1)^i \dim_k H^i_c(X; k) \in \mathbb{Z}.$$

When coefficients are clear, we write $\chi_c(X)$.

3. Duality with compact supports

3.1. Orientability of simply connected manifolds.

Lemma 3.1. *If X is a connected simply connected topological manifold, then X is orientable.*

Proof. The orientation local system of a manifold is classified by the homomorphism $\pi_1(X) \to \{\pm 1\}$ recording whether loops preserve or reverse local orientation. If $\pi_1(X) = 0$, this homomorphism is trivial, hence the local system is constant, i.e. X is orientable. ☐

3.2. **Poincaré duality with compact supports.** We use the standard duality isomorphism for oriented noncompact manifolds. A convenient reference is Hatcher's *Algebraic Topology*, Theorem 3.35, which gives duality with compact supports for R-oriented manifolds for any commutative ring R (and hence for fields).

Theorem 3.2 (Poincaré duality with compact supports)**.** *Let X be an oriented n-manifold without boundary and let k be a field. Then cap product with the (Borel–Moore) fundamental class induces natural isomorphisms*

$$H^i_c(X; k) \;\cong\; H_{n-i}(X; k) \qquad \text{for all } i \geq 0.$$

Remark 3.3. For non-orientable X, the same statement holds with coefficients twisted by the orientation local system. In this paper we apply Theorem 3.2 only to simply connected manifolds, which are orientable by Lemma 3.1.

4. The compactly supported cohomology of a k-acyclic universal cover

Let M^n be a compact connected n-manifold and let $X = \widetilde{M}$ be its universal cover.

Lemma 4.1 (Noncompactness). *Assume $n \geq 1$ and X is k-acyclic for a field k. Then X is noncompact (equivalently, $\pi_1(M)$ is infinite).*

Proof. If $\pi_1(M)$ were finite, then $X \to M$ would be a finite-sheeted covering, hence X would be compact. Being simply connected, X is orientable by Lemma 3.1. For a compact connected orientable n-manifold, $H_n(X;k) \cong k \neq 0$. This contradicts k-acyclicity when $n \geq 1$. $\square$

Proposition 4.2. *Let M^n be a compact connected n-manifold without boundary and let $X = \widetilde{M}$. If X is k-acyclic for a field k, then*

$$H^i_c(X;k) \;\cong\; \begin{cases} k, & i = n, \\ 0, & i \neq n, \end{cases} \qquad \textit{and hence} \qquad \chi_c(X;k) = (-1)^n \in \{\pm 1\}.$$

Proof. The universal cover X is a connected simply connected n-manifold, hence orientable by Lemma 3.1. By Poincaré duality with compact supports (Theorem 3.2),

$$H^i_c(X;k) \cong H_{n-i}(X;k).$$

Since X is k-acyclic, $H_{n-i}(X;k) = 0$ for $n - i > 0$, i.e. for $i < n$, and $H_0(X;k) \cong k$ gives $H^n_c(X;k) \cong k$. Also $H^i_c(X;k) = 0$ for $i > n$ because $H_{n-i}(X;k) = 0$ for negative degrees. The Euler characteristic formula follows. $\square$

5. A Lefschetz vanishing principle for proper maps

Let X be a locally compact Hausdorff space such that each $H^i_c(X;k)$ is finite-dimensional and $H^i_c(X;k) = 0$ for $i \gg 0$. For a proper map $f : X \to X$ we define the *compactly supported Lefschetz number*

$$L_c(f;X) := \sum_{i \geq 0} (-1)^i \operatorname{tr}\big(f^* : H^i_c(X;k) \to H^i_c(X;k)\big) \in k.$$

Remark 5.1. Every topological manifold is a locally compact separable metric ANR (hence an ENR), so the standard fixed point index theory on ENRs applies to manifolds. References include Borsuk's *Theory of Retracts* and modern treatments in fixed point theory; for our application we only require the vanishing implication in Theorem 5.2.

Theorem 5.2 (Proper Lefschetz fixed point theorem: vanishing direction). *Let X be a locally compact ENR (in particular, a topological manifold) and let $f : X \to X$ be a proper continuous map. Assume that* $\operatorname{Fix}(f)$ *is compact and that $H^i_c(X;k)$ is finite-dimensional for all i and vanishes for $i \gg 0$. Then $L_c(f;X)$ agrees with the fixed point index of f (defined for ENRs), and in particular:*

$$\operatorname{Fix}(f) = \varnothing \quad \Longrightarrow \quad L_c(f;X) = 0.$$

Remark 5.3. A full treatment proceeds via the fixed point index for ENRs and its identification with a Lefschetz number. Foundational sources include Dold's construction of the fixed point index for ENRs [2] and the development of local/global indices and Lefschetz formulas (e.g. Thompson [4] and Brown's monograph [1]).

