The Early Years

The School of Agricultural Sciences at the University of Naples, where Vittorio Santaniello studied, was considered both prestigious and remote. It was located in Portici, a populous town south of Naples, in the Royal Palace (a summer house of the Bourbons in the 18th century), amidst a wondrous park and a splendid garden. In the 1950s, it was one of the few schools in the University that required rigorous attendance from students to virtually all classes. Vittorio was a conscientious student, and, at the same time, a great believer in the importance of the practice of “student life,” a mixture of bohemian attitudes and worldly behavior. This made Vittorio an enjoyable companion but did not reduce his dedication to his studies and his determination to rapidly pursue academic achievements.

His way of dealing with life was always a mixture of joviality and humorous detachment, combined with concern and serious planning. He developed this strategy of behavior over the years, and the strategy worked because it reflected the natural inclination of a generous character—ready to help and vulnerable to disappointment, but also relentless and effective in overcoming hardships and obstacles. As most people from the South of Italy, he had a dramatic conception of friendship. For him “a friend in need was a friend indeed.” Vittorio had developed profound, strong feelings toward some of us—a sentiment that we experienced directly throughout the many years in which we knew each other. This sentiment, however, was not exclusive, and we witnessed Vittorio’s enlarged capacity to make friends and to cultivate new and old friendships with a unique mixture of generosity, solidarity, and human warmth.

It is difficult to accurately depict student life in Italy in the years of the economic boom (the “Italian miracle”) in the late 1950s and the early 1960s. The University was still a place for the elites, but as the Italian economy developed at great speed, it was becoming increasingly open to young people from an emerging lower-middle class. The University continued to adhere to much of the protocol established over the centuries, but many of the rules were being challenged. Legitimacy of the older ways was being eroded, while at the same time no convincing new model for teaching and learning appeared available, except perhaps the ones represented by the great institutions of learning in the Anglo-Saxon world. Even more than in England, which had been the object of desire for previous generation of students, it was the US universities that appeared to embody the promise of a new beginning. Vittorio was an ardent believer in the American system for graduate work and in the positive effects of a learning experience in the United States. At the time, students’ attitudes toward the United States were tinted with ambiguities, but admiration and attraction were prevalent. The Kennedy administration, then just taking over the country, with its almost legendary mixture of grace and intellectual appeal, did much to reinforce these positive feelings.

Vittorio found his way to the United States almost immediately after he graduated in Agricultural Sciences from the University of Naples through the assistance of one of the major academic “Barons” of Agricultural Economics in Italy. With his help, Vittorio went to North Carolina State University. There, he rapidly earned a master’s degree in Agricultural Economics, but was also involved in a serious car accident.

This first American experience was important for Vittorio’s maturity as a young and promising scholar and gave him full access to the standard Italian academic track. He joined the prestigious Faculty of Economics at University of Rome “La Sapienza,” first as an Assistant and then as an Associate Professor of Agricultural Economics, and he began enjoying the prospect of
a promising career in an exciting intellectual milieu. The
formal learning dimension was not, however, the only
effect of his American degree. The combination of his
enthusiasm for the United States, and the exposure to a
merit-based, pragmatic culture touched more profound
chords of his character. His enduring enthusiasm for
development economics, his command of cost-benefit
analysis, and the experience working as a consultant
with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the
United Nations (FAO), led to a position as economist at
the InterAmerican Development Bank.

The few years he spent in Washington were momen-
tous ones, as he tried to make the most of the American
experience. At the same time, he was at a point of his
family life cycle, where he wanted to be back to Italy.
Vittorio’s character and his dedication to work led to
continuous planning for professional, political, and
social change. In addition to working for the InterAmer-
ican Development Bank, he also worked with Pasquale
Scandizzo (at the World Bank at that time) on several
issues. Some of these were technical in nature, involv-
ing measurements and academic papers, and some were
more broadly professional in the realm of development
projects planned for his return to Italy, where the politi-
cal situation seemed both dramatic and full of promise.

Vittorio had a number of contacts in the socialist
party and was often excited at reports and prospects for
involvement from these sources. He had respect for
political power and, at the same time, a belief in the
problematic nature of power and the importance of
being independent from it. Vittorio was indeed fasci-
nated by power, especially in its most practical aspects
deriving from the exercise of great authority. At the
same time, however, he had a natural nonchalance, vis-
à-vis personal power, and this made him almost indiffer-
ent to the suggestions of political persuasion and oppor-
tunism. It was perhaps for this reason that he never tried
to be close to a politician or to sell his professional
advice in the political arena in spite of his ideological
closeness and, in some cases, even private acquaintance
with the increasingly powerful socialist politicians in
Italy.

University of Rome “Tor Vergata”

Back in Italy at the beginning of the 1980s, Vittorio was
involved with a group of friends in the foundation of the
School of Economics in a new University of Rome at
Tor Vergata. The School of Economics was founded by
a very tight group, a brotherhood of academic profes-
sionals that shared a common interpretation of what the
University should be and also a specific project. Vittor-
io’s dedication to this common cause was, from the
beginning, complete. It was an opportunity to overcome
the alienation that he had experienced in other situa-
tions, where the structure of power had seemed arbitrary
and inconsistent with what the institution purported to
be its mission. At Tor Vergata he had a chance to con-
tribute to both the mission and the vision of the school,
and his enthusiasm perhaps went even beyond the elation
that we all felt as our plans and dreams gradually
became true.

