A comparison of the Wilson flow with cooling in $SU(3)$ pure gauge theory

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The Wilson flow has been introduced recently in order to provide a solid theoretical framework for the smoothing of ultraviolet noise in lattice gauge configurations. It is interesting to ask how it compares with other, more heuristic and numerically cheaper smoothing techniques, such as standard cooling. In this study we perform such a comparison, focusing on observables related to topology. We show that, already for moderately small lattice spacings, standard cooling and the Wilson flow lead to equivalent results, both for average quantities and configuration by configuration.

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I. INTRODUCTION

At present, the lattice formulation represents the best available tool for a gauge-invariant regularization [1] and a systematic non-perturbative numerical study of strong interactions, and of gauge theories more in general. Like for any regularized theory, one has to deal with unphysical fluctuations at the scale of the ultraviolet (UV) cutoff (which is set by the lattice spacing in the case of lattice gauge theories), which must be properly treated. During the years, various techniques have been developed in this sense. Where possible, proper prescriptions can be assigned for a perturbative or non-perturbative renormalization of physical quantities. Another widely used technique is instead to apply some kind of smoothing procedure, in order to damper the fluctuations at the UV scale, while hopefully leaving the physical content unchanged.

Typical examples of observables requiring renormalization are the topological charge (winding number) and, more generally, the observables related to topology, like the topological susceptibility. Contrary to its continuum counterpart, the lattice gluonic definition of the topological charge is affected by UV fluctuations: it gets multiplicatively renormalized [2] and does not take integer values. Further additive renormalizations, related to contact terms, appear when defining the topological susceptibility [3].

Apart from switching to a fermionic definition of topology, via the index theorem, various strategies have been developed during the years to successfully deal with such renormalizations, going from a direct computation and subtraction of them [4–10] to the application of smoothing methods to damper the UV fluctuations and recover an almost integer valued observable. In this respect cooling techniques [11], which proceed through a local minimization of the gluonic action, are particularly well suited, since the topological content of gauge configurations becomes quasi-stable against minimization as one approaches the continuum limit, i.e. as one recovers a proper definition of the gauge field topology.

In this context, the recent introduction of the Wilson flow (also known as gradient flow) represented an important advance [12–14]. The main difference with respect to previously used smoothers is that in this case the elimination of UV fluctuations is governed by a differential equation, thus achieving a better analytical control of the smoothing procedure.

An interesting and due question regards how the Wilson flow compares with other standard smoothing techniques. The present study is a step in the direction of clarifying this issue. In particular we will compare standard cooling and the Wilson flow, for the determination of topological observables, in the $SU(3)$ lattice gauge theories discretized with the Wilson action.

Such a question is of general interest, since standard smoothing techniques have been widely used in the literature during the years. But it is also of great practical interest. Indeed, as will clarify later, the application of the Wilson flow is much more computationally demanding than standard cooling. It is therefore compelling to understand what are the effective differences between the two methods, depending on the chosen observable.

The paper is organized as follows. In Section II we provide a brief description of the Wilson flow and of standard cooling, then comparing them in the limit of smooth fields. In Section III we first discuss the definition of a general setting for the comparison of the two methods; then we present our numerical results for topological quantities. Finally, in Section IV we discuss our results and draw our conclusions.

II. COOLING AND THE WILSON FLOW

In this section, for the benefit of the reader, we will recall the definitions of the Wilson flow and of the cooling procedure, and present the details of our implementation. We will limit ourselves to the case of the Wilson action for $SU(N)$ pure gauge theories [1], which is the one used in our simulations, but the generalization to different dis-
cretizations does not present significant modifications.

The Wilson action is written in terms of the product of the link variables \( U_\mu(x) \) along an elementary face (plaquette) of the lattice, \( U_\mu(x) \), in the form

\[
S = \frac{2N}{g_0^2} \sum_{x, \mu < \nu} \left( 1 - \frac{1}{N} \text{ReTr} U_{\mu \nu} \right),
\]

where \( N \) is the number of colors. It is convenient to introduce the staples as the (in general non unitary) matrices \( W_\mu(x) \), defined by

\[
W_\mu(x) = \sum_{\nu \geq 0, \nu \neq \mu} \left[ U_\nu(x) U_\mu(x + \hat{\nu}) U_\mu^\dagger(x + \hat{\mu}) + U_\mu^\dagger(x - \hat{\nu}) U_\mu(x - \hat{\nu}) U_\mu(x - \hat{\nu} + \hat{\mu}) \right];
\]

the part of the action involving a given link variable \( U_\mu(x) \) is then simply written as 

\[-(2/g_0^2) \text{ReTr} [U_\mu(x) W_\mu^\dagger(x)] \]. To avoid confusion, in the following expressions we will not make use of the implicit summation over repeated indices.

