

**Zeitschrift:** L'Enseignement Mathématique  
**Herausgeber:** Commission Internationale de l'Enseignement Mathématique  
**Band:** 47 (2001)  
**Heft:** 3-4: L'ENSEIGNEMENT MATHÉMATIQUE

**Artikel:** GROUPS ACTING ON THE CIRCLE  
**Autor:** GHYS, Étienne  
**Kapitel:** 7.1 WITTE'S THEOREM  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-65441>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 03.02.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

in  $\Gamma$ . Otherwise, we say that  $\Gamma$  is *irreducible*. Note that lattices in simple Lie groups are obviously irreducible.

The first example of a lattice is  $SL(n, \mathbf{Z})$  in  $SL(n, \mathbf{R})$ : the corresponding quotient has finite volume (but is not compact).

Another example to keep in mind is the following. Consider the field  $\mathbf{Q}(\sqrt{2})$  and its ring of integers  $\mathcal{O} = \mathbf{Z}[\sqrt{2}]$ . The field  $\mathbf{Q}(\sqrt{2})$  has two embeddings in  $\mathbf{R}$  given by  $a + b\sqrt{2} \in \mathbf{Q}(\sqrt{2}) \mapsto a \pm b\sqrt{2} \in \mathbf{R}$ . This gives two embeddings of the group  $SL(2, \mathcal{O})$  in  $SL(2, \mathbf{R})$ . The images of these embeddings are dense but the embedding of  $SL(2, \mathcal{O})$  in  $SL(2, \mathbf{R}) \times SL(2, \mathbf{R})$  has a discrete image which is an irreducible lattice in  $SL(2, \mathbf{R}) \times SL(2, \mathbf{R})$  (whose real rank is 2). Of course, we can construct many more examples using this kind of arithmetic construction: Borel showed for instance that any semi-simple Lie group (with no compact factor) contains at least an irreducible lattice (and even a cocompact one).

Note also that if a compact oriented manifold  $M$  of dimension  $n$  admits a metric with constant negative curvature, its universal cover is identified with the hyperbolic space  $H^n$  of dimension  $n$ . It follows that the fundamental group  $\Gamma$  of  $M$  is a discrete cocompact subgroup of the group of positive isometries of  $H^n$  which is the simple Lie group  $SO_0(n, 1)$ . These examples provide lattices in real rank 1 simple Lie groups.

For the theory of lattices in Lie groups, we refer to [48, 72].

## 7.1 WITTE'S THEOREM

In [70], Witte proves the following remarkable theorem:

**THEOREM 7.1 (Witte).** *Let  $\Gamma$  be a finite index subgroup of  $SL(n, \mathbf{Z})$  for  $n \geq 3$ . Then any homomorphism  $\phi: \Gamma \rightarrow \text{Homeo}_+(\mathbf{S}^1)$  has a finite image.*

The proof will be derived from the following

**THEOREM 7.2 (Witte).** *A finite index subgroup of  $SL(n, \mathbf{Z})$  for  $n \geq 3$  is not left orderable.*

*Proof.* It suffices to prove it for a finite index subgroup  $\Gamma$  of  $SL(3, \mathbf{Z})$  since a subgroup of a left ordered group is of course left ordered. Suppose by contradiction that there is a left invariant total order  $\preceq$  on  $\Gamma$ . Choose some integer  $k \geq 1$  so that the following six elementary matrices belong to  $\Gamma$ :

$$a_1 = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & k & 0 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}, \quad a_2 = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 & k \\ 0 & 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}, \quad a_3 = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 & k \\ 0 & 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix},$$

$$a_4 = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 & 0 \\ k & 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}, \quad a_5 = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 \\ k & 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}, \quad a_6 = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 \\ 0 & k & 1 \end{pmatrix}.$$

It is easy to check the following relations between these matrices. Taking indices modulo 6, for every  $i$  the matrices  $a_i$  and  $a_{i+1}$  commute and the commutator of  $a_{i-1}$  and  $a_{i+1}$  is  $a_i^{\pm k}$ . Fix some  $i$  and let us analyze the structure of  $\preceq$  on the group  $H_i$  generated by  $a_{i-1}, a_i, a_{i+1}$ . Allowing ourselves to replace  $a_{i-1}$  or  $a_{i+1}$  by their inverses and to permute them, we can define three elements  $\alpha, \beta, \gamma$  such that  $\{\alpha, \beta\} = \{a_{i-1}^{\pm 1}, a_{i+1}^{\pm 1}\}$  and  $\gamma = a_i^{\pm k}$  and such that the following conditions are satisfied:

$$\alpha\gamma = \gamma\alpha \quad ; \quad \beta\gamma = \gamma\beta \quad ; \quad \alpha\beta\alpha^{-1}\beta^{-1} = \gamma^{-1}$$

$$1 \prec \alpha \quad ; \quad 1 \prec \beta \quad ; \quad 1 \prec \gamma$$

(1 denotes the identity element). If  $\xi$  is an element of  $\Gamma$ , we set  $|\xi| = \xi$  if  $1 \preceq \xi$  and  $\xi^{-1}$  otherwise. If two elements  $\xi, \zeta$  in  $\Gamma$  are such that  $1 \prec \xi$  and  $1 \prec \zeta$ , we write  $\xi \ll \zeta$  if for every integer  $n \geq 1$ , we have  $\xi^n \prec \zeta$ . We claim that  $\gamma \ll \alpha$  or  $\gamma \ll \beta$  (which implies that  $|a_i| \ll |a_{i-1}|$  or  $|a_i| \ll |a_{i+1}|$ ). Indeed, suppose that there is some integer  $n \geq 1$  such that  $\alpha \prec \gamma^n$  and  $\beta \prec \gamma^n$  and let us compute

$$\delta_m = \alpha^m \beta^m (\alpha^{-1} \gamma^n)^m (\beta^{-1} \gamma^n)^m.$$

