Large deviations and metastability

The book provides a general introduction to the theory of large deviations and a wide overview of the metastable behaviour of stochastic dynamics. With only minimal prerequisites, the book covers all the main results and brings the reader to the most recent developments. Particular emphasis is given to the fundamental Freidlin–Wentzell results on small random perturbations of dynamical systems. Metastability is first described on physical grounds, following which more rigorous approaches are developed. Many relevant examples are considered from the point of view of the so-called pathwise approach. The first part of the book develops the relevant tools, including the theory of large deviations, which are then used to provide a physically relevant dynamical description of metastability. Written to be accessible to graduate students, this book provides an excellent route into contemporary research.

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Large deviations and metastability

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To Anna and Daniela, Juliana, Lucas and Vladas

CONTENTS

PREFACE

This book has germinated from the lecture notes of a course 'Large deviations and metastability' given by one of us at the 'CIMPA First School on Dynamical and Disordered Systems', at Universidad de la Frontera, Temuco, during the summer of 1992 [293].

Since then a large amount of new material on metastability has been accumulated, and our goal was to combine a basic introduction to the theory of large deviations with a wide overview of the metastable behaviour of stochastic dynamics.

Typical examples of metastable states are supersaturated vapours and magnetic systems with magnetization opposite to the external field. Metastable behaviour is characterized by a long period of apparent equilibrium of a pure thermodynamic phase followed by an unexpected fast decay towards the stable equilibrium of a different pure phase or of a mixture, e.g. homogeneous nucleation of the liquid phase inside a highly supersaturated vapour, due to spontaneous density fluctuations. The point of view of metastability as a genuinely dynamical phenomenon is now widely accepted. Approaches which aim to describe static aspects of metastability (such as determination of the metastable branch of the equation of state of a fluid) in the Gibbs equilibrium set-up are, in their 'naïve form', applicable only in a mean field context. In this case, the physically unacceptable assumption that the range of the interaction equals the linear dimension of the container gives rise to pathological behaviour of non-convex free energy that implies negative compressibility, namely, thermodynamic instability. It is this feature that gives rise to the idea of associating metastability with local minima of the free energy. Moreover, dynamical aspects such as the lifetime of the metastable state require an investigation that a static approach is programmatically unable to provide. Thus, metastability for short range systems is included in the field of non-equilibrium statistical mechanics. Since a general theory of non-equilibrium thermodynamic phenomena is still lacking, a particularly relevant role is played by the study of specific mathematical models, for instance the stochastic Ising model.

The first attempt to formulate a rigorous dynamical theory of metastability goes back to Lebowitz and Penrose (see [240, 241]). In their approach the decay from metastability to stability is essentially characterized by a slow irreversible evolution of the expected values of the observables during the process. In [48] another method was proposed, based on a pathwise analysis of the process. The single trajectories of the process are characterized by a long period of random oscillations in apparent equilibrium (with a relatively fast loss of memory of the initial condition) followed by a sudden decay towards another, different regime, corresponding to stable equilibrium. In this approach metastability becomes strictly related to the first exit problem from special domains. Characterization of the most probable exit mechanism involves comparison between different rare events – a typical problem in large deviation theory.

After describing metastability on physical grounds, we present the existing rigorous approaches, with a particular emphasis on the pathwise approach, the main object of our analysis. Large deviation theory is applied, in combination with specific tools, to provide a dynamical description of metastability.

The construction of a mathematical theory of metastability not only provides interesting and physically relevant applications of the already established large deviation theory, but also poses new problems.

The first part of the book provides a reasonably self-contained account of basic results about large deviation theory. In Chapter 1 we discuss the classical basic results in the frame of large deviations for sums of independent random variables. In Chapter 2 we concentrate on the results of Freidlin and Wentzell in the context of small random perturbations of deterministic flows. Chapter 3 is mainly dedicated to the treatment of large deviations for interacting systems, and to its role in equilibrium statistical mechanics. The first two sections contain a short summary of large deviations for Markov chains and the Gärtner–Ellis theorem. The third section provides a brief introduction to equilibrium statistical mechanics, and the last section discusses large deviations for Gibbs measures and its relation to thermodynamical formalism.

In Chapter 4 we start the description of the metastability phenomenon and the various rigorous approaches to its treatment. The pathwise approach, which is one of the main topics of the book, is introduced in Section 4.2. The next two sections contain two examples: first we consider the extremely simple mean field model of the Curie–Weiss chain. Though unphysical, this mean field model can be considered as an initial 'laboratory', due to the explicitness of computations. The second example is the one-dimensional Harris contact process, which presents a nontrivial spatial structure. In the final section, we briefly outline results on metastability for other mean field type dynamics as well as the multidimensional Harris contact process. In Chapter 5 we are concerned with the verification of metastability for Itô processes in the context of the Freidlin–Wentzell theory. This is done in Section 5.4, based on results of Freidlin and Wentzell combined with coupling techniques. The important example of a double well potential is discussed in detail in Section 5.2. Finally, extensions to infinite dimensional situations such as reaction–diffusion models are briefly discussed at the end of the chapter.

In Chapter 6 we study the long time behaviour of general reversible Freidlin–Wentzell Markov chains; these are characterized by a finite state space and transition probabilities exponentially small in an external parameter that in many applications is the inverse temperature. In particular we analyse the first exit problem from particular sets of states, called *cycles*, whose characteristic property is that all their points are typically visited before the exit. Various aspects that are relevant for the description of metastable behaviour are studied: the asymptotic exponentiality of properly renormalized first exit times, the conditional equilibrium (Gibbs) measure, the 'tube' of typical trajectories during the exit.

In Chapter 7 we study metastability and nucleation for various short range lattice spin models that can be seen as generalizations of the standard stochastic Ising model. We consider the asymptotic regime with fixed volume and coupling constants in the limit of very low temperature. From a physical point of view this corresponds to the study of local aspects of nucleation; from a mathematical point of view it corresponds to the study of some large deviation phenomena for a class of Freidlin–Wentzell Markov chains. To study these models we apply the general results of Chapter 6 and have to solve some specific model dependent variational problems.

A particular emphasis is given to the case of reversible stochastic evolutions. Under the reversibility condition, many different dynamics such as quite general mean field models, Itô stochastic differential equations of gradient type, and stochastic Ising models can be treated by the same methods.

Parts of this text have been used in graduate courses at IMPA, Rio de Janeiro, and at Università di Roma 'Tor Vergata'. We would like to thank D. Tranah for the invitation to write this book, for his patience, attention and professionalism which made the process run smoothly during all these years.

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Corrections that may appear in the future will be posted at
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Illud in his rebus non est mirabile, quare,
Omnia cum rerum primordia sint in motu,
Summa tamen summa videatur stare quiete,
Praeterquam siquid proprio dat corpore motus.
Lucretius, *De rerum natura*