The passage to noncompact spaces is handled by working with compactly supported (or "compact carrier") (co)homology and by using the fact that $\mathrm{Fix}(f)$ is compact, so the index is defined and localized. We use only the displayed implication, which is the formal vanishing property of the index when no fixed points are present.

6. Torsion-freeness of π_1 and the lattice corollary

6.1. Deck transformations are fixed-point-free.

Lemma 6.1. *Let $p : X \to M$ be a covering map. If $\varphi : X \to X$ is a deck transformation and $\varphi(x) = x$ for some $x \in X$, then $\varphi = \mathrm{id}_X$. In particular, the deck group acts freely.*

Proof. Since φ is a deck transformation, $p \circ \varphi = p$. Both φ and id_X are lifts of p through p that agree at x. By uniqueness of lifts, $\varphi = \mathrm{id}_X$. □

6.2. Main theorem.

Proof of Theorem 1.2. If $n = 0$, then M is a point and $\pi_1(M) = 1$ is torsion-free. Assume henceforth $n \geq 1$.

Let $X = \widetilde{M}$ and $\Gamma = \pi_1(M)$ act on X by deck transformations. By Lemma 6.1, this action is free.

By Proposition 4.2 (with $k = \mathbb{Q}$), we have $H^i_c(X;\mathbb{Q}) = 0$ for $i \neq n$ and $H^n_c(X;\mathbb{Q}) \cong \mathbb{Q}$, hence $L_c(f;X) = (-1)^n \operatorname{tr}(f^*|H^n_c(X;\mathbb{Q}))$ for any proper self-map f of X.

Assume for contradiction that Γ contains an element g of finite order $m > 1$. Then g acts on X by a deck transformation, hence by a homeomorphism. Homeomorphisms of locally compact Hausdorff spaces are proper, so $g : X \to X$ is proper. Since the action is free, $\mathrm{Fix}(g) = \varnothing$.

By Theorem 5.2, $\mathrm{Fix}(g) = \varnothing$ implies $L_c(g;X) = 0$.

On the other hand, since $H^n_c(X;\mathbb{Q})$ is 1-dimensional over $\mathbb{Q}$, the linear map $g^* : H^n_c(X;\mathbb{Q}) \to H^n_c(X;\mathbb{Q})$ is multiplication by some $\lambda \in \mathbb{Q}^\times$; and because $g^m = \mathrm{id}$ we have $(g^*)^m = \mathrm{id}$, hence $\lambda^m = 1$. The only roots of unity in $\mathbb{Q}$ are ± 1, so $\lambda = \pm 1$. Therefore

$$L_c(g;X) = (-1)^n \operatorname{tr}(g^*|H^n_c(X;\mathbb{Q})) = (-1)^n \lambda \in \{\pm 1\} \neq 0,$$

a contradiction. Hence Γ has no nontrivial torsion. □

Proof of Corollary 1.3. If $\Gamma \cong \pi_1(M)$ for a closed manifold M with $\mathbb{Q}$-acyclic universal cover, then Γ would be torsion-free by Theorem 1.2. This contradicts the hypothesis that Γ contains an element of order 2. □

7. Variants and additional structure

Remark 7.1 (Fields other than $\mathbb{Q}$). The argument above works over any field k. Indeed, if $\widetilde{M}$ is k-acyclic then Proposition 4.2 gives $H^n_c(\widetilde{M};k) \cong k$, and for a finite-order element g the induced map on this one-dimensional vector space is multiplication by $\lambda \in k^\times$ satisfying $\lambda^m = 1$, hence $\lambda \neq 0$. The Lefschetz number is $(-1)^n\lambda \neq 0$, contradicting Theorem 5.2. Thus $\pi_1(M)$ is torsion-free for any field coefficients.

Remark 7.2 (An Euler characteristic proof). One may alternatively combine Proposition 4.2 with multiplicativity of χ_c under finite free group actions (Appendix A) to show that if a finite group G acts freely on $X = \widetilde{M}$, then $|G|$ divides $\chi_c(X) = \pm 1$, forcing $G = 1$.

Appendix A. Transfer, invariants, and multiplicativity of χ_c

This appendix records a standard transfer formalism for compactly supported cohomology and derives multiplicativity of χ_c for finite free quotients. While not needed for the main argument, it provides a second proof strategy and makes explicit the constructions sometimes left implicit.

A.1. **Deck transformations act freely.** Lemma 6.1 already provides the freeness of deck actions; we will also use that a finite free action on a manifold yields a manifold quotient.

