

American Purgatory: Race, Empire, and the Carceral State

By Benjamin Weber



Thursday, January 9th 2020

4:00pm-5:30pm

3201 Hart Hall

Bio

Benjamin Weber is an interdisciplinary historian of the African Diaspora, Carceral Studies, and International Legal and Political Thought. He received his PhD from Harvard University, and currently serves as Watson Institute Postdoctoral Fellow in International & Public Affairs at Brown University. His talk is drawn from his first book, *American Purgatory*, under contract with The New Press.

Research Abstract

On the eve of slavery's abolition in the United States, the Thirteenth Amendment's convict clause – establishing slavery and involuntary servitude as punishment for crime – was used to force people to work on plantations, roads, and infrastructure projects. While most studies of the convict leasing era have focused on the US South, the convict clause applied not only within the United States, but to “*any place subject to their jurisdiction.*” This talk follows the convict clause beyond US borders, tracing the historical geography of prison imperialism to places like the Panama Canal Zone. It considers a range of critiques of imprisonment and imperialism, examining prison protests through the lens of global anticolonialism. It concludes with a discussion of how this history contributes to the transnational turn in critical prison studies and growing body of work on racial capitalism, as well as the lessons it offers for movements struggling to broaden the meaning and experience of freedom in the face of slavery's recurrent afterlives.

