«We chose the wall where Guido Reni's *The Massacre of the Innocents* is displayed, explains Andrea, one of the activists who took part in the action together with his father. By placing the photo of the children who died in Ischia, we wanted to create a dialogue with the artwork itself […] Ours is not an act of vandalism, but the alarmed cry of desperate citizens who refuse to resign themselves to the destruction of the planet, and, with it, their own lives».
(fanpage.it – 3.12.2022)

The activist's words add further nuance and depth to an image already rich in symbolic and performative meaning. The act of self-immolation, albeit in theatrical terms, enables the activists to render the trauma of the climate crisis visible through the language of the body, while simultaneously suggesting that the crisis is not solely an environmental issue, but a collective wound that affects human bodies and lives. Their bodies, covered in red paint, both stimulate and embody the connection between climate policy and loss of life, transforming an abstract issue into an immediate and tangible concern.

In this context, the activists move beyond verbal denunciation to symbolically incorporate the crisis into their own bodies, producing an image capable of capturing public attention and eliciting an emotional response.

These final two images are particularly significant because they underscore another key characteristic of symbolic objects: their dynamism and non-exclusivity. An object may serve, either simultaneously or sequentially, as a target, a tool, and a stimulus in a protest action. Its role depends on context and interpretation. This illustrates a high degree of polysemy, making symbolic objects not only powerful communicative devices but also ideal instruments for conveying complex meanings through multiple perspectives.

6. Conclusions

The analysis conducted in this study has highlighted the significant role that symbolic objects play in contentious politics, confirming their capacity to function as targets, tools, and stimuli within collective action. Through the examination of the protests carried out by the *Ultima Generazione* movement, it has been possible to observe how activists have employed a wide range of material objects to amplify their message, create powerful visual impacts, and generate communicative flashpoints aimed at mobilizing public attention to the climate crisis.

The images analyzed demonstrate that symbolic objects are not merely material artifacts, but genuine narrative devices that, within conflict contexts, become imbued with multiple and shifting meanings. From the use of orange paint and the defacement of artworks and monuments to the employment of the body as both stimulus and instrument of protest, each of the movement's actions has been conceived with a precise communicative strategy, designed to spark public debate and render the ecological crisis visible. This study has shown that symbolic objects do not merely convey messages; they influence mobilization dynamics and processes of political subjectivation, constructing collective imaginaries and redefining the boundaries of protest.

Another key finding concerns the dialectical nature of symbolic objects, which can be interpreted in varying ways depending on the perceptions and responses of the actors involved. For activists, these objects represent tools of denunciation and awareness-raising; for institutions and segments of public opinion, they may instead

assume a negative connotation, contributing to the criminalization of protest. This phenomenon fits within the broader process of polarization in contentious politics, wherein symbolic objects become vehicles of both consensus and opposition.

Moreover, the research has shown that symbolic objects can act as catalysts of emotions and affect, influencing the effectiveness of collective actions. The ability to evoke indignation, empathy, or fear is a key element in constructing political visibility and strengthening collective identities (Castells 2013; 2014; della Porta & Diani 2006; Flam & King 2005; Jasper 2011; Melucci 1989). In this sense, the use of the body as a medium of protest, whether in road blockades or performative actions involving red paint, has made the climate crisis not only an environmental issue, but also a social and human one, reinforcing the link between the symbolic and the material.

Finally, this study has confirmed that symbolic objects are not fixed or immutable entities, but rather fluid and contextual elements that adapt and transform according to political strategies and social dynamics. Their polysemy and ability to transcend conventional uses make them essential tools for understanding how social movements construct meaning, mobilize support, and challenge institutions.

Looking ahead, the analysis of symbolic objects in contentious politics could be expanded through comparative studies of other social movements, exploring how different political and cultural contexts influence the role and function of these artifacts in collective mobilization. Furthermore, an interdisciplinary approach that brings together sociology, semiotics, and communication studies could offer an even deeper understanding of the relationship between materiality, symbolism, and political action.

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