He contributed vastly to building the faculty, the
graduate program, the teaching, and research standards.
His relentless activity of designing new projects—he
conceived and managed a successful two-year program
of institutional advice and training for the University of
Maputo in Mozambique—finally found a worthy chal-
lenge in the International Consortium for Agricultural
Biotechnology Research (ICABR). It was the last fron-
tier of Vittorio’s commitment and achievements in insti-
tution building.

International Consortium for Agricultural
Biotechnology Research (ICABR)

The regulation and utilization of agricultural biotechnol-
ogy has become a major cause of conflict between the
European Union and the United States. This conflict
spills over to the rest of the world, where the Latin
American nations have adopted the US approach and
African countries follow the pattern established by the
European Union. Above all, Vittorio wanted the Ravello
meetings and the consortium to provide a forum for
exchange between scientists in the European Union, the
United States, and developing countries so that more
effective biotechnology policies would emerge. Vittorio
Santaniello was crucial in establishing—in the midst of
Europe—a sanctuary where new research findings and
varying perspectives on the economics of agricultural
biotechnology were presented and debated. The Ravello
conference and the ICABR consortium that sponsored it
have provided a forum for presenting new knowledge
and international dialogue on the utilization of new bio-
logical knowledge in agriculture and natural resource
systems.

This project started with a simple and tentative idea:
to construct an international network of scholars around
a highly controversial topic that was as yet almost
neglected by the economists. Vittorio was enthusiastic,
determined, and as he had demonstrated in many other
cases, ready to put himself on the line to realize the proj-

Scandizzo, Zilberman, & Pray — Vittorio Santaniello: Founder of the ICABR
ect. He had a sense of urgency about it, a feeling justified by the growth and establishment of the Ravello conference and the consortium itself.

The first conference had about 40 participants and was organized by Vittorio Santaniello, Bob Evenson, and Jerry Carlson in 1996 at the University of Rome “Tor Vergata,” on the economics of biotechnology. Vittorio and Bob Evenson envisioned an annual event in Italy; FAO, “Tor Vergata,” and the Yale Development Center co-sponsored the second event in 1997, which attracted close to 100 participants. At the end of this conference, the International Consortium of Agricultural Biotechnology Research was established, with Vittorio Santaniello, Bob Evenson, David Zilberman, and Bill Lesser on its board. It was agreed that the consortium would have an annual conference and would serve as an intellectual clearinghouse for knowledge about agricultural biotechnology. From the beginning, the board realized that the annual conference would not attract committed participants unless it combined knowledge with pleasure, and Vittorio was dedicated to expose the participants first to the best of Rome and then to the treasures of Italy. The second conference included an exclusive visit to Villa Borghese, a night tour of Rome, and unforgettable meals. The sessions were full of excitement and heated discussion and sometimes lasted much longer than planned. In one of the days, the discussion ended at about 8:30 pm (it was scheduled to end at 6 pm), which delayed dinner at one of Rome’s best restaurants. Dinner therefore did not begin until 10 pm, and the night tour around the Vatican did not begin until 12:30 am.

Rome has many charms, but traffic is not one of them, and the long trips from the hotels to the meeting facilities in “Tor Vergata” exhausted the participants. Finding a venue that would reduce the transportation hassle became a major priority, and then Vittorio raised the possibility of holding future meetings at Ravello. We did not know much about the place, but the pictures and the favorable financial conditions convinced the board and the membership of the newly formed consortium to give Ravello a chance.

Before the third year, Vittorio initiated the establishment of a state-of-the-art website, and this device and word of mouth attracted about a hundred participants to the meeting, which started in Rome and ended in two days in Ravello. It was love at first sight between the ICABR and Ravello. Villa Rufolo and the other palaces; the comfortable hotels captured us with their breath-taking vistas and delicate cuisine, the ceramic stores and the water holes near the city squares, the limoncello and the Grappa. The two days of our initial visit established a tradition of enlightening and enjoyable meetings in Ravello that are likely to continue for years to come.

Vittorio wore many hats within the ICABR and the Ravello meetings. He was the ultimate host. He treated everyone as his guest and felt personally responsible for participants to enjoy the meetings. He loved Italy and was proud to showcase it to his guests. The tours he organized—to Pompeii, the Naples Museum, Capri, various sites in the Amalfi coast, concerts, and other events he orchestrated—reflected his sense of adventure and his refined tastes. Vittorio was an outstanding organizer and coordinator. While we loved to complain about the “glitches,” the late bus, the malfunctioning equipment, the noisy rooms, and the busy schedule, overall the Ravello meetings were very effective, and many of us returned every year and were asking for more. We realized Vittorio’s touch in the last two years when his health prevented him from being involved in all details of planning and management.

More than anything, Vittorio was an outstanding intellectual entrepreneur and leader. He was the dynamo pushing for the publishing of a new book, encouraging and demanding from his partners in the consortium’s leadership that they come up with new ideas and themes for each conference. He was always on the lookout for new presenters and intriguing new perspectives. He was fighting to include practitioners from industry, non-economists, and policymakers so as to maintain the excitement and relevance of the meetings.

The seven books that came out of the Ravello conferences, this special issue, the many papers that these meetings inspired, and the important role of the ICABR and its members in providing knowledge and expertise for policy decisions on agricultural biotechnology and related issues are directly linked to Vittorio’s leadership and vision. We all miss him, but his vision is carried forward as the Ravello conferences and the ICABR are thriving.

ICABR Books


