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Last Generation:
A Critical Visual Analysis

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Abstract: This study analyzes the role of symbolic objects in the protests of Last Generation (Ultima Generazione) movement, highlighting their communicative and mobilizing impact. Using a visual sociology approach, it examines images and documentation to identify three key functions of these objects: as targets, instruments of protest, and emotional stimuli. The research demonstrates that these objects are not mere accessories but narrative devices that shape public debate and redefine forms of mobilization. The analysis suggests that studying symbolic objects is essential to find understanding the communicative strategies of contemporary social movements.

Keywords: contentious politics, eco-activism, emotions, visual sociology, symbolic objects.

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1. Introduction

In the study of contentious politics and social movements, scholarly attention has traditionally been directed towards collective actors, mobilization dynamics, and political opportunity structures (McAdam et al. 2001; Klandermans et al. 1988; Tilly and Tarrow 2007). However, one often overlooked aspect concerns the role of symbolic objects in protest dynamics and collective action. As Abrams and Gardner (2023) point out, material objects are not merely ancillary tools of collective action; rather, they are elements capable of shaping meanings, activating emotions, and influencing mobilization strategies. They may serve as targets, instruments, or stimuli of conflict, contributing to the construction of collective imaginaries and the redefinition of the public arena of contention.

Within this framework, the present study proposes to analyze the role of symbolic objects in the protest actions of the climate movement *Ultima Generazione*, one of the most controversial actors in the Italian environmental mobilization landscape. Through the strategic use of colored paint, fire extinguishers, banners, and

the performative and theatrical occupation of public space, the movement has adopted a highly symbolic and disruptive repertoire of action aimed at denouncing political inaction in the face of the climate crisis. This study, adopting a visual sociology perspective, seeks to examine how the objects employed by the movement have been used to reinforce the symbolic resonance of their protests, elicit emotions, and spark public debate.

The research revolves around three central questions: a) which objects have taken on symbolic value within the protest actions of *Ultima Generazione*? b) how have these objects been used to enhance the communicative reach of the protests? c) what dynamics emerge in the interaction between activists, symbolic objects, and the responses of the public and institutions?

To address these questions, the study is structured into multiple sections. The first part offers a theoretical framework on the concepts of contentious politics, repertoires of collective action, and symbolic objects in mobilization. It also discusses the main sociological perspectives that have explored the link between materiality, symbolism, and collective action. The second part focuses on the analysis of *Ultima Generazione*'s protests through a visual approach that examines photographs and documentation of their actions. Following Abrams and Gardner's (2023) framework, three key roles played by objects in conflict dynamics are explored: as targets of protest, as tools of mobilization, and as emotional and cognitive stimuli.

Finally, the conclusions provide a critical reflection on the findings, emphasizing the communicative and strategic potential of symbolic objects in mobilization processes, and suggesting possible future developments for the study of symbolic dimensions in contentious politics. In an era marked by the intensification of protest repression and increased media attention to dissent, understanding the role of symbolic objects is crucial to deciphering and articulating how social movements negotiate visibility, legitimacy, and public support.

2. Contentious politics and symbolic objcets

Conflict is always structured around three fundamental elements: a subject, an object, and a claim. Each of these elements may take on various forms, characteristics, and modalities. In its most basic configuration, the subject is the party who formulates a claim, directing it toward another party – defined as the object – namely, the recipient of the claim. This configuration, although schematic and essential, recurs across a multitude of cases and situations. However, it acquires a political connotation only when it involves actors occupying institutional roles. As Tilly and Tarrow (2007) remind us, most conflicts occur outside strictly political domains, finding expression in the everyday flow of ordinary life.

When then, can we speak of political conflict? And what forms can it take? These questions can be answered in various ways, with differing levels of complexity.

Tilly and Tarrow (2007) define political conflict as a dynamic structured by a subject-object interaction that involves specific actors, such as governmental agents, institutional figures, or more broadly, individuals and groups endowed with authority and power. According to Mouffe (2013), however, political conflict may manifest in different gradients. On one end, there is conflict between enemies, where the parties perceive one another as incompatible and seek mutual elimination; on the other, there is conflict between adversaries, in which parties acknowledge each other's legitimacy while maintaining deep disagreement. Another compelling

perspective is offered by Gramsci (1975), who interpreted conflict as either a direct and open struggle for power (a war of movement), or a prolonged and more complex confrontation aimed at the control of cultural and economic institutions – not only political ones (a war of position).

Building on Tilly and Tarrow's (2007) definition, one may argue that contentious politics brings together three common features of social life: conflict, politics, and collective action. The latter emerges when a claim, beyond being directed toward a governmental agent, becomes the expression of a coordinated initiative in support of a shared interest or program. In fact, most forms of collective action within contentious politics manifest through a specific practice: protest, understood as the deployment of a range of public performances, including marches, rallies, demonstrations, public assemblies, petitions, and similar actions. Tilly (1993) conceptualized this set of practices as "repertoires of contention," highlighting their historically and culturally specific nature as forms of collective contentious action. In the literature, these repertoires are defined as the set of practices, tactics, and strategies that social groups use to articulate their claims and challenge power (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). In other words, they constitute the vocabulary of action available to a community in each historical and geographic context. Regardless of context, however, history shows that such public displays of value, unity, participation, and commitment have almost always been accompanied using physical objects – flags, banners, placards, and badges – as tangible tools of contention.