A. Wilson flow

The Wilson flow is defined (see [12, 13]) by the solution of the evolution equations

\[
\begin{align*}
\dot{V}_\mu(x, \tau) &= -g_0^2 \partial_{x, \mu} S(V(\tau)) V_\mu(x, \tau) \\
V_\mu(x, 0) &= U_\mu(x),
\end{align*}
\]

where the link derivatives are defined by

\[
\partial_{x, \mu} f(U) = i \sum_a T_a \frac{d}{ds} f(e^{isX^a} U) \bigg|_{s=0} = i \sum_a T_a \partial^{(a)}_{x, \mu} f(U),
\]

In this expression \( T_a \) are the (hermitian) \(^1\) generators of the \( SU(N) \) algebra, with the normalization \( \text{Tr}(T_a T_b) = \frac{1}{2} \delta_{ab} \), and

\[
X^a(y, \nu) = \begin{cases} T_a & \text{if } (y, \nu) = (x, \mu) \\ 0 & \text{else} \end{cases}.
\]

If we introduce the notation \( \Omega_\mu = U_\mu(x) W_\mu^\dagger(x) \) we have

\[
\partial^{(a)}_{x, \mu} S(U) = \frac{2}{g_0^2} \text{ImTr} [T^a \Omega_\mu],
\]

and \( \partial_{x, \mu} S(U) \) is given by

\[
g_0^2 \partial_{x, \mu} S(U) = 2 \sum_a T^a \text{ImTr} [T^a \Omega_\mu] = \frac{1}{2} (\Omega_\mu - \Omega_\mu^\dagger) - \frac{1}{2N} \text{Tr} (\Omega_\mu - \Omega_\mu^\dagger).\]

In practice, the Wilson flow moves the gauge configuration along the steepest descent direction in the configuration space, i.e. along the gradient of the action (hence the name of gradient flow); in particular, the chosen sign in the evolution equations leads to a minimization of the action. Indeed, from the definition Eq. 3 and the previous expressions it is simple to show that

\[
\frac{d}{d\tau} S(V(\tau)) = -g_0^2 \sum_{a, x, \mu \geq 0} [\partial^{(a)}_{x, \mu} S(V(\tau))]^2 \leq 0,
\]

thus \( S(V(\tau)) \) is a monotonically decreasing function of the flow time \( \tau \) and the “evolved” variables \( V_\mu(x, \tau) \) can be used as the smoothed version of the original link variable \( U_\mu(x) \). From the explicit expression, Eq. 7, we can also see that the Wilson flow is just the flow generated by the infinitesimal version of the isotropic stout smearing introduced in Ref. [14]. It is important to stress at this point that quantity \( \tau \), defined here and used in the following, is the flow time in dimensionless units.

The integration of the flow in Eq. 3 can be performed by using standard methods for ordinary differential equations, in particular we adopted the third order Runge-Kutta scheme described in appendix C of Ref. [12]. We have chosen an elementary integration step \( \epsilon = 0.02 \), and verified that the integration error induced by this choice does not significantly affect our results.

B. Cooling

Also in the case of cooling, the idea is that of evolving the gauge configuration so as to minimize the gauge action: in fact, cooling has been one of the first procedures introduced to get rid of UV artifacts by smoothing gauge configurations [11]. However, while the Wilson flow is defined by an evolution equation, the cooling method proceeds by discrete steps: in each step the action is minimized with respect to a subset of configuration variables (e.g., a single link or even a link subgroup), then the procedure is performed iteratively over all variables, in order to achieve a global movement of the configuration towards the minimum of the gauge action.

