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.

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