Rarely have protesters, insurgents, and revolutionaries acted without resorting to symbolically charged objects. Even today, when a group of workers goes on strike, they display signs to articulate their demands and concerns. It is even rarer to encounter demonstrators without large banners and flags. History is filled with revolutionary groups who have adopted floral symbols – tulips, carnations, or roses – as representative emblems of their cause and identity. In contemporary times, significant examples include the *Gilets Jaunes* in France, who filled streets and squares wearing yellow vests as both a distinctive symbol and a marker of identity; the iconic *Tute Bianche* worn by members of the *Disobbedienti* movement in Italy; and the famous umbrellas, initially used as protection from tear gas and later transformed into icons of democracy and political freedom by activists from the *Occupy Central with Love and Peace* movement in Hong Kong, who protested in favor of free and universal elections. Finally, the global protests that erupted after the killing of George Floyd in the United States included deliberate actions against monuments and statues representing the legacy of slavery and colonialism – objects that were often defaced or dismantled.

What do all these examples have in common? The presence of a material object, often highly symbolic, through which protest is initiated or conveyed. Each case illustrates the importance of material objects in contentious politics, emphasizing their dual nature as both cultural/semiotic and material.

Lofland (1996), one of the first scholars to address symbolic objects in social movement studies, defined them as among the most important components of social movement culture. Building on Lofland's (1996) analysis, Abrams and Gardner (2023) not only confirm the potential of these objects to convey both physical and symbolic meanings, but also extend their relevance to include opponents, bystanders, and other marginal figures involved in contentious events. As they assert: "Symbolic objects do not exist only for those who share the group meanings associated with them; they also act and generate representations for those who possess a different or limited understanding of them." Ślosarski (2023), for instance, argues that protesters draw upon a toolbox filled with symbolic objects to articulate their demands. Saramifar (2023), on the other hand, contends

that such objects can provide a means of psychological transformation capable of encouraging political participation and protest.

In each of these processes, as Johnston (2001, p.16) has shown, objects, as things, become artifacts; that is, they are "transformed, discussed, modified, and displayed for further action, thereby granting them a life beyond their relatively brief material existence." In other words, they become what Abrams and Gardner (2023) call symbolic objects: powerful and persuasive signifiers within contentious politics. As such, they are not merely objects nor solely symbols, but resources for collective action capable of influencing not only its form but also its outcome. Moreover, they function as markers of unity and belonging, tools of protest, symbolic arguments for making claims, and vehicles through which to mobilize identities, articulate discourses, and promote collective subjectivities. Playing a central role in shaping, sustaining, and transforming the social world and its underlying material conditions, they represent a vital tool for understanding reality, particularly the dynamics and mechanisms that characterize political conflict.

Based on these considerations, the following section will outline the objectives of this study and the potential tools that sociology can provide to deepen the understanding of this field, which remains underrepresented and under-theorized within both social movement studies and the literature on contentious politics.

3. Aims

One of the primary objectives of this study is to draw attention to the role of symbolic objects in contentious politics and the study of social movements. As Abrams and Gardner (2023, p. 294) observe, "despite the consistent and often significant role played by symbolic objects in episodes and processes of contention, the topic has historically been understudied or undervalued, leaving research in this area fragmented and disjointed." Embracing the invitation put forward by these scholars, this work does not aim merely to fill a gap, but rather to contribute to the development of a more coherent and systematic field of inquiry focused on symbolic objects and contentious politics. To pursue this aim, the analysis centers on a case study: the climate movement *Ultima Generazione*.

As demonstrated in previous research (de Nardis, Galiano 2023), the activists of *Ultima Generazione* have made extensive use of a disruptive repertoire of contention, favoring highly symbolic protest performances over more conventional forms such as rallies, street demonstrations, and marches. This approach appears to echo protest forms that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, in which personal cost or risk was subordinated to the pursuit of goals perceived as urgent and fundamental. These are protest forms that fall within what DeNardo (1985) termed the "logic of testimony," where activists seek to demonstrate, through their own example, the possibility of acting collectively to change a situation perceived as unjust, dangerous, and/or in urgent need of resolution.

As various scholars have noted (Bernstein 2013; Cornish, Saunders 2013; Eileraas 2014; Purnell 2019; Benski 2005), it is sometimes not only the objects that adorn bodies that possess symbolic power, but the body itself. One of the most emblematic examples in this regard is that of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor who, in an act of protest, set himself on fire in front of the governor's office and became the symbol of

the Jasmine Revolution and the wave of anti-government protests that swept across the Middle East and North Africa between 2010 and 2012. Similarly, the activists of *Ultima Generazione* have used their own bodies as both sites and symbols to convey alternative narratives about the climate crisis, as well as powerful and radical tools to increase the visibility of their claims. In other instances, they have used objects as tools of protest and as stimuli to encourage mobilization.

According to Jasper and Duyvendak (2015), the relationship between protest actors, the arena in which protest takes place, and the multitude of elements shaping that interaction is inherently dynamic. As a result, not only actors but also objects can assume different functions within a contentious context. Of course, not everything that is physical or material carries the same symbolic weight in contentious politics. Objects are ubiquitous, but not all of them acquire relevant symbolic significance. As Abrams and Gardner (2023) explain, the umbrellas used by Hong Kong protesters as shields against police tear gas during demonstrations for universal suffrage became the emblem of the entire pro-democracy movement. By contrast, the umbrellas carried by participants in one of the many independence marches in rainy Scotland served only their practical purpose of providing shelter from the rain, without acquiring any symbolic meaning.

