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.