Many variants of cooling have been devised during the years, in which the discrete steps are made more or less smooth [15, 16]. Here we will consider the simplest, original version, also known as standard cooling:

\footnote{We would like to warn the reader that such a notation is different from the one adopted in the literature where the Wilson flow has been originally discussed [12, 13]. We follow here the standard convention in which the generators of \( SU(N) \) are taken to be hermitian, e.g., for \( SU(3) \), \( T^a = \lambda^a/2 \) where \( \lambda^a \) are the Gell-Mann matrices.}

\footnote{In particular, results obtained on a subsample of configurations by using a different integration step, \( \epsilon = 0.01 \), are indistinguishable from those obtained at \( \epsilon = 0.02 \).}
• An elementary step of the algorithm consists in replacing a given link variable \( U_\mu(x) \) by the group element which locally minimizes the action, while all other link variables are kept fixed, i.e. by the matrix \( M \in SU(N) \) which maximizes
\[
\text{ReTr}[MW_\mu^\dagger(i)] .
\]
In the particular case of the \( SU(2) \) gauge theory the maximization step can be performed analytically, with the result
\[
M = \frac{W_\mu(x)}{\sqrt{|\text{det} W_\mu(x)|}} .
\]
For \( SU(N) \) the maximization is performed by using a Cabibbo-Marinari like algorithm (18), i.e. by iterating the maximization over a covering set of \( SU(2) \) subgroups.

• The procedure is then repeated iteratively by visiting link variables on all sites and along all directions of the lattice. In our implementation we will first sweep lattice sites, following the standard lexicographic order, and then link directions, starting with \( \mu = 0 \) and \( x = (0,0,0,0) \). Both the starting link and the visiting order can be changed at will, leading to slightly different cooling variants.

• A complete sweep of the lattice is what is usually called a cooling step. A cooling step can be iterated \( n_c \) times, thus generating a (discrete) flow in the space of gauge configurations.

It is important to stress once more that, contrary to other smoothing procedures such as smearing, a cooling sweep proceeds iteratively, i.e. at each elementary step the cooled link is substituted in the configuration before computing the staple needed to cool next link. If the staples were all computed before starting the cooling sweep, the decrease of the action would not be guaranteed any more, and instabilities would appear, similar to those happening in the repeated application of smearing when the smearing parameter is too large (see, e.g., Ref. (17)). This iterative nature of cooling will be important when we discuss the speed at which cooling proceeds, as compared with the Wilson flow.

It is interesting to notice that there is one variant of cooling which resembles the Wilson flow more closely, namely the controlled cooling introduced in Ref. (18). In that case, the elementary step of cooling consists in minimizing the action under the constraint
\[
\frac{1}{N} \text{Tr}\{(U_\mu^\dagger - U_\mu^{\dagger(0)})(U_\mu - U_\mu^{(0)})\} \leq \delta^2
\]
where \( U_\mu \) and \( U_\mu^{(0)} \) are respectively the old and the new link variables. Also in this case the configuration proceeds towards a minimum, but with the constraint that

| \( \beta = 6/g_0^2 \) | \( r_0 \) | \( a \) |
|----------------|------|-----|
| 5.95           | 4.898(12) | 0.1021(25) |
| 6.07           | 6.033(17)  | 0.08288(23) |
| 6.2            | 7.380(26)  | 0.06775(24) |

\[ \text{TABLE I: Values of the bare couplings used in this work, of the corresponding Sommer scale (computed in Ref. (19)} \]

at each elementary step the new link variable does not differ much from the old variable, depending on the value of the controlling parameter \( \delta \). For small enough \( \delta \), the cooling step becomes an infinitesimal movement along the steepest descent direction, i.e. it becomes a possible integrator of the gradient flow. Indeed, the authors of Ref. (18) verified that, for small enough \( \delta \), the order in which the links are cooled becomes immaterial.

C. Perturbative relation between the two smoothing procedures

As we have already stressed, both cooling and the Wilson flow evolve the gauge configuration towards a minimum of the gauge action. In a perturbative approximation, in which all link variables are very close to the identity element of the gauge group, the connection between the two procedures can be investigated in more detail, and a relation can be found between the speed at which the two evolutions proceed. This relation will be compared with the numerical results discussed in Section III.