However, between these two extremes lie a range of qualitative variations and functional differences. An object can perform multiple roles and possess various characteristics: it may function as a target, a tool, or a stimulus in the conflict; carry more or less intense symbolic charge; be easily transportable, relatively static and durable, or ephemeral; and be either inanimate or animate. In short, an object may display a wide range of attributes depending on the context and the ways in which it is deployed.

For these reasons, the following section seeks to identify which objects have acquired symbolic status within the *Ultima Generazione* movement, define their qualitative gradient, and understand how activists have used them to shape and sustain their protests, as well as to effectively communicate their demands.

4. Methodology

As outlined in the introduction, this study aims to analyze society through images (Grady 1999), specifically focusing on the symbolic objects used by *Ultima Generazione* activists to address the issue of the climate crisis. From this perspective, the tools offered by visual sociology are particularly valuable. Several scholars have shown that this epistemological approach, based on observational methods, is especially suitable for analyzing social behaviors, interactions, places, symbols, and objects (Ciampi 2016; Grady 1999; Spencer 2011; Toti 2009). Researchers who employ this approach treat images as primary sources of information, constructing their knowledge either with or upon them, regarding them as data on par with words and numbers.

The literature identifies two main approaches for conducting sociological research of this kind: a) doing sociology *with* images; and b) doing sociology *on* images. In the first case, as highlighted by Harper (1988), this approach generates knowledge through the production of images. In the second, it involves analyzing visual material – cinematic, photographic, televised, or multimedia – as a cultural product, social phenomenon, or form of communication. The object of analysis is visual communication: the way individuals, groups, and institutions communicate through images, as well as the functions and influences these images exert in society.

In this context, as Ciampi (2016, p. 220) notes, "the sociologist studies the content of the selected visual corpus and interprets externally produced iconic documents."

This study adopts the second analytical approach, selecting a series of images that represent the various protest forms and actions adopted by the climate movement *Ultima Generazione*. These are pre-existing images, specifically photographs, produced both by the activists themselves and by the media who have documented and reported on their actions through newspapers and other information channels.

The selection of images was not random but guided by their ability to effectively address the research questions. Each image is accompanied by a detailed caption, which includes essential information for accurate coding: the author, circumstances of production, intended purposes, the relevant sociocultural context, and the research motivations. As several scholars have emphasized, images, like other sources, do not possess intrinsic meaning and are subject to multiple interpretations. The caption therefore serves a dual function: on one hand, it limits the scope of potential content analysis; on the other, it highlights the researcher's interpretive choices, contributing to the sociological framing of meaning. Situated within this framework, the image no longer appears as a mere reflection of practical experience but assumes the role of a constitutive element of social reality. It functions as a medium intrinsically tied to social action and as an active source of meaning-producing effects with specific social connotations (Boehm 1994).

According to Arnheim (1969), images can embody different types of value in their relationship with reality: a) a representational value; b) a symbolic value; and c) a sign value. It is precisely this latter category – the value of the sign – that allows the image to become an indirect medium, capable of operating as a reference to the reality it represents.

5. The symbolic objects of Ultima Generazione

The selection of protest targets and symbolic repertoire (flags, banners, placards) to be used during demonstrations or similar events is often the outcome of a complex strategic process that involves internal discussion and debate among activists, militants, and other organized actors. A significant example can be found in the *ultrà* subculture, where elements such as flags, banners, iconography, and even clothing styles are intensely debated before being incorporated into the group's symbolic repertoire. A similar, albeit more complex, process occurs among actors engaged in explicitly political collective actions, such as social movements, political parties, and other forms of political participation.

More specifically, narrowing the focus to the political sphere, Ślosarski (2023) argues that in selecting both objects and protest targets, actors tend to tailor their strategies to the specific characteristics of the arena in which they operate, with the aim of achieving their objectives as effectively as possible. Given the increasingly complex, articulated, and fragmented nature of the political arena, this process involves a range of strategic dilemmas and difficult choices. These are not merely questions of style or approach, whether more or less radical, but rather decisions of political and social

positioning that entail deeper reflections on the nature of the relationship between goal attainment, social recognition, and the political legitimacy one hopes to achieve.

Tilly (1978) effectively captured this layered relationship through the concept of political opportunity structures, emphasizing that not only the substance, but also the expressive forms of contentious performances are shaped by forces beyond individual will or collective aspiration.

A particular political regime, for instance, may ban or restrict the availability and use of certain objects during public demonstrations, or limit the space of protest to designated areas, safeguarding sensitive targets and infrastructures, such as through the creation of so-called "red zones."

Nevertheless, activists and political militants are accustomed to navigating such constraints, adjusting both their protest repertoires and their goals through processes of radicalization, diplomacy, and negotiation. The Italian context offers numerous examples in this regard: from the kneecapping and kidnappings carried out by the *Brigate Rosse*, to the violent and terrorist actions of far-right groups during the *Anni di piombo*; from the PCI's (Italian Communist Party) strategy of compromise and détente, to the broken shop windows and riots by *black blocs* in the 2000s; and to the semi-institutionalization of certain social antagonism experiences, such as that of social centers (*centri sociali*).

