

Ueber-Brands™-Podcast Episode 2

Interview with David LaRocca on Brunello Cucinelli

I'm much delighted to welcome today's guest David LaRocca (DL), PhD. to our podcast. David is a much-published author, editor, film director, and - in particular - scholar of philosophy and rhetoric at the universities of Harvard, Cornell and now State University of New York (SUNY).

I came across David's work entitled 'A New Philosophy of Clothes'; it's a fantastic documentary about the very singular, neo-humanistic approach to business that Brunello Cucinelli, the Italian luxury cashmere and fashion brand is taking.

JP: David, welcome to the show.

DL: Hi, JP. It's great to be here.

JP: David, you're into so many interesting things. I would love for you to give us a little bit more detail and flavour versus what I could do.

[02:00]

DL: Well, as you already mentioned some of the categories of my work, I teach and lecture at Ithaca College and the College at Cortland (SUNY). I'm also a visiting scholar at Cornell University. I have published books and edited volumes on film and American philosophy, and I'm really looking forward to talking with you today about Brunello Cucinelli.

JP: And that is actually one of the things that struck me. You're an expert on all things philosophy, ethics ... what brought you to want to study an Italian fashion brand?

DL: Well, I have a PhD. in philosophy and that's the main stream of my research for about 20 years. I also should mention that I'm not employed by the company Brunello Cucinelli, I never have been. So, I come to the company as a much-interested outsider, as a critic, as a sceptic and as a customer.

JP: And you publish in the Journal of Religion and Business Ethics, ... it's all very fascinating. But I hope, after this little podcast episode, it will all come together for people how ethics and even religion might relate to branding.

But before we dive into that - because I know it will be a deep dive - can you just explain to the few listeners (readers) who might not know at all what Brunello Cucinelli is all about. - What do they actually make?

DL: In a very literal sense, they are selling clothes. This began many decades ago when he started selling cashmere sweaters and acquired the nickname 'Cashmere King', because he specialized in this particular sweater and they were very colourful. But over time, this has evolved not only into a full line of clothes for men and women but also a large multi-faceted philanthropic organization that involves a school, a theatre, a foundation and other initiatives. It has gone very far from the initial sweaters, so we might then talk about what he is selling beyond clothes and that is where we are going to have to dive.

[04:26]

JP: Very definitely. And all of this happens in Umbria, right?

DL: That's right. The locus of all these operations is a small medieval village called Solomeo. It is about a half an hour drive from Perugia and also very close to Assisi, the home of St. Francis and not far from Norcia which is the home of St. Benedict. These names will become relevant and important in a few minutes.

JP: In our book, one of the concepts that we talk about is if you want to go up in price and esteem ... - these sweaters can set you back, not only a few hundred but up to a few thousand dollars - if you want to go up in esteem you have to 'go deep'. And it seems like Brunello is going very deep and that's what attracted you. Can you talk a little bit about how Brunello Cucinelli goes deep with his brand story?

DL: The reason that the company initially piqued my interest, and why my background as a philosopher is relevant, is that I was surprised to see how much and how frequently he would reference philosophers as a source of inspiration and guidance. It begins from Plato and his lead character Socrates,

on through the Middle Ages and into the renaissance with Mirandola and with the signature contributions of the St. Assisi and St. Benedict, also Kant and onward to literary figures and so on. It's not every day that you encounter a brand - you can pick any luxury brand and if we just stay within high-end fashion like Ralph Lauren, Gucci, Bottega Veneta - ... they aren't quoting from Aristotle and Kant. For someone who studies and teaches these figures, my interest was piqued and I was intrigued to know how this luxury [casual]wear company was using those philosophies effectively. - Or was it a pun? How exactly were they using it? So, that was my initial connection into the company and its outlook.

[06:51]

JP: Fascinating! And when we talking about going deep to go up, it seems to me that when we list all these philosophers and great thinkers and Saints there's always a risk of going over the top. As we talk about Assisi or Benedict ... - penniless monks but expensive clothes, how does that jive?

DL: Right. I do think that there are completely legitimate reasons to be sceptical and to identify a paradox, and I've written two lengthy articles for the journal of religion and business ethics in which I try to articulate and explore these apparent paradoxes. For example, the relationship between luxury and quality or the one you point out - how does someone who sells extremely expensive cashmere clothing connecting with the cynicism, the modesty, the humility and the poverty of Assisi and Benedict.