Lemma A.1. *Let a finite group G act freely on a topological manifold X by homeomorphisms. Then the quotient $Y := X/G$ is a topological manifold and the quotient map $p : X \to Y$ is a regular covering with deck group G.*

Proof. Fix $x \in X$. Choose a coordinate chart $U \cong \mathbb{R}^n$ about x. Since the action is free and G is finite, after shrinking U we may assume the translates $\{gU\}_{g\in G}$ are pairwise disjoint. Then $p|_U : U \to p(U)$ is a homeomorphism and $p^{-1}(p(U)) = \bigsqcup_{g\in G} gU$, giving the usual local trivialization of a covering. The charts on Y are inherited from these evenly covered neighborhoods. □

A.2. **Transfer for compactly supported cohomology.** Let $p : X \to Y$ be a finite covering of degree m between locally compact Hausdorff spaces. Since p is proper, $p^* : H^i_c(Y; k) \to H^i_c(X; k)$ is defined by Lemma 2.2.

Lemma A.2 (Transfer). *For a finite covering $p : X \to Y$ of degree m, there exists a natural transfer map*

$$\mathrm{tr} : H^i_c(X; k) \to H^i_c(Y; k)$$

such that $\mathrm{tr} \circ p^* = m \cdot \mathrm{id}$ *for all i.*

Proof. Fix a compact $K \subseteq Y$. Then $p^{-1}(K) \subseteq X$ is compact. The restriction $p : (X, X \setminus p^{-1}(K)) \to (Y, Y \setminus K)$ is a finite covering of pairs. Define a map on singular cochains representing the classical transfer on relative cohomology by summing, for each relative singular simplex in Y, the pullbacks along its m distinct lifts to X over an evenly covered neighborhood. This yields a homomorphism

$$\mathrm{tr}_K : H^i(X, X \setminus p^{-1}(K); k) \to H^i(Y, Y \setminus K; k)$$

satisfying $\mathrm{tr}_K \circ p^* = m \cdot \mathrm{id}$. These transfers are compatible as K increases, hence pass to the direct limit defining $H^i_c(-; k)$ and give $\mathrm{tr} : H^i_c(X; k) \to H^i_c(Y; k)$ with the stated property. □

Lemma A.3. *If $p : X \to Y$ is a regular finite cover with deck group G of order m, then on $H^i_c(X;k)$ one has*

$$p^* \circ \mathrm{tr} \;=\; \sum_{g\in G} g^*.$$

Proof. This is checked on the cochain-level definition of the transfer: transferring amounts to summing over sheets of the covering, while pulling back then sums the translates by all deck transformations. Passing to cohomology yields the identity. $\square$

Proposition A.4. *Let $p : X \to Y$ be a regular finite cover with deck group G of order m. Assume each $H^i_c(X;k)$ is finite-dimensional. Then for all i,*

$$p^* : H^i_c(Y;k) \xrightarrow{\;\cong\;} H^i_c(X;k)^G$$

is an isomorphism onto the G-invariant subspace.

Proof. By Lemma A.2, p^* is injective. It lands in invariants since $p \circ g = p$ for all $g \in G$.

Conversely, if $v \in H^i_c(X;k)^G$, then by Lemma A.3,

$$p^*\Big(\frac{1}{m}\,\mathrm{tr}(v)\Big) = \frac{1}{m}\sum_{g\in G} g^*v = \frac{1}{m}\sum_{g\in G} v = v,$$

so v lies in the image. $\square$

A.3. **Multiplicativity of χ_c under finite free quotients.**

Proposition A.5 (Multiplicativity)**.** *Let X be a manifold such that $H^i_c(X;k)$ is finite-dimensional for all i and vanishes for $i \gg 0$. Suppose a finite group G acts freely on X by homeomorphisms, and set $Y := X/G$. Then*

$$\chi_c(X;k) = |G| \cdot \chi_c(Y;k).$$

Proof. By Lemma A.1, the quotient map $p : X \to Y$ is a regular covering with deck group G, $m := |G|$. For each i, Proposition A.4 gives $H^i_c(Y;k) \cong H^i_c(X;k)^G$.

Let $V^i := H^i_c(X;k)$ and let $P^i := \frac{1}{m}\sum_{g\in G} g^* \in \mathrm{End}(V^i)$ be the averaging projector. Since V^i is finite-dimensional, $\mathrm{tr}(P^i) = \dim_k(V^i)^G$. Therefore,

$$\chi_c(Y;k) = \sum_i (-1)^i \dim_k(V^i)^G = \sum_i (-1)^i\,\mathrm{tr}(P^i) = \frac{1}{m}\sum_{g\in G}\sum_i (-1)^i\,\mathrm{tr}(g^*|V^i) = \frac{1}{m}\sum_{g\in G} L_c(g;X).$$

For $g = \mathrm{id}$, $L_c(g;X) = \chi_c(X;k)$. For $g \neq \mathrm{id}$, the action is free so $\mathrm{Fix}(g) = \varnothing$. Since g is a homeomorphism it is proper, and Theorem 5.2 gives $L_c(g;X) = 0$. Hence $\chi_c(Y;k) = \chi_c(X;k)/m$. $\square$

References

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