Processes of escalation, de-escalation, radicalization, and disillusionment are constant features of contentious politics, marking both the beginning and the end of a conflict cycle or a particularly intense wave of protest (Tilly, Tarrow 2007). In recent years, these challenges have been predominantly addressed by movements centered on the ecological crisis. On this front, *Ultima Generazione* has emerged as one of the most prominent and publicly visible movements. Their protests, characterized by a strong symbolic and disruptive charge, such as defacing works of art, monuments, and historic buildings, have generated widespread opposition and have often been perceived as useless, extreme, or unacceptable provocations. Their demands. such as an immediate halt to fossil fuel use or the drastic reduction of emissions, have sparked similar criticisms.

Nonetheless, beyond dominant narratives, these actions can be interpreted as true examples of *détournement*: deeply creative and disorienting actions aimed at transforming the meaning of cultural, artistic, or media elements conceived as symbols, with the goal of subverting their original interpretation and producing new, critical, sometimes tragic, meanings.

In line with the methodological approach outlined in the previous section, the following subsections will identify the objects that have acquired symbolic value for *Ultima Generazione* activists and analyze the functions they have performed.

5.1 Object as target

As previously discussed, symbolic objects, through their various forms, can assume the role of target, tool, or stimulus within a political conflict (Abrams and Gardner 2023). First and foremost, an object may become a target-or even the primary target-of collective action, wherein its direct involvement constitutes an integral part of the contentious strategy. More broadly, Abrams and Gardner (2023) argue that such actions consist of the alteration, appropriation, or destruction of one or more symbolic objects, imbuing them with specific political meanings.

This dynamic is evident in the recent actions carried out by *Ultima Generazione* activists, who have defaced monuments, museums, and historic buildings using washable paint or other easily removable substances. As the activists themselves have explained in official statements and appearances on talk shows and news programs, these actions are not intended to damage the selected targets, but rather to stimulate public debate on the climate crisis and promote potential political solutions.

The images that follow not only provide useful elements to contextualize the actions, objectives, and targets of these protests, but also serve as powerful visual tools for analyzing the strategies employed by the movement in the pursuit of its aims.

Figure n.1: Activists deface Van Gogh's *Seminatore*, Rome.

Figure n.1 depicts three young *Ultima Generazione* activists inside one of Rome's museums, Palazzo Bonaparte, which at the time was hosting an exhibition of works by Vincent Van Gogh, with paintings on loan from the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, the Netherlands. In the photograph, the activists are shown with their hands glued to the wall beside one of Van Gogh's most iconic paintings, *The Sower*. Standing before them is a fourth activist, whose specific role is to record and disseminate the entire protest action and the group's message via social media.

This element, present in virtually all the movement's protest actions, indicates that the act was clearly designed to be filmed, photographed, and shared, deliberately exploiting the immediacy of visual media as a means of amplifying and disseminating ideas, narratives, and meanings.

Moreover, as can be seen in the image, the painting is smeared with an organic substance – specifically, pea soup – thrown by the activists as a symbolic gesture of protest. It is important to note that, although not visible, the artwork is protected by a glass barrier that ensures its preservation. Therefore, as the activists themselves have declared, the intent was not to damage the painting, but to convey a precise message through a highly symbolic action directed at an especially iconic and communicative object.

Below are the words used by the activists to claim and contextualize their action:

«This is a desperate and scientifically grounded cry that cannot be dismissed as mere vandalism, but must be understood as an expression of visceral love for life and art. Everything we should have the right to witness in our present and future is being obscured by a real and imminent catastrophe, just as this pea soup has obscured the fieldwork (and thus the possibility of food security), the farmer's home (and thus the right not to be forced to migrate), and the energy radiating from the Sun across the scene (and thus the necessary investment in a just energy transition). We are simply calling for serious and timely government intervention: nonviolent direct actions will continue until citizens receive a response from their government to our demands to halt gas and coal use and to invest in at least 20 GW of renewable energy».
(fanpage.it – 4.11.2022)

As several scholars have argued (Cadeluppi 2022; Spreafico et al. 2016), images do not merely represent reality – they actively contribute to the construction and amplification of social meanings. The activists' statement provides a more detailed interpretive framework for the message they intend to convey through their protest action. However, more than words, it was the object chosen for the action – Van Gogh's painting and the constellation of symbolic meanings it evokes – that opened a space for discussion, however polarizing and controversial, about the climate crisis and governmental inaction.

In this sense, the artwork becomes a symbol of the cultural heritage that the activists aim to protect, but which is increasingly threatened by climate change. The contrast between the beauty of the artwork and the disruptive gesture draws attention to the theme of fragility, both of art and of the ecosystem. In this case, both the painting and its exhibition site symbolize tradition and cultural capital, which are placed at symbolic risk not by the activists' action – given the presence of a protective glass barrier – but by political inaction in the face of the ecological crisis.

Efforts to draw attention and raise the volume of public debate on the climate crisis have not been directed solely at government authorities and public opinion but have also targeted so-called *bystanders* – those who

passively witness protest actions as spectators. In the following case, involving a protest action targeting the Trevi Fountain, attention shifted to a specific category of bystanders: tourists.

Figure n.2: Activists pour vegetable charcoal into the Trevi Fountain, Rome.

Figure n.2 documents a recurring action by *Ultima Generazione* activists, consisting of pouring vegetable charcoal into the most iconic fountains of major Italian cities. In this instance, the protest takes place at the Trevi Fountain in Rome, a highly symbolic site of Italian artistic and cultural heritage.

