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Objects as Symbols in Last Generation: A Critical Visual Analysis

Angelo Galiano

CCPS – University of Salento

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.

Corresponding authors: email: angelo.galiano@unisalento.it

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 objects

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