[07:56]

JP: One fact we know is that he is very successful as an enterprise, if you measure it in terms of profits and share price, because he is listed on the Milan's Stock Exchange. So, how do you explain that? Is all these new humanism relevant to his buyers? How exactly does it help him to sell expensive sweaters?

DL: Well, this is part of the mystery for me. As a philosopher when I walk into a showroom and I see a necklace or a bag or a pair of shoes sitting beside a copy of Marcus Aurelius, I go for the book as much as for the fashion. I'm equally

interested in these two things, but the question I have is what the connection is.

So, for example, we could talk about the enterprise in Solomeo. There he has around 500 employees who live in beautifully restored medieval buildings, working in wonderful environments. There's a theatre and a library that's open and accessible by workers and there is generally a high quality of life for factory workers. Now all of those workers are directly on a daily basis benefitting from Cucinelli's humanistic or new humanistic outlook. The question is if you go to Bleeker street or Madison Avenue [both in NYC], and you go into a shop there could be the purchase of a product but there may not be an understanding of how the profit of that product is making its way back to Solomeo and other initiatives.

[09:34]

JP: We've been puzzled with this on a lot of our brands, even the philosophically less elevated brands like the popular Ben & Jerry's. They say in their mission statement that they want to try and heal society while selling ice-cream. That is a very ambitious goal and we were obviously wondering how many ice-cream eaters actually know about that.

And we came to two conclusions: One is that having such a strong mission helps these brands being very consistent in everything they do, in their manifestations, in everything they say. So, that's already one good thing when you are brand and a marketer of a brand.

The other one - which is more important in this context - is that 'influencers' and people in the inner sanctum and the media would be fascinated with these deeper layers of the brand that no regular buyer might venture into, at least not at first encounter. These deeper layers make them talk about the brand, carry on the message, become disciples, put it in the articles, invite Brunello to talks and all those things that create awareness and the esteem that we talked about earlier.

Does that ring true to you? Is that something that you noticed?

DL: Well, it does. It is one way to make sense of that connection or disconnection. So, the two options that we have so far are that the customers

by and large are ignorant of the philosophy or they are buying the product because they are aware of the philosophy. A third option, perhaps, a way to resolve the paradox is one of the ways I pursue in my articles - and that is something that I feel inspired by – something by the 19th century writer Thomas Carlyle. He wrote a book called the ‘Sartor Resartus’ which means ‘the tailor re-tailored’ and it’s a story about a philosophy of clothes. So, I draw inspiration from this because I think there’s something transformative about what Cucinelli is doing to the clothes; he is trying to translate these philosophical ideas through craft, workmanship and the dignity of labour into the clothes themselves. ***So, if you want to know about the ethics of the company all you need to do is touch the clothes, wear the clothes, and in that sense you've taken on the garment that represents the philosophy.***

[12:34]

JP: Many people refer to this ‘Renaissance’ concept of ‘sprezzatura’ as a way of living, a lifestyle. It seems to particularly fit with what Brunello is doing, the lifestyle he portrays or manifests, as well as the clothes he supplies his customers.

DL: Yes, this is a wonderful notion that he uses ‘sprezzatura’. The way that Cucinelli translates this is ‘make it your own’. So, when you buy his clothes ***he doesn't want you to wear the clothes as a uniform or as some sort of indication of your filial relationship to the company but rather to take the clothes and dress yourself to become your own philosopher of clothes.***

[13:30]

JP: That certainly sounds like a beautiful mission statement right there and ties with something else that Brunello is talking about a lot, which is ‘Beauty’. He even has this foundation and one of their key projects is called ‘A project for Beauty’. So, this might be another part of his mission and maybe something that people experience - even if it is subconsciously.

DL: Yes, it is a very good point and this is a good example of philosophical content. When we hear the word ‘beauty’, we might think that it is superficial. Our minds might go to the study of aesthetics, which is the study of beauty. But for Cucinelli there is an ethical imperative in his notion. He says that he

wants to ‘embellish the world’ and that was something actually Adrian, the emperor said that he can’t help but want to embellish the world. ***Cucinelli has taken on this imperial dictate to create beauty .But there is an ethical imperative caught up in that, so you cannot succeed in creating beauty if you are abusing people or misusing them.*** So, apart from the foundation that you mentioned, he also has a school called ‘School of Craftsmanship’ and the disciplines in this school are – mending and linking, cutting and assembling, tailoring, and fourth category that might surprise people who look into a fashion company, masonry. And masonry is a great indicator of his commitment to restoration. So, he has restored a church, he has built a theatre and a library, and currently he is restoring an Etruscan arch in Perugia. So, for him beautification is actually part of his treatment of workers and his sense of the continuity of time.