In the image, seven activists are seen inside the fountain. Two of them hold a banner reading: "We won't pay for fossil fuels," while the others pour vegetable charcoal into the fountain's waters using plastic jerrycans. As shown in the photograph, the action immediately draws the attention of the surrounding crowd, composed predominantly of tourists, as the Trevi Fountain represents one of the essential stops on the Roman cultural tourism circuit.

This action is clearly designed to provoke strong emotional reactions – particularly indignation and astonishment – by visually altering an iconic site. The contrast between the fountain's white, symbolizing purity

and beauty, and the black of the poured charcoal serves as a metaphor for the contamination and environmental degradation caused by the climate crisis.

The aim, once again, is to stimulate critical reflection on the crisis and the ruptures it may generate – not only within natural and urban landscapes, but also across the economic, touristic, and cultural dynamics of the entire country.

Another protest action, the last selected for this analysis on symbolic targets, involved a symbol not only of architectural, historical, and cultural value, but also of political and administrative significance: *Palazzo Vecchio*, the seat of the Municipality of Florence.
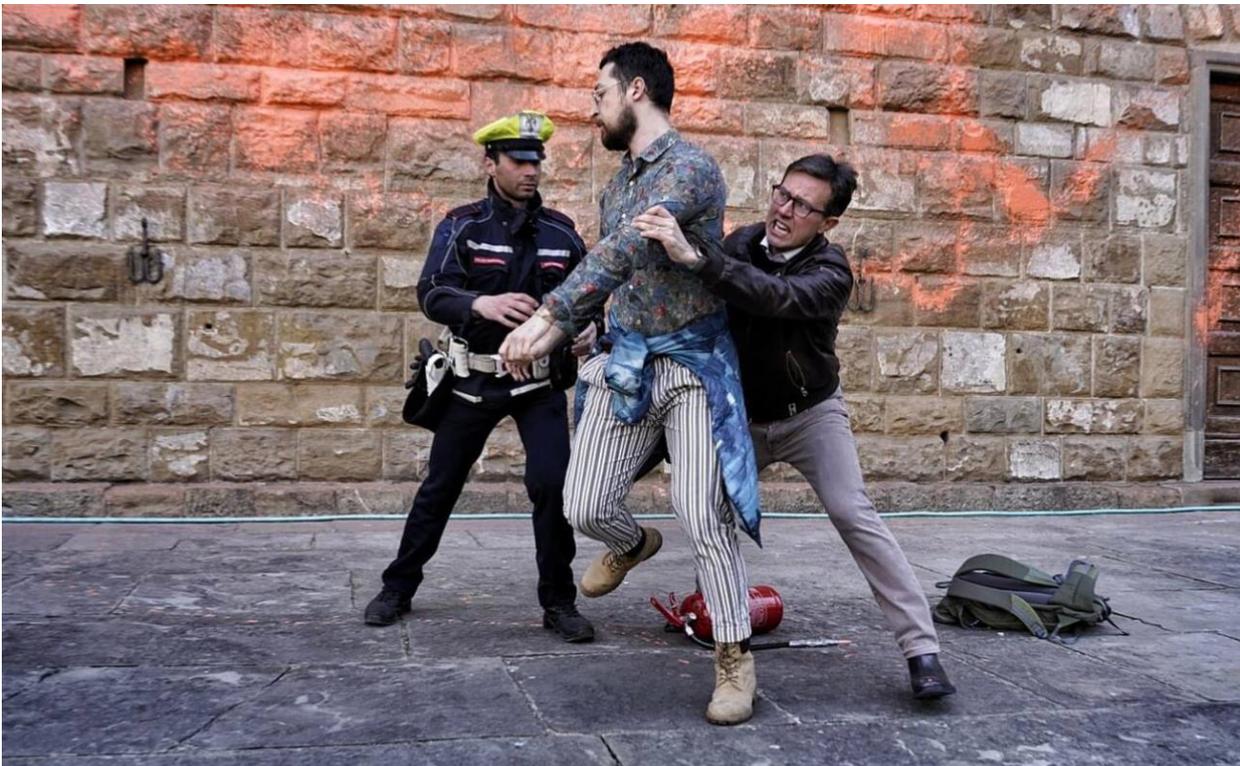

Figure n.3: Activist defaces the walls of *Palazzo Vecchio* with orange paint, Florence.

Figure n.3 captures a moment of heightened tension and confrontation between an activist from the *Ultima Generazione* movement, a local police officer, and the mayor of Florence, Dario Nardella. On the pavement lie a duffel bag and a red fire extinguisher – the same one used by the activist to spray washable orange paint on the walls of *Palazzo Vecchio*, which can be seen in the background.

Once again, the protest target is a historical-cultural symbol that, through the activist's action, is transformed into a platform from which to launch a political message. However, as previously mentioned, *Palazzo*

Vecchio is not only an icon of Italian historical and cultural heritage but also an emblem of the political-administrative system. From this perspective, the protest extends beyond mere criticism of institutions; it constitutes a direct appeal to authorities and public administrators to take a stand on global issues such as the climate crisis.

In this case, the activists are not simply denouncing political inertia; they are using *Palazzo Vecchio* as a symbolic battleground, one in which the classical configurations of conflict materialize, namely those between friends and enemies, and between adversaries and allies (Mouffe 1999, 2013). The mayor's physical intervention, as he steps in personally to defend the city's historical heritage and urban decorum, places him in direct opposition to the activists' demands, preliminarily shaping the trajectory of the ongoing conflict. In the hours following the protest, he would go on to label the activists as "barbarians."