Let us assume, therefore, that \( U_\mu(x) \simeq 1 + i \sum_a u_\mu^a(x)T^a \) for each link variable, so that also the staples take a simple form, \( W_\mu(x) \simeq 6 + i \sum_a w_\mu^a(x)T^a \), where both \( u_\mu^a(x) \) and \( w_\mu^a(x) \) are infinitesimal quantities. In this approximation, one has
\[
\Omega_\mu \simeq 6 + i \sum_a \left[ 6u_\mu^a(x) - w_\mu^a(x) \right]T^a
\]
and Eq. (7) becomes
\[
g_0^2 \partial_{x,\mu} S(U) = i \sum_a \left[ 6u_\mu^a(x) - w_\mu^a(x) \right]T^a . \tag{10}
\]
As a consequence, the evolution equation of the Wilson flow can be approximated as follows:
\[
u_\mu^a(x, \tau + \epsilon) \simeq u_\mu^a(x, \tau) - \epsilon \left[ 6u_\mu^a(x, \tau) - w_\mu^a(x, \tau) \right] . \tag{11}
\]
On the other hand, cooling acts so as to substitute \( U_\mu(x) \) with the projection of \( W_\mu(x) \) over the gauge group. In the perturbative approximation, this projection is simply \( 1 + i \sum_a (w_\mu^a(x)/6)T^a \), so that the elementary cooling step corresponds to the substitution
\[
u_\mu^a(x) \rightarrow \frac{w_\mu^a(x)}{6} . \tag{12}
\]
A naive comparison of Eqs. (11) and (12) would lead to the conclusion that the instantaneous speed at which links evolve in the Wilson flow is such that a whole cooling step would be covered in a step $\epsilon = 1/6$ of Wilson flow evolution, i.e. that the approximate relation $\tau \simeq n_c/6$ should hold between the Wilson flow time and the number of cooling steps. The factor 6 comes, given the normalization chosen for the gradient, from the number of staples around a given link, i.e. it is equal to $2(D-1)$, where $D$ is the number of space-time dimensions.

However, such a conclusion is wrong by a factor two, as it is clear from the following argument. The staple appearing in the Wilson flow is constructed with gauge links all computed at the same flow time $\tau$. On the contrary, in the case of cooling, due to the iterative nature of the process, some of the links used to construct the staple have already undergone the cooling step under consideration, and this results in an increase in the speed of cooling. For a regular visiting order of the lattice links during the sweep, one has on average that half of the neighboring links have already been cooled one more time: that results in a speed increase for cooling by a factor 2 with respect to the naive expectation, as one can evince from the simple diffusive model discussed in Appendix A.

Therefore, the predicted perturbative relation is actually $\tau \simeq n_c/(D-1) = n_c/3$. Such a relation is expected to depend on the dimensionality of the system (and on the normalization of the gradient, i.e. on the fact that we actually take the gradient of $g_0^2 S$), but not on the number of colors, at least in the limit of smooth fields.

### III. NUMERICAL RESULTS

Simulations have been performed at the bare coupling values $6/g_0^2 = 5.96, 6.07, 6.2$ on a $20^4$ lattice, corresponding to the lattice spacings reported in Table I and to physical lattice sizes ranging from 2 fm to 1.4 fm. We do not have here the aim to keep finite size effects well under control, since our purpose is simply the check how cooling and the Wilson flow compare to each other, on the same configuration sample, in the smoothing of fluctuations at the UV scale. However, the fair scaling to the continuum limit of the topological susceptibility, to be discussed later, shows that such effects are not important.

For each value of the bare coupling we have generated $O(10^4)$ configurations, each one separated from the next by 200 Monte Carlo steps, a single step consisting of a full lattice update with 1 heatbath ([20,21] and 5 overrelaxation sweeps [22]). On these configurations, we have evaluated the topological charge after smoothing, by using both cooling (we have reached a maximum of 50 cooling steps, with measurements taken after each step) and the Wilson flow (reaching a maximum flow time $\tau = 10$, with measurements performed every $\Delta \tau = 0.2$). The expression used for the discretization of the topological charge density is

$$q_L(x) = -\frac{1}{2\pi^2} \sum_{\mu\nu\rho\sigma} \epsilon_{\mu\nu\rho\sigma} \text{Tr} (U_{\mu\nu}(x)U_{\rho\sigma}(x)),$$

where $\epsilon_{\mu\nu\rho\sigma} = \epsilon_{\nu\rho\mu\sigma}$ for positive indices, while for the negative directions the relation $\epsilon_{\mu\nu\rho\sigma} = -\epsilon_{(-\mu)\nu\rho\sigma}$ and the complete antisymmetry are used.

#### A. Setting a common scale

The purpose of the present study is to compare how the (continuous) Wilson flow and the discrete flow generated by cooling compare to each other. It is clear that, in order to do that, we need to set a common scale, i.e. to fix apriori what is the flow time $\tau$ to be compared with $n_{c}$ cooling steps. The simplest way to proceed is to set such a common scale by using some standard observable, and the most natural observable is given by the quantity whose minimization defines both flows, that is by the action itself. This is also the strategy adopted in the past to compare different definitions of cooling [23].

