

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.