> « They are barbarians. This is not how one protests; they should be defending civilization. ».
> (tg24.Sky.it – 17.2.2023)

This episode dramatically, and in some ways tragically, illustrates the extreme level of polarization that has been reached between those who view the climate crisis as an urgent priority and those who, by contrast, appear distant, unresponsive, and seemingly disengaged from the severity of the situation and the need for concrete solutions. On one side stand the activists and their supporters; on the other, symbolically represented by Mayor Dario Nardella, a segment of the Italian political establishment.

5.2 Objects as tools

Selbin (2023) argues that symbols can be employed in as many ways as human imagination allows. However, as Abrams and Gardner (2023) emphasize, there are limits that distinguish what can be considered a symbol from what remains merely an object. Not all objects, in fact, carry symbolic value within the dynamics of contentious politics. According to the authors, for an object to be considered part of contentious politics, it must possess an intrinsic symbolic meaning closely tied to the context in which it is used.

From this perspective, symbolic objects must represent, reflect, or at times refract elements of resistance, struggle, solidarity, and dissent. More broadly, they must embody collective action driven by individuals within a specific organizational context – whether a small group or an entire population. For this reason, such objects are frequently appropriated and repurposed beyond their original contexts. This is the case with the fire extinguisher used by *Ultima Generazione* activists and the orange paint with which they "sign" their protest actions – and even more generally, the color orange itself, which recurs as a visual leitmotif throughout nearly all of the movement's actions.

These cases demonstrate how objects can acquire multiple and fluid meanings, transgressing the boundaries of their conventional use and entering new contexts – social, yes, but above all, political.

The following images capture key moments in the protest actions of *Ultima Generazione*.

Figure n.4: Activist displays a banner after defacing the walls of *Cassa Depositi e Prestiti* with orange paint, Rome.

Figure n.5: Two activists display a banner after defacing the walls of *Cassa Depositi e Prestiti* with orange paint, Rome.

Figure n.6: Activists holding two orange smoke flares protests in front of *Arco della Pace*, Milan.

As can be seen, in each of these images the color orange becomes a tool capable of condensing a multiplicity of meanings, ranging from rebellion to demand and evoking both urgency and the risk associated with the climate crisis.

Figure n.4 depicts an *Ultima Generazione* activist seated in front of the headquarters of *Cassa Depositi e Prestiti* in Rome, shortly after having carried out an act of defacement. The woman is seated on the ground next to a fire extinguisher used to spray orange paint, which is visible both on the wall behind her and on the pavement. She also holds a banner with one of the movement's core slogans: "New Generation, No Gas and No Coal," while smiling despite the tension of the moment and the awareness of having broken the law. Her calm, smiling, and relaxed posture breaks with the stereotype of the "angry protester" and creates an empathetic narrative that contrasts with the public perception of such actions as "vandalism."

Figure n.5 offers a wide-angle view of the previous scene, showing two other activists seated a few meters away from the woman in Figure n.4. This wider framing allows for a clearer view of the symbolic tools used to target their chosen site, thus reinforcing the evocative power of the action. The orange paint covers a large portion of the building's façade, generating a strong visual impact that disrupts normalcy and the uninterrupted flow of everyday life.

This visual shock prompted the public, as well as passersby, employees of the institution, and of course, the media outlets that reported on the event, to question the meaning behind the action and the motivations driving it.

Below are some headlines from major national newspapers:

«**Climate: Ultima Generazione Activists Deface the Headquarters of Cassa Depositi e Prestiti with Orange Paint on the Wall**. A prompt, though predictable, intervention by security personnel quickly removed one of the activists' hands from the wall, causing abrasions».
(la Repubblica.it – 16.11.2022)

«**Another Blitz by Ultima Generazione Activists in Rome**. This morning, environmental activists threw orange paint on the entrance walls of Cassa Depositi e Prestiti. Their primary demand remains the non-reopening of coal-fired power plants and adherence to 2025 as the deadline for their decommissioning».
(Skytg24.it – 16.11.2022)

«**Ultima Generazione Climate Activists Target Cassa Depositi e Prestiti: Orange Paint Thrown on the Walls.** In the morning, four *Ultima Generazione* activists defaced the façade of the central headquarters of Cassa Depositi e Prestiti on Via Goito, following multiple blitz actions on the ring road and the attack on a Van Gogh painting».
(Corriere della Sera.it – 16-11-2022)

The choice of *Cassa Depositi e Prestiti* as the stage for the action, in addition to conveying a critique of the use of public resources to support an economic model deemed unsustainable, highlights how both the action itself and the symbolic objects employed are the result of a carefully designed communication strategy aimed at maximizing media exposure. In this context, the color orange, visually jarring – and the fire extinguisher – an object that evokes urgency and immediate response, transcend their conventional functions to become visual metaphors of alarm and impending climate catastrophe.

The final image, Figure n.6, portrays a young *Ultima Generazione* activist protesting in front of the *Arco della Pace* in Milan. The activist holds two orange smoke flares and wears a high-visibility vest of the same color. At the base of the *Arco della Pace*, which is visibly marked with paint, two fire extinguishers can be seen, recurring elements in the movement's protest actions, confirming the presence of a well-defined symbolic strategy. In this instance, tools such as the colored smoke flares, fire extinguishers, background paint, and the high-visibility vest worn by the activist become true symbolic objects functioning as a rhizome of urgency and risk. They form a tangle of imaginaries tied to the crisis situation (Gould 2007; Selbin 2023).