In Fig. 1 we report the average plaquette (action density) values as a function of $n_c$ (for cooling) and of $3\tau$ (for the Wilson flow case). Such functions permit to obtain the desired correspondence: for each given value of the inverse bare gauge coupling $\beta$, we define $\tau(n_c)$ as the value of the Wilson time $\tau$ that changes the average action by the same amount as $n_c$ cooling steps.

A plot of the functions $\tau(n_c)$, obtained for the different explored values of $\beta$, is shown in Fig. 2. The continuous line corresponds to the function $\tau = n_c/3$. It is clear that this function is a good approximation of $\tau(n_c)$ for all the lattice spacings used, and becomes better and better as $n_c$ increases: the agreement is at the level of 1% for $n_c = 10$ and of 0.1% (i.e. already within the precision of our determination) for $n_c = 20$. In the following, for simplicity, we will just use the approximation $\tau(n_c) \simeq...
\[ \beta = 5.95 \]
\[ \beta = 6.07 \]
\[ \beta = 6.2 \]

**FIG. 2:** Behaviour of \( \tau(n_c) \) as a function of the number of cooling steps \( n_c \). The continuous line corresponds to \( \tau = n_c/3 \).

\( n_c/3 \), that is equivalent to say that one unit of Wilson time corresponds to three cooling steps; corrections to this assumptions reveal to be completely irrelevant to the following analysis. Preliminary results show that the relation \( \tau(n_c) \approx n_c/3 \) holds true also for the gauge group \( SU(2) \), thus supporting the perturbative argument of the previous section.

### B. Determination of the topological background

The lattice topological charge \( Q_L \) is defined as the sum over all the lattice sites of the charge density given in Eq. (13). Although \( Q_L \) is not exactly quantized, because of lattice artifacts, sharp peaks appear in the topological charge distribution, as the smoothing procedure goes on, located at approximately integer values.

An example of the probability distribution \( P(Q_L) \) of \( Q_L \) for \( \beta = 6.2 \) is shown in Fig. 3 where the results obtained both with cooling \( (n_c = 21) \) and the Wilson flow \( (\tau = 7) \) are shown. The fact that the two distributions perfectly agree with each other is a first indication that, at least for the computation of average quantities, the two considered smoothing procedures are equivalent.

In order to reduce the lattice artefacts and improve the convergence towards the continuum limit, the estimator \( Q \) of the topological background that will be used in the following analysis is defined by the procedure [24]:

\[ Q = \text{round} (\alpha Q_L) \quad (14) \]

where \( \text{round}(x) \) denotes the integer closest to \( x \) and the rescaling factor \( \alpha \) is determined in such a way to minimize

\[ \left\langle (\alpha Q_L - \text{round} [\alpha Q_L])^2 \right\rangle \quad (15) \]

In this way, the distribution of \( \alpha Q_L \) is such that the sharp peaks visible in Fig. 3 move exactly onto integer values.

An example of the behaviour of the rescaling factor \( \alpha \) is reported in Fig. 4 for two different values of \( \beta \). The oscillations observed for a small number of cooling steps (or equivalently for small values of the Wilson time) are due to instabilities of the optimization procedure adopted to minimize Eq. (15) and disappear once the configurations are smooth enough (i.e. once the peaks in \( P(Q_L) \) are well defined), in particular they almost disappear by reducing the lattice spacing.

### C. Comparison on average quantities: the topological susceptibility

In this section we present our results for the topological susceptibility obtained by using cooling or the Wilson flow as smoothers. The topological susceptibility is de-
FIG. 5: Topological susceptibility computed for $\beta = 5.95$ after cooling or Wilson flow. The average plaquette $\langle P \rangle$ is used to set a common scale.

fined by

$$\chi = \frac{\langle Q^2 \rangle}{V} = \frac{\langle Q^2 \rangle}{a^4 N_t N_s^3},$$

(16)

where $N_t$ and $N_s$ are the temporal and spatial extent of the lattice and $Q$ is given by Eq. (14).

In the continuum limit, topological sectors become strictly separated and the topological charge $Q$ is stable under any smoothing procedure which minimizes the action. On the other hand, at finite lattice spacing, $Q$ is in general only quasi-stable, and topological backgrounds can be eventually washed out by a prolonged smoothing. However the two time scales, at which the UV fluctuations or the topological background are respectively affected, become rapidly well separated as the lattice spacing is reduced. That results in the appearance of a well defined and extended plateau, as a function of the amount of smoothing, for topological quantities, like the susceptibility $\chi$.