I think a great example, as far as the corporate culture goes, you might even say corporate rhetoric, is someone might ask a question “You’re the president of a company. What’s your 5 year plan?” When you ask Cucinelli this question he says, “I have 500 year plan”.

[16:06]

JP: That sounds similar to what we heard in an interview with Shang Xia, which is [a sister brand of Hermes based] in China [dedicated] to revive the Chinese arts and crafts. Almost un-do the Cultural Revolution. And when asked about – ‘when are you going to turn profitable?’, ‘when are you going to open the next flagship store?’, ‘when are you going to expand internationally?’, their answer was exactly the same – ‘We’re not thinking in quarters or years or even decades, we are thinking in centuries because that is how long we want these crafts to endure and we want our product and our philosophy to be timeless’.

But the interesting thing in what you described – the school to revive the crafts, the building of the theatre -... and I know you were lead into a library when he received you and that seems to be the ritual every time anyone wants to talk to Brunello in Solomeo. They first wait in the library, and apparently he comes late, so people get a chance to actually peruse the many philosophy boxes that he has in it. All of that seems to reflect the concept that we talk about in the book which we call ‘Un-Selling’, meaning doing everything not to

come across as somebody who wants to pitch his product or even pitch a direct, didactic kind of idea.

I don't think Brunello comes out and says 'I want to make the world more beautiful' or 'I want to teach the world how to dress properly' or any of such things. He is building a world that he lives and projects, and it seems like he wants to draw people in almost instinctively. What do you think about that?

DL: I think it's a combination of perhaps the instinctive allure of beautiful things and the quality of the clothing can cast its own spell. Touching a cashmere sweater of a certain pedigree is its own kind of attractive element. So, that might be the level of instinct. But there is so much in Solomeo, in the stores and in the literature surrounding the company that there is a way in which it is literally described. The first link, the largest and most prominent one on the website is 'Philosophy', then it's 'Solomeo' and only then a third category is 'Cashmere'. So, before you even get to the collections or the boutiques you have these two very prominent links and pages that discuss philosophy and the town.

I might go back though to pick up on your idea about the Chinese company that talks about timelessness because perhaps this is the way that Cucinelli is going against the grain of the dominant fashion industry. If we just think about the usual association with fashion in terms of clothing, it is extremely trend-driven, it ephemeral and it is often full of bold changes. ... So, we've gone through fashion week in New York City, many shows are happening in Milan and in Paris. Throughout the year there are these sortes of gatherings to celebrate change. But Cucinelli pushes against this, in fact, in some cases reverses the direction altogether because he presents collections that resembles last year's collection. He seeks a kind of continuity from season to season, from year to year.

[19:56]

JP: It seems to me that this concept of timelessness is a big element, a big part of what makes these brands 'Ueber'. They are neither following a fad nor following a fashion, they are not selling either, which is evident from the website. There is no 'Buy Now' button to be found. So, your New York University colleagues who study effective e-commerce would rate the site

extremely low because it is very tough to shop anything on that site [reference to Prof. Scott Galloway of NYU and his 'L2' e-commerce research reports]. So, it seems that he elevates himself and his brand above a fray and the commerce and all the superficial manifestations of that and goings about.

Now, you say he is about humanistic enterprise, and he is about closeness because we read about his famous reception and lunches under the tree and mingling with a co-worker and even rolling up his sleeves and having a regular game of soccer and everyone walking around in Solomeo in his clothes. ... It seems like it's all about 'inclusivity' and doing good. On the other hand, it's also extremely 'exclusive'. And that is something we described in our book – the 'balance between Inclusivity and Exclusivity'. Because while that is going on - doesn't it remain a fact that his fashions are only affordable and within reach of a tiny elite? Did you see signs about how he plays these concepts of inclusivity and exclusivity?