As several scholars have noted (Anderson 1991; Castoriadis 1998; Taylor 2004), imaginaries do not merely reflect the real world, they actively contribute to shaping it, offering people the coordinates through which they construct and interpret the reality they inhabit. In other words, imaginaries generate narratives that give meaning to reality.

Through a process of symbolic bricolage, the objects used by *Ultima Generazione* activists – the color orange, the vest, the smoke flare, and the fire extinguisher – interweave to produce an instantly recognizable and highly communicative visual narrative (Selbin 2010). This process not only amplifies the movement's ability to convey its message but also contributes to redefining the material and ideological conditions of everyday life, influencing collective perceptions of climate risk.

5.3 Objects as stimuli

Speaking of words rather than objects, Tarrow (2013, p. 116) argues that "contentious language not only expresses mobilization, but also stimulates emotions and guides episodes of conflict and protest." Similarly, according to Abrams and Gardner (2023), symbolic objects can reflect and transmit the ways in which emotions and affect shape, influence, and structure the dynamics of collective action, impacting both mobilization processes and the formation of subjectivities. In particular, bodies, and in some cases, the bodies of the dead, often take on this role.

A paradigmatic example is that of George Floyd: the image of his lifeless body, pinned beneath the knee of a U.S. law enforcement officer, circulated globally, fueling and amplifying the struggle of the anti-racist movement both locally and internationally. Similarly, Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation served as the spark that ignited the so-called Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, triggering a wave of protests that transcended national borders and spread throughout the entire North African region.

In both cases, symbolic objects acquired a corporeal dimension, functioning not merely as artifacts but as active elements in the production of meaning and the construction of collective subjectivities. Their role went beyond the simple representation of preexisting meanings; rather, they operated as catalysts of affect, perception, and latent social dynamics. Through their materiality and capacity to evoke shared meanings, these objects activated political and experiential potentialities that, though embedded within the social fabric, surfaced and materialized in collective practices and mobilization processes.

In summary, as Abrams and Gardner (2023) emphasize, symbolic objects have acted as stimuli, awakening, eliciting, and facilitating dynamics of mobilization and acts of resistance and protest. However, their role as stimuli in contentious politics is not confined to representing death, vulnerability, or bodily suffering (Biggs 2005; Whalen-Bridge 2015).

The protests staged by *Ultima Generazione* offer an opportunity to deepen the analysis of this dimension and to expand its boundaries. Their actions and demonstrations belong to a broader tradition of nonviolent movements that have made the body the core of their political strategy, transforming it into a symbol, a tool of struggle, and a medium for constructing social conflict. As the literature suggests (Butler 2003; 2017; Cornish, Saunders 2013), the strategic use of the body as an element of resistance, vulnerability, and denunciation generates an aesthetic of mobilization capable of arousing strong emotions and making visible the urgency of a particular issue.

Yet the corporeal language of protest is never univocal: it is subject to interpretation, contestation, and resignification within the field of affective politics, where emotions become crucial variables for both mobilization and demobilization (Jasper 1998, 2014; Goodwin et al. 2001).

From this perspective, the road blockades carried out by *Ultima Generazione* activists are particularly useful for exploring this dilemmatic and polysemous dimension of emotion-driven collective action. The following image captures one of the many road blockades organized by the movement on the *Grande Raccordo Anulare* in Rome.

Figure n.7: Activists engage in discussion with motorists and motorcyclists during a road blockade, Rome.

The geometry of the image is very clear: four activists from the movement are present, one standing on the left and three seated in the middle of the road holding a banner, while visibly irritated motorists and motorcyclists attempt to understand what is happening. One activist is engaged in conversation with a motorcyclist, while the other three use their bodies as physical barriers by sitting in the center of the roadway, disrupting the normal flow of traffic.

In this context, the body becomes a physical obstacle, a material presence that halts a functional system, namely the logistical system, causing a disruption perceived as annoying and destabilizing, but which simultaneously fosters direct confrontation and generates contentious interaction between protesters and drivers.

The drivers' irritation is clearly visible, both in their facial expressions, such as the woman on the scooter, and in their gestures, like the red-haired woman attempting to speak with an activist at the center of the scene. In the background, other motorists can be seen having exited their vehicles and engaged in discussion, seemingly trying to make sense of what is unfolding.

However, the irritation extends beyond individual reactions; it reflects a broader social dynamic in which the protest action is perceived as a violation of everyday order and normalcy. This dynamic mirrors the tension between the urgency felt by the activists, who view the climate crisis as an immediate priority, and the indifference or alternative priorities of a segment of the population focused on immediate needs.

The activists' goal in this case is to provoke a strong emotional response, whether of support or opposition, in order to create a communicative flashpoint. The scene highlights the gap between the perspectives of activists and those of the motorists: the former regard the climate crisis as an absolute emergency, while the latter appear more preoccupied with the immediate routines and trivialities that shape and give meaning to their daily lives.

Actions of this kind, precisely because of their highly polarizing nature, spark public debate and challenge existing regimes of normalcy and attention, as well as the relationship between climate urgency and social

resistance to change (Norgaard 2006; Zerubavel 2002; Foucault 1977; 2009). The scene thus becomes a visual representation of the difficulties of collectively mobilizing a fragmented society, where not only space but also time emerges as a peculiar arena of conflict.