All that is well known for cooling. The plateau value is the one typically used, although this is just one of the possible prescriptions: any other prescription that gives the correct value in the continuum limit (like for instance taking the charge after a fixed number of cooling steps) is legitimate as well.

Our purpose is now to check if, under the Wilson flow, the topological susceptibility behaves in a similar fashion and, more generally, to compare its behaviour with the one obtained by cooling. To this aim we have computed $\chi$ for the three different lattice spacings adopted, using configurations smoothed both with cooling and the Wilson flow. In Fig. 5 and Fig. 6 the values of $\chi$ obtained for $\beta = 5.95$ and $\beta = 6.2$ are plotted against the deviation of the average plaquette from unity, which is proportional to the action density, i.e. the variable that we have established as a “thermometer” to compare cooling and the Wilson flow.

Apart from small deviations at the very beginning of the smoothing, the two determinations are completely equivalent: the agreement is perfect starting from $n_c = 8$ on the coarsest, and starting from $n_c = 3$ on the finest explored lattice (see also Table II for some representative numerical values). On the other hand, such an agreement was already expected from the superposition of the two topological charge distributions, shown in Fig. 3, since $\chi$ is just one of the moments of this distribution.

A nice scaling to the continuum limit is observed in both cases, see Fig. 7 for the case of the Wilson flow, with extended plateaux around $\chi^{1/4} \sim 195$ MeV, even if an accurate estimate of the finite size and UV cutoff systematic effects is not the purpose of this study.

D. Comparison configuration by configuration

We have shown that cooling and the Wilson flow provide perfectly equivalent results for average topological quantities, such as the topological susceptibility. Here we want to make a more stringent test, comparing the outcome of the Wilson flow and of cooling configuration by configuration.

First, we have determined the percentage of configurations where cooling and the Wilson flow obtain different results for the global topological content $Q$. This is reported in Fig. 8: the topological charges were estimated after 21 cooling steps and after 7 units of Wilson time, respectively, however results are stable in a wide range

| $\beta$ | 5.95 | 6.07 | 6.2 |
|--------|------|------|------|
| $n_c$  | 9    | 10.91(17) | 4.644(83) | 1.998(30) |
| $\tau$ | 3    | 10.91(18) | 4.653(84) | 1.999(30) |
| $n_c$  | 21   | 10.68(17) | 4.554(81) | 1.985(29) |
| $\tau$ | 7    | 10.74(17) | 4.566(82) | 1.987(29) |

TABLE II: Values of $a^4 \chi \times 10^5$ for the three values of the bare coupling. The topological charge measurements were performed after 9 and 21 cooling steps and after an evolution of 3 and 7 units of Wilson flow.
FIG. 7: Behaviour of the topological susceptibility under the Wilson flow for the different lattice spacings adopted.

FIG. 8: Fraction of the configurations for which different results are obtained, for the topological charge, using two different procedures. Circles refer to the comparison between cooling and Wilson flow, while triangles refer to different cooling implementations. Data points have been slightly shifted horizontally in order to distinguish them.

FIG. 9: Plot of $\langle \delta Q^2 \rangle / \langle Q^2 \rangle$ as a function of the number of cooling steps. See Eq. (17) for definitions.

FIG. 10: Projection on the $z-t$ plane of the topological charge density for a $\beta = 6.2$ configuration of total charge $Q = 2$ after 21 cooling steps (continuous line) or after 7 units of Wilson time (dotted line).

relevant with respect to the global topological activity, taking place on a given lattice at a given $\beta$ value. In order to do that, we have measured the quantity

$$\langle \delta Q^2 \rangle \equiv \langle (Q^{(c)} - Q^{(W)})^2 \rangle,$$  \hspace{1cm} (17)

where $Q^{(c)}$ and $Q^{(W)}$ are the corresponding (i.e. at $n_c = 3\tau$) estimates of the topological charge obtained by cooling and by the Wilson flow, and we have normalized it by the corresponding value of $\langle Q^2 \rangle$: in this way we normalize with respect to possible variations of the topological activity due, for instance, to the different physical volumes. Numerical results for $\langle \delta Q^2 \rangle / \langle Q^2 \rangle$ are shown in Fig. 9 also in this case it is clear that the differences rapidly disappear as one approaches the continuum limit.

