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GROUP COHOMOLOGY AND ALGEBRAIC CYCLES

BURT TOTARO

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32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107015777

First published 2014

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Totaro, Burt.
Group cohomology and algebraic cycles / Burt Totaro, University of California, Los Angeles.
pages cm. – (Cambridge tracts in mathematics)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-107-01577-7 (hardback : alk. paper)
1. Homology theory. 2. Algebra. I. Title.
QA612.3.T68 2014
512′.64–dc23 2014002457

ISBN 978-1-107-01577-7 Hardback

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General Editors

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for Susie

Preface

Group cohomology reveals a deep relation between algebra and topology. A group determines a topological space in a natural way, its classifying space. The cohomology ring of a group is defined to be the cohomology ring of its classifying space. The challenges are to understand how the algebraic properties of a group are related to its cohomology ring, and to compute the cohomology rings of particular groups.

A fundamental fact is that the cohomology ring of any finite group is finitely generated. So there is some finite description of the whole cohomology ring of a finite group, but it is not clear how to find it. A central problem in group cohomology is to find an upper bound for the degrees of generators and relations for the cohomology ring. If we can do that, then there are algorithms to compute the cohomology in low degrees and therefore compute the whole cohomology ring.

Peter Symonds made a spectacular advance in 2010: for any finite group G with a faithful complex representation of dimension n at least 2 and any prime number p, the mod p cohomology ring of G is generated by elements of degree at most n^2 [130]. Not only is this the first known bound for generators of the cohomology ring; it is also nearly an optimal bound among arbitrary finite groups, as we will see.

This book proves Symonds's theorem (Corollary 4.3) and several new variants and improvements of it. Some involve algebro-geometric analogs of the cohomology ring. Namely, Morel-Voevodsky and I independently showed how to view the classifying space of an algebraic group G (e.g., a finite group) as a limit of algebraic varieties in a natural way. That allows the definition of the Chow ring of algebraic cycles on the classifying space BG [107, proposition 2.6]; [138]. A major goal of algebraic geometry is to compute the Chow ring for varieties of interest, since that says something meaningful about all subvarieties of the variety.

the analogous very strong bound for the cohomology ring of a finite group modulo transfers from proper subgroups, and we give a version of his argument (Corollary 10.3).

In examples, the Chow ring of a finite group G always turns out to be simpler than the cohomology ring, and it seems to be closely related to the complex representation theory of G. In that direction, I conjectured that the Chow ring of any finite group was generated by transfers of Euler classes (top Chern classes) of complex representations [138]. That was disproved by Guillot for a certain group of order 2^7, the extraspecial 2-group 2_+^{1+6} [62]. It would be good to find similar examples at odd primes. Nonetheless, the theorem on the Chow ring modulo transfers gives a class of p-groups for which the question has a positive answer. Namely, the Chow ring of a p-group with a faithful complex representation of dimension at most $p+2$ consists of transferred Euler classes (Theorem 11.1). This includes all 2-groups of order at most 32, and all p-groups of order at most p^4 with p odd.

We extend Symonds's theorem on the Castelnuovo-Mumford regularity of the cohomology ring to the Chow ring of the classifying space of a finite group (Theorem 6.5). We also bound the regularity of motivic cohomology (Theorem 6.10). It follows, for example, that all our bounds on generators for the Chow ring also lead to bounds on the relations. In each case, our upper bound for the degree of the relations is twice the bound for the degree of the generators. Another application is an identification of the motivic cohomology of a classifying space BG in high weights with the ordinary (or etale) cohomology. This statement goes beyond the range where motivic cohomology and etale cohomology are the same for arbitrary varieties, as described by the Beilinson-Lichtenbaum conjecture.

Let G be a finite group with a faithful complex representation of dimension n. Chapter 12 shows that the cohomology of G is determined by the cohomology of certain subgroups (centralizers of elementary abelian subgroups) in degrees less than $2n$. This was conjectured by Kuhn, who was continuing a powerful approach to group cohomology developed by Henn, Lannes, and Schwartz [86, 69]. We also prove an analogous result for the Chow ring: the Chow ring of a finite group is determined by the cohomology of centralizers of elementary abelian subgroups in degrees less than n. This is a strong computational tool, in a slightly different direction from the bounds for degrees of generators. The proof is inspired by Kuhn's ideas on group cohomology.