Spatially, the tension manifests between global and local dimensions, with claims seeking to connect systemic issues like the climate crisis to daily life priorities – such as arriving at work on time. Temporally, the conflict lies between a present dominated by urgency, risk, and danger, and a future perceived as abstract, distant, and uncertain, making it difficult to develop a collective vision that reconciles the short and long term.

Visually, the contrast between the small number of activists – four – and the much larger group of drivers offers a striking representation of the ongoing conflict around the climate issue. This scenario symbolizes an engaged and concerned minority opposed to an apparently indifferent and disengaged majority.

Another particularly meaningful and emblematic image that concludes this section on symbolic objects as stimuli portrays five activists during a protest action at the *Pinacoteca* of Bologna. In this case, the action was a response to a tragic event directly tied to the effects of the climate crisis: the landslide that struck the community of Casamicciola on the island of Ischia, resulting in several fatalities, including children.

Figure n.8: Five activists stage a theatrical protest at the *Pinacoteca* of Bologna by pouring red paint over their bodies, Bologna.

Figure n.8 shows five activists: three in the background writing messages of denunciation against the Italian government, and two in the foreground, heads bowed, pouring red paint onto their bodies a symbolic gesture representing the blood and death caused by the landslide.

The protest action was accompanied by an official statement, reported by several news outlets, as well as by a spontaneous comment from one of the participants, interviewed by journalists present at the scene. Here are his words:

«We chose the wall where Guido Reni's *The Massacre of the Innocents* is displayed, explains Andrea, one of the activists who took part in the action together with his father. By placing the photo of the children who died in Ischia, we wanted to create a dialogue with the artwork itself […] Ours is not an act of vandalism, but the alarmed cry of desperate citizens who refuse to resign themselves to the destruction of the planet, and, with it, their own lives».
(fanpage.it – 3.12.2022)

The activist's words add further nuance and depth to an image already rich in symbolic and performative meaning. The act of self-immolation, albeit in theatrical terms, enables the activists to render the trauma of the climate crisis visible through the language of the body, while simultaneously suggesting that the crisis is not solely an environmental issue, but a collective wound that affects human bodies and lives. Their bodies, covered in red paint, both stimulate and embody the connection between climate policy and loss of life, transforming an abstract issue into an immediate and tangible concern.

In this context, the activists move beyond verbal denunciation to symbolically incorporate the crisis into their own bodies, producing an image capable of capturing public attention and eliciting an emotional response.

These final two images are particularly significant because they underscore another key characteristic of symbolic objects: their dynamism and non-exclusivity. An object may serve, either simultaneously or sequentially, as a target, a tool, and a stimulus in a protest action. Its role depends on context and interpretation. This illustrates a high degree of polysemy, making symbolic objects not only powerful communicative devices but also ideal instruments for conveying complex meanings through multiple perspectives.

6. Conclusions

The analysis conducted in this study has highlighted the significant role that symbolic objects play in contentious politics, confirming their capacity to function as targets, tools, and stimuli within collective action. Through the examination of the protests carried out by the *Ultima Generazione* movement, it has been possible to observe how activists have employed a wide range of material objects to amplify their message, create powerful visual impacts, and generate communicative flashpoints aimed at mobilizing public attention to the climate crisis.

The images analyzed demonstrate that symbolic objects are not merely material artifacts, but genuine narrative devices that, within conflict contexts, become imbued with multiple and shifting meanings. From the use of orange paint and the defacement of artworks and monuments to the employment of the body as both stimulus and instrument of protest, each of the movement's actions has been conceived with a precise communicative strategy, designed to spark public debate and render the ecological crisis visible. This study has shown that symbolic objects do not merely convey messages; they influence mobilization dynamics and processes of political subjectivation, constructing collective imaginaries and redefining the boundaries of protest.

Another key finding concerns the dialectical nature of symbolic objects, which can be interpreted in varying ways depending on the perceptions and responses of the actors involved. For activists, these objects represent tools of denunciation and awareness-raising; for institutions and segments of public opinion, they may instead

assume a negative connotation, contributing to the criminalization of protest. This phenomenon fits within the broader process of polarization in contentious politics, wherein symbolic objects become vehicles of both consensus and opposition.

Moreover, the research has shown that symbolic objects can act as catalysts of emotions and affect, influencing the effectiveness of collective actions. The ability to evoke indignation, empathy, or fear is a key element in constructing political visibility and strengthening collective identities (Castells 2013; 2014; della Porta & Diani 2006; Flam & King 2005; Jasper 2011; Melucci 1989). In this sense, the use of the body as a medium of protest, whether in road blockades or performative actions involving red paint, has made the climate crisis not only an environmental issue, but also a social and human one, reinforcing the link between the symbolic and the material.

Finally, this study has confirmed that symbolic objects are not fixed or immutable entities, but rather fluid and contextual elements that adapt and transform according to political strategies and social dynamics. Their polysemy and ability to transcend conventional uses make them essential tools for understanding how social movements construct meaning, mobilize support, and challenge institutions.

Looking ahead, the analysis of symbolic objects in contentious politics could be expanded through comparative studies of other social movements, exploring how different political and cultural contexts influence the role and function of these artifacts in collective mobilization. Furthermore, an interdisciplinary approach that brings together sociology, semiotics, and communication studies could offer an even deeper understanding of the relationship between materiality, symbolism, and political action.

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