Finally, it is interesting to ask whether the observed agreement between cooling and the Wilson flow is something that regards only the global topological charge of gauge configurations, or whether the agreement holds true also at a local level. The latter, of course, is a much stronger statement. In Fig. 10 we report the topological charge density, projected on the $z-t$ plane, obtained on a typical configuration where $Q^{(W)} = Q^{(c)} = 2$ (with

of $n_c$. The percentage is around 40% on the coarsest lattice ($\beta = 5.95$) and rapidly decreases, seemingly exponentially in $\beta$, reaching around 1% on the finest lattice ($\beta = 6.2$).

It is interesting to compare this rate of different determinations of $Q$ with the analogous rate obtained by comparing two slightly different versions of cooling, the one used in this paper and a simple variation, in which we just move the starting point of the cooling sweep from the origin to the middle of the lattice. Results are reported in Fig. 8 as well, and are completely equivalent with the previous ones, showing that the differences between cooling and the Wilson flow are perfectly explainable in terms of the normal variations between different smoothing techniques, which take place when the starting configuration presents some degree of coarseness and rapidly disappear as one approaches the continuum limit.

A slightly different question is how much the different determinations of $Q$ between the two methods are
\( \beta = 6.2, n_c = 21 \) and \( \tau = n_c/3 \). As one can appreciate, the agreement is very good also at a local level. Such a result may give hints that also for observables not directly related to topology one could obtain similar results when adopting cooling or the Wilson flow, however a systematic investigation of this possibility is left to future studies.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to compare the Wilson flow and the discrete flow generated by standard cooling, with respect to the determination of the topological properties of non-Abelian gauge theories on a lattice, with particular reference to the case of the \( SU(3) \) pure gauge theory.

To that aim, we have first established a relation between the Wilson flow time \( \tau \) and the number of cooling steps \( n_c \), so that the plaquette action density, which is the quantity minimized by both flows, coincides. The relation \( \tau \simeq n_c/3 \) holds within a good precision and already after a few cooling steps; such a relation is also in agreement with a perturbative estimate, which is expected to be valid in the limit of smooth fields and to depend on the dimensionality of the system (\( \tau = n_c/(D - 1) \) where \( D \) is the number of space-time dimensions), but not on the details of the gauge group.

We have proven that, after a very few transient cooling steps, the two flows lead to equivalent results, the transient region rapidly decreasing as the continuum limit is approached. This assertion is true at various degrees of strength. It is true for average quantities: we have checked this assertion with some accuracy for the topological susceptibility, however, given the superposition of the two probability distributions (see Fig. 3), we expect that the assertion be true also for the higher order moments, which are needed to specify the \( \theta \) dependence of the theory \([24,28]\).

This expectation is also supported by the fact that, at a stronger level, even the discrepancies in the determination of \( Q \), which are found configuration by configuration, rapidly become irrelevant as the continuum limit is approached, and already for \( a \sim 0.1 \) fm. Moreover, also the local profiles of topological charge densities, obtained by the two smoothing methods on sample configurations, are very close to each other.

At this point, given the equivalence of the two procedures from a practical point of view, and at least regarding topological quantities, it is interesting to compare the computational needs of the two methods. In order to do that, we can make use of the established relation \( \tau \simeq n_c/3 \) and compare the execution time of three cooling steps with the time needed to perform an unity of Wilson time evolution:

\[
\frac{\text{cpu_time}(\tau = 1)}{\text{cpu_time}(n_c = 3)} \simeq 130.
\]

For comparison, we also note that the time required to complete an unity of Wilson time evolution is analogous to the time needed to perform around 50 complete update steps, as defined at the beginning of Section III.

Clearly these estimates depend on the specific integrator adopted for the Wilson flow and, in particular, adaptive integrators make it possible to obtain an \( \mathcal{O}(10) \) speedup with respect to the third order RK solver (see \([29,30]\)). Nevertheless, cooling remains about one order of magnitude cheaper than the Wilson flow.

Of course, one should consider that the Wilson flow has advantages with respect to techniques like cooling, related to the fact that it has an associated differential equation, which clearly appear whenever an analytical treatment of the smoothing process is required, like for instance in the analysis of the renormalization properties of the smoothed fields \([31]\) (in this respect, such advantages are partially shared by smearing techniques). Moreover, the gradient flow can be consistently extended to the presence of dynamical fermion fields \([32]\). We refer to \([33]\) for a recent review of present and future perspectives of the Wilson flow.

Finally, given the agreement of the topological charge density also at a local level, in the future one should better investigate the relation between the two smoothing procedures also for other physical quantities.