DL: Let me think about this... He creates an atmosphere in Solomeo that is very inclusive but if we think about the far-flung customers that are all over the world then the exclusivity shows its head which is - walk into a store, see the prices and perhaps you walk out. There's a lot of parallel with this notion you have of inclusion-exclusion with membership. So, if you want to make someone feel special you create the aura of membership.

I wonder ***with Cucinelli it's a sort of unstated citizenship. It's not that they don't give you a Solomeo passport but you do feel like, because you have gone to the origin of the clothes, that there is an invitation to make a connection between a place and the clothes and yourself.***

[22:53]

JP: Citizens of Solomeo... so explain that graduation process.

DL: It could just be as accidental as you're walking on Madison Avenue, you see a window, you pop your head in and it's the Cucinelli store and from nothing you touch the material and say 'This is incredible! I'm attracted to this', and so it might begin just with the level of purchasing of one or two items. Then they hear about Solomeo, many of them go to Solomeo and it's like a pilgrimage. They walk on the steps of Solomeo and suddenly they become part of that

community even if they live in New York or Los Angeles. From that point on, there is a pseudo membership quality or in Cucinelli's language you might think of it as 'Citizenship'.

JP: And of course they could become incredible disciples because these are the kinds of stories you tell to the next person.

We both don't work for Cucinelli but you had direct access to the Holy Grail. - So, maybe Brunello shared some secrets with you? I wondered, based on what you know, and based on your analysis, where do you think this brand is going over the next couple of decades? Maybe even after Brunello might no longer be around. Do you see eternal growth or do you see this to turn into a fad in the end? What would be your personal assumption or forecast?

DL: There are two ways of thinking about what the future looks like – there's the practical one and I think that the company going public is addressing their practical one which is that Brunello's life will come to an end. So, what does the company looks like after Mr. Cucinelli is no longer with us? And that to me is the job of business people, marketers, operation managers, factory workers and so on.

[25:10]

JP: But it seems to me that he is very concerned about that scenario. Hasn't he created a foundation and given a large share of the company to this foundation to try and help this idea of making it last eternally? Have you heard about that?

DL: I have. The other side is the more philosophical, spiritual, soul-driven aspect of the company. So, it's true; there's a relatively new foundation called the 'Brunello and Federica Cucinelli foundation' and this is meant to support the initiatives of the new humanism and interestingly, I think there's a way of imagining the new humanistic enterprise continuing hundreds and hundreds of years just like the academia that Plato founded or the lyceum that Aristotle founded. When you found a school and you have a form for the arts, an academy, a library, an amphitheatre, a philosopher's garden you create the conditions for ongoing meditation about things. ***If you think about what Cucinelli's done, it's very clever in addition to being deep. It's clever because***

he has tied his company's identity to one of the oldest elements of human existence and that is philosophy. So, are we still reading Plato and Aristotle and Epictetus? We are.

If Cucinelli's brand is sort of genetically wound up with philosophy then as long as we are interested in philosophy we will not only find Brunello Cucinelli an interesting figure as a businessman but also his company as founded on or through philosophy. ***So, instead of being tied to a fad or trend, Cucinelli has hitched his wagon to one of the most eternal elements of human existence.***

[27:22]

JP: David, I think that's a beautiful thought to conclude this discussion about Brunello Cucinelli that maybe he will succeed to make his brand and his enterprise endure by tying it so closely to these timeless items of philosophy, myth and creating a school and enduring legacy via that rather than try it via selling cashmere sweaters, which are wonderful but maybe not that enduring in their legacy.

DL: It's true. Time will tell what Mr. Cucinelli's longest lasting contribution will be and it's a fascinating aspect of his business ethics, to even bring this into the form of business at all.

JP: So, David you're extremely prolific. Can you tell us a little bit about what you're up to right now and how people reach you or even join you in some of your projects.

DL: I'm very easy to reach. I have a website (www.davidlarocca.org), I have an email address there and I'll be happy to hear from people. Presently, I have a couple of book projects that are forthcoming and in the works, I have a co-edited volume on 'Transnational Literature and Philosophy' coming out in a couple of months with Dartmouth College Press. I'm also in the process of editing a new volume called 'The philosophy of Documentary Film' and other initiatives include a documentary film where I'm the producer and director and it's about the photographer Joel Friedman, who lives and works in New York City and all other information are available on my website.

JP: That sounds exciting and that's just the part of what you do, I'm in awe. Thank you so much David, for sharing your time, insights and wisdom with us.