Since  $\delta_m$  is a product of elements in  $\Gamma$  which are bigger than 1, we have  $1 \prec \delta_m$ . Now the product defining  $\delta_m$  can easily be estimated since we know that  $\gamma$  commutes with  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  and that interchanging the order of an  $\alpha$  and a  $\beta$  is compensated by the introduction of a  $\gamma$ . We find

$$\delta_m = \gamma^{-m^2+2mn}.$$

Since  $1 \prec \gamma$ , we know that  $\gamma$  to a negative power is less than 1. For  $m$  big enough, we get  $\delta_m \prec 1$ . This is a contradiction.

Coming back to our six matrices  $a_i$ , we find that  $|a_i| \ll |a_{i-1}|$  or  $|a_i| \ll |a_{i+1}|$ . If we assume for instance  $|a_1| \ll |a_2|$ , we therefore deduce cyclically  $|a_1| \ll |a_2| \ll |a_3| \ll |a_4| \ll |a_5| \ll |a_6| \ll |a_1|$ , and this is a contradiction.  $\square$

Let us now prove Theorem 7.1 using similar ideas. Of course, Theorem 7.2 means that a finite index subgroup of  $\mathrm{SL}(n, \mathbf{Z})$  for  $n \geq 3$  does not act faithfully on the line (by orientation preserving homeomorphisms).

Consider first a torsion free finite index subgroup  $\Gamma$  of  $SL(3, \mathbf{Z})$  and suppose by contradiction that there is an action  $\phi: \Gamma \rightarrow \text{Homeo}_+(\mathbf{S}^1)$  with infinite image. According to an important theorem, due to Margulis, every normal subgroup of a lattice in a simple Lie group of rank at least 2 is either of finite index or is finite (see [48, 64]). It follows that the action  $\phi$  is faithful.

As in the proof of Theorem 7.2, choose an integer  $k$  such that the matrices  $(a_i)_{i=1\dots 6}$  are in  $\Gamma$ . Note that the group  $H_i$  generated by  $a_{i-1}, a_i, a_{i+1}$  is nilpotent, hence amenable, so that the rotation number is a homomorphism when restricted to  $H_i$ . Since  $a_i^{\pm k}$  is a commutator, it follows that the rotation numbers of all  $\phi(a_i)$  vanish. Define  $A_i$  as being the unique lift of  $\phi(a_i)$  whose translation number is 0. We claim that the elements  $A_i$  of  $\widetilde{\text{Homeo}}_+(\mathbf{S}^1)$  also satisfy the relations that for every  $i$  the homeomorphisms  $A_i$  and  $A_{i+1}$  commute and the commutator of  $A_{i-1}$  and  $A_{i+1}$  is  $A_i^{\pm k}$ . Indeed  $A_i A_{i+1} A_i^{-1} A_{i+1}^{-1}$  and  $A_{i+1} A_{i-1} A_{i+1}^{-1} A_{i-1}^{-1} A_i^{\mp k}$  project on the identity and have translation number 0 since the inverse image of  $H_i$  in  $\widetilde{\text{Homeo}}_+(\mathbf{S}^1)$  is nilpotent and the restriction of  $\tau$  to this group is a homomorphism. Consider now the (left ordered) group of homeomorphisms of the line generated by the  $A_i$ . We can reproduce exactly the same argument that we used in Theorem 7.2 to get a contradiction.

Consider finally the general case of an action  $\phi: \Gamma \rightarrow \text{Homeo}_+(\mathbf{S}^1)$  of a finite index subgroup of  $SL(n, \mathbf{Z})$  ( $n \geq 3$ ). Replacing  $\Gamma$  by a finite index subgroup, we can assume that  $\Gamma$  is torsion free. Of course,  $SL(3, \mathbf{Z})$  is the subgroup of  $SL(n, \mathbf{Z})$  consisting of matrices preserving  $\mathbf{Z}^3 \simeq \mathbf{Z}^3 \times \{0\} \subset \mathbf{Z}^n$  and  $\Gamma$  intersects  $SL(3, \mathbf{Z})$  on a subgroup of finite index in  $SL(3, \mathbf{Z})$ . Since we have already dealt with the case  $n = 3$ , the kernel of  $\phi$  contains a subgroup of finite index in the infinite group  $\Gamma \cap SL(3, \mathbf{Z})$ . By the theorem of Margulis that we mentioned, the kernel of  $\phi$  is a subgroup of finite index in  $\Gamma$  so that the image of  $\phi$  is a finite group. Theorem 7.1 is proved.

It turns out that the arguments used in this proof can be extended to a family of lattices more general than finite index subgroups of  $SL(n, \mathbf{Z})$  for  $n \geq 3$ . The general situation in which Witte proves his theorem is for *arithmetic* lattices in algebraic semi-simple groups of  $\mathbf{Q}$ -rank at least 2. We will not define this concept and refer to the original article by Witte. Note however that the method of proof cannot be generalized to an arbitrary lattice since it uses strongly the existence of nilpotent subgroups (which don't exist for example if the lattice is cocompact). However, this strongly suggests the following:

**PROBLEM 7.3.** *Is it true that no lattice in a simple Lie group of real rank at least 2 is left orderable?*