

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

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