For a finite group G, Henn, Lannes, and Schwartz found that much of the complexity of the cohomology ring of G is described by one number, the "topological nilpotence degree" d_0 of the cohomology ring. This number is defined in terms of the cohomology ring as a module over the Steenrod algebra, but it is also equal to the optimal bound for determining the cohomology of G in terms of the low-degree cohomology of centralizers of elementary abelian subgroups.

Section 13.5 gives the first calculations of the topological nilpotence degree d_0 for some small p-groups, such as the groups of order p^3. In these examples, d_0 turns out to be much smaller than known results would predict. Improved bounds for d_0 would be a powerful computational tool in group cohomology.

To understand the cohomology of finite groups, it is important to compute the cohomology of large classes of p-groups. The cohomology of particular finite groups such as the symmetric groups and the general linear groups over finite fields F (with coefficients in $\mathbf{F}_p$ for p invertible in F) were computed many years ago by Nakaoka and Quillen. The calculations were possible because the Sylow p-subgroups of these groups are very special (iterated wreath products). To test conjectures in group cohomology, it has been essential to make more systematic calculations for p-groups, such as Carlson's calculation of the cohomology of all 267 groups of order 2^6 [26, appendix]. More recently, Green and King computed the cohomology of all 2328 groups of order 2^7 and all 15 groups of order 3^4 or 5^4 [51, 52]. In that spirit, we begin the systematic calculation of Chow rings of p-groups. Chapter 13 computes the Chow rings of all 5 groups of order p^3 and all 14 groups of order 16. Chapter 14 computes the Chow ring for all 15 groups of order $3^4 = 81$, and for 13 of the 15 groups of order p^4 with $p \geq 5$. Most of the proofs use only Chow rings, but the hardest cases also use calculations of group cohomology by Leary and Yagita.

One tantalizing example for which the Chow ring is not yet known is the group G of strictly upper triangular matrices in $GL(4, \mathbf{F}_p)$, which has order p^6. The machinery in this book should at least make that calculation easier. For p odd, Kriz and Lee showed that the Morava K-theory $K(2)^*BG$ is not concentrated in even degrees, disproving a conjecture of Hopkins, Kuhn, and Ravenel [83, 84]. It seems to be unknown whether the complex cobordism of BG is concentrated in even degrees in this example. Until this is resolved, it remains a possibility that the Chow ring of BG may map isomorphically to the quotient $MU^*(BG) \otimes_{MU^*} \mathbf{Z}$ of complex cobordism for every complex algebraic group G (including finite groups), as conjectured in [138]. Yagita strengthened this conjecture to say that algebraic cobordism Ω^*BG should map isomorphically to the topologically defined MU^*BG for every complex algebraic group G [154, conjecture 12.2].

Chapter 15 gives examples of p-groups for any prime number p such that the geometric and topological filtrations on the complex representation ring are different. When $p = 2$, Yagita has also given such examples [156, corollary 5.7]. A representation of G determines a vector bundle on BG, and these two filtrations describe the "codimension of support" of a virtual representation in the algebro-geometric or the topological sense. Atiyah conjectured that the (algebraically defined) γ-filtration of the representation ring was equal to the topological filtration [6], but that was disproved by Weiss, Thomas, and (for p-groups) Leary and Yagita [93]. Since the geometric filtration lies between the

γ and topological filtrations, the statement that the geometric and topological filtrations can be different is stronger. The examples use Vistoli's calculation of the Chow ring of the classifying space of $PGL(p)$ for prime numbers p [143].

Chapter 16 constructs an Eilenberg-Moore spectral sequence in motivic cohomology for schemes with an action of a split reductive group. The spectral sequence was defined by Krishna with rational coefficients [82, theorem 1.1]. We give an integral result, as far as possible. The Eilenberg-Moore spectral sequence in ordinary cohomology is a basic tool in homotopy theory. Given the cohomology of the base and total space of a fibration, the spectral sequence converges to the cohomology of a fiber. The reason for including the motivic Eilenberg-Moore spectral sequence in this book is to clarify the relation between the classifying space of an algebraic group and its finite-dimensional approximations.

Finally, Chapter 17 considers the Chow Künneth conjecture: for a finite group G and a field k containing enough roots of unity, the natural map $CH^*BG_k \otimes_{\mathbf{Z}} CH^*X \to CH^*(BG_k \times X)$ should be an isomorphism for all smooth schemes X over k. This would in particular imply that the Chow ring of BG_K is the same for all field extensions K of k. Although there is no clear reason to believe the conjecture, we prove some partial results for arbitrary groups, and prove the second version of the conjecture completely for p-groups with a faithful representation of dimension at most $p+2$. Chapter 18 is a short list of open problems. The Appendix tabulates several invariants of the Chow rings of p-groups of order at most p^4.