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Appendix A: A simple diffusive model

Let us consider a massless real scalar field, \( \phi(n) \), on a three dimensional isotropic cubic lattice lattice, where \( n \equiv (n_x, n_y, n_z) \), and the associated action

\[
S = \sum_{n,j} \frac{1}{2} [\phi(n + \hat{j}) - \phi(n)]^2
\]

where \( \hat{j} \) runs over the three positive directions and \( n + \hat{j} \) indicates, as usual, the lattice site which is nearest neighbor of \( n \) in the forward \( \hat{j} \) direction. We will now consider the gradient flow for such a theory, and the differential equation obtained by it in the limit of smoothly varying fields. Then we will do the same in the case of cooling, and compare the two differential equations.

The gradient flow is defined by adding a dependence
of $\phi$ on a fictitious time $\tau$ and letting
\[
\frac{\partial \phi(n, \tau)}{\partial \tau} = -\frac{\partial S(\tau)}{\partial \phi(n, \tau)} = \sum_j \left[ \phi(n + j, \tau) + \phi(n - j, \tau) \right] - 6\phi(n, \tau). \tag{A1}
\]

In the limit of smoothly varying fields, we can take a continuum description and, letting $x_j \equiv a n_j$, where $a$ is the lattice spacing, change the notation $\phi(n, \tau) \rightarrow \phi(x, \tau)$. The field on nearest neighbor sites can be Taylor expanded
\[
\phi(n + j, \tau) \simeq \phi(x, \tau) + a \frac{\partial \phi}{\partial x_j} + \frac{a^2 \partial^2 \phi}{2 \partial x_j^2}
\]
so that the flow equation, Eq. (A1), takes the simple form of a diffusive (heat) equation:
\[
\frac{\partial \phi(x, \tau)}{\partial \tau} \simeq a^2 \nabla^2 \phi(x, \tau) \tag{A2}
\]
where $\nabla^2$ is the 3D Laplacian operator.

Let us now consider cooling, in which the field is evolved by local minimization steps, which are iterated by sweeping all lattice sites at each cooling step. Let us call $\phi(n, n_c)$ the field obtained after $n_c$ steps. If the lattice sites are visited in the positive lexicographic order, then it is easy to verify that the cooling equation is
\[
\phi(n, n_c + 1) = \frac{1}{6} \sum_j [\phi(n + j, n_c) + \phi(n - j, n_c + 1)] \tag{A3}
\]
where we have taken into account that part of the nearest neighbor sites have already undergone the cooling step under consideration. In order to write a corresponding differential equation, we now consider that, in the limit of smoothly varying fields, also the evolution generated by cooling is smooth, so that we can Taylor expand also in terms of a cooling time, defined by $\tau_c \equiv a_r n_c$, where $a_r$ is a fictitious temporal spacing that will be eventually set to 1. We can therefore substitute
\[
\phi(n, n_c + 1) \simeq \phi(x, \tau_c) + a_r \frac{\partial \phi}{\partial \tau_c} + \frac{a_r^2 \partial^2 \phi}{2 \partial x_j^2}
\]
\[
\phi(n - j, n_c + 1) \simeq \phi(x, \tau_c) + a_r \frac{\partial \phi}{\partial \tau_c} + \frac{a_r^2 \partial^2 \phi}{2 \partial x_j^2}
\]
\[
\phi(n + j, n_c) \simeq \phi(x, \tau_c) + a_r \frac{\partial \phi}{\partial \tau_c} + \frac{a_r^2 \partial^2 \phi}{2 \partial x_j^2}
\]
We notice that, since we are dealing with a diffusion process, in which spatial distances scale like the square root of the diffusion time, it is consistent to Taylor expand at the linear order in time and at the quadratic order in spatial derivatives. Putting everything together, Eq. (A3) becomes
\[
a_r \frac{\partial \phi(x, \tau_c)}{\partial \tau_c} \simeq \frac{1}{3} a_r^2 \nabla^2 \phi(x, \tau) \tag{A4}
\]
which after setting $a_r = 1$ teaches us that the relation between the cooling time $\tau_c$ and the gradient flow time $\tau$ is
\[
\tau_c = n_c \simeq 3\tau,
\]
meaning that 3 cooling steps correspond to 1 unit of gradient flow time. It should be clear that the factor 3 would have been a factor 6, had we not taken into account the additional cooling time dependence of half of the nearest neighbor fields.

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