

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.