I thank Ben Antieau and Peter Symonds for many valuable suggestions.

Contents

1

Group Cohomology

This chapter gives the topological and algebraic definitions of group cohomology. We also define equivariant cohomology.

Although we give the basic definitions, a beginner may have to refer to other sources. Brown [24] is an excellent introduction to group cohomology. Group cohomology is also treated in general texts on homological algebra such as Weibel [149]. Some of the main advanced books on the cohomology of finite groups are Adem-Milgram [1], Benson [12], and Carlson [26].

Group cohomology unified many earlier ideas in algebra and topology. It was defined in 1943–1945 by Eilenberg and MacLane, Hopf and Eckmann, and Freudenthal.

1.1 Definition of group cohomology

Group cohomology arises from the fact that any group determines a topological space, as follows. Let G be a topological group. The special case where G is a discrete group is a rich subject in itself. Say that G acts *freely* on a space X if the map $G \times X \to X \times X$, $(g, x) \mapsto (x, gx)$, is a homeomorphism from $G \times X$ onto its image. By Serre, if a Lie group G acts freely on a metrizable topological space X, then the map $X \to X/G$ is a principal G-bundle, meaning that it is locally a product $U \times G \to U$ [109, section 4.1].

There is always a contractible space EG on which G acts freely. The *classifying space* of G is the quotient space of EG by the action of G, $BG = EG/G$. Any two classifying spaces for G that are paracompact are homotopy equivalent [72, definition 4.10.5, exercise 4.9]. If G is a discrete group, a classifying space of G can also be described as a connected space with fundamental group G whose universal cover is contractible, or as an Eilenberg-MacLane space $K(G, 1)$.

The cohomology of the classifying space of a topological group G is well-defined, because the classifying space is unique up to homotopy equivalence. In particular, for any commutative ring R, the cohomology $H^*(BG, R)$ is a graded-commutative R-algebra that depends only on G. For a discrete group G, we call $H^*(BG, R)$ the *cohomology of* G with coefficients in R; confusion should not arise with the cohomology of G as a topological space, which is uninteresting for G discrete. A fundamental challenge is to understand the relation between algebraic properties of a group and algebraic properties of its cohomology ring.

The cohomology of a group G manifestly says something about the cohomology of certain quotient spaces. More generally, for any space X on which G acts freely, there is a fibration

$$X \to (X \times EG)/G \to BG,$$

where the total space is homotopy equivalent to X/G. The resulting spectral sequence $H^*(BG, H^*X) \Rightarrow H^*(X/G)$, defined by Hochschild and Serre, shows that the cohomology of G gives information about the cohomology of any quotient space by G.

Another role of the classifying space of a group G is that it classifies principal G-bundles. By definition, a principal G-bundle over a space X is a space E with a free G-action such that $X = E/G$. The classifying space BG classifies principal G-bundles in the sense that for any CW-complex X, there is a one-to-one correspondence between isomorphism classes of principal G-bundles over X and homotopy classes of maps $X \to BG$. (Explicitly, we have a "universal" G-bundle $EG \to BG$, and a map $f : X \to BG$ defines a G-bundle over X by pulling back: let E be the fiber product $X \times_{BG} EG$.)

Therefore, computing the cohomology of the classifying space gives information about the classification of principal G-bundles over an arbitrary space. Namely, an element $u \in H^i(BG, R)$ gives a *characteristic class* for G-bundles: for any G-bundle E over a space X, we get an element $u(E) \in H^i(X, R)$, by pulling back u via the map $X \to BG$ corresponding to E.

A homomorphism $G \to H$ of topological groups determines a homotopy class of continuous maps $BG \to BH$. For example, we can view this as the obvious map $(EG \times EH)/G \to EH/H = BH$. As a result, given a commutative ring R, a homomorphism $G \to H$ determines a "pullback map" on group cohomology:

$$H^*(BH, R) \to H^*(BG, R)$$

Example The classifying space of the group $\mathbf{Z}/2$ can be viewed as the infinite real projective space $\mathbf{RP}^\infty = \cup_{n \geq 0} \mathbf{RP}^n$. Its cohomology with coefficients in the field $\mathbf{F}_2 = \mathbf{Z}/2$ is a polynomial ring,

$$H^*(B\mathbf{Z}/2, \mathbf{F}_2) = \mathbf{F}_2[x],$$