



Brazil's Rand Paul: Can Libertarianism Fix Crime And Corruption?

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Fabio Ostermann's office in the southern Brazilian city of Porto Alegre boasts a bookshelf with rows dedicated to Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, Ludwig von Mises. On top sits a copy of the American Declaration of Independence, a ukulele and a cartoon blow-up doll of Brazil's former president, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, dressed in the black-and-white stripes of a prison uniform, sporting an inmate's number.

Over the former president's mouth, it reads "Menos Marx, mais Mises" — less Marx, more Mises, the latter referring to libertarian pioneer Ludwig von Mises.

Ostermann, 32, is a key player in Brazil's growing libertarian movement, which has risen against a backdrop of the country's collapsing left. He's led youth groups on college campuses, co-organized some of the country's largest-ever protests — which may have helped impeach the country's leftist president, Dilma Rousseff. Now, he's the president of the Social Liberty Party in his home state, which he is reforming to defend classical libertarian ideals.

He ran and lost for mayor of his hometown of Porto Alegre, but now has his eye on a lower house seat in 2018 — and on launching a larger campaign in next year's presidential and congressional elections to occupy the political vacuum created by the left's disintegration with a rebranded, youthful, American-influenced libertarianism. Ostermann's brand of libertarianism calls for widespread privatizations, deregulation of the economy and open trade markets. He's pro marijuana legalization and favors gay marriage. Sound familiar? For Americans, it should: Ostermann was trained by the United States' most influential libertarian organizations — the Cato Institute, the Atlas Network and the Charles Koch Foundation. The latter, a grant-distributing organization, was founded by Charles Koch, one of the famous Koch brothers, who own the second-largest privately held company in the U.S. and are best known for using their vast fortune to support right-wing political causes.

Ostermann, once a left-leaning law student (like many young people at the time, as he puts it), found his way into the D.C. "think tank scene," as he says, after finishing university in Brazil. He took a course on libertarian theory with Cato and earned a Koch summer fellowship to work at the Atlas Network. Newly evangelized, Ostermann returned to Brazil in 2009, where he co-founded Estudantes pela Liberdade — the Brazilian chapter of Students for Liberty, another U.S.-based libertarian group.

The organization had matured in time for 2013's mass protests over increasing bus fares, dissatisfaction with government services and Rousseff's reelection. "We saw an opportunity," he says. From that came the Free Brazil Movement. They started rallying hard to impeach Rousseff. On March 15, 2015, Free Brazil and other organizations mobilized 3 million people to protest in 229 cities across the country — the largest protest since the fall of the military dictatorship in 1985. The rest is history. Free Brazil remains controversial, in part for protesting Rousseff so heavily without levying the same criticisms against right-wing President Michel Temer. Ostermann has since left. The group has splintered, and he reflects that the group became too partisan, with some of its leaders cozying up to traditional political parties.

This makes Ostermann part of an increasing number of Brazilians who are coming of age in the image of American libertarian think tankers. Atlas, for instance, holds an increasing presence in Brazil, where it offers several online and in-person seminars in Portuguese. Skeptics see the ideological cultural exchange as nothing new. "I think it's just continuing a tradition; Americans have always manipulated us," says Juremir Machado da Silva, a columnist and radio show host, citing the U.S. alignment with Brazil's military dictatorship.

Camila Rocha, a Ph.D. student at the University of São Paulo who's studying the emergence of U.S.-style libertarian think tanks in Brazil and Latin America, says Atlas teaches young Brazilians how to found think tanks, manage libertarian organizations, develop an internet presence and, crucially, become what she calls a "polemista" (a polemic figure) via op-eds and media appearances. Between Atlas and Cato, they've trained many of the leaders of Brazil's new right wing. "It Americanizes our political debate; it brings those proposals to the Brazilian context," Rocha says. "Libertarianism itself is something that never even existed in Brazil, this ultra-individualist vision." She cites the calls for privatization sans regulation. "And they call for privatizations of sectors in Brazil that have always had the consensus they should be public and free, like education and health care."

But American-imported or not, Ostermann speaks about policy in his national context. If elected, Ostermann's first policy order of business would be the mass privatization of Brazil's \$70 billion-plus social safety net. He supports voucher systems for private schools and health care. "I don't think the government has the competence or capacity to manage these services in a country as chaotic as Brazil," he says, though he's happy to let the government spend on sanitation, security and "basic infrastructure." (That doesn't include soccer stadiums, he adds, in sardonic reference to some \$25 billion spent on the World Cup and the Olympics in 2014 and 2016 — though that number is frequently contested in Brazil.)

When talking marijuana legalization, he situates his pro stance in response to Brazil's bloody drug landscape, where drug crime causes near-constant violence in urban centers. In 2015, Brazil had more than 56,000 homicides, landing it the world's highest murder rate in terms of absolute numbers, which in large part is due to drug-related crimes. In turn, Brazil also has the world's fourth-largest prison population. "To leave drug traffickers and cartels to have a monopoly over marijuana is a crime against society and an ineffective way to spend taxpayer money," he says.

Ostermann defends this latter stance despite the fact that it may have lost him his race last year. It's his obsession with ideological purity that might keep him and his party from finding success. "I think Brazil isn't prepared for this — Brazilian politics is very polarized right now. It's black and white, right or left," says da Silva. "To voters, I think he comes across as too in the middle; he wants to be both at the same time ... this discourse in Brazil doesn't stick."

