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Reparations between Momentum, Co-optation and Elite Capture

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Chair: Laura Kotzur

Reparations movements have gained unprecedented momentum in recent years, with grassroots organising across multiple contexts, the African Union declaring 2025 the year of reparations, or Commonwealth leaders putting reparations on the agenda. Yet this visibility brings profound risks. This panel examines how reparations discourse, rooted initially in radical demands for material redistribution and structural transformation, risks being appropriated by political, economic, and social elites who strip these demands of their liberatory roots. As reparations enter mainstream political discourse, we ask: Who controls the narrative? What happens when calls for reparative justice become absorbed into existing institutions? Are they transformed into symbolic gestures that leave power relations fundamentally unchanged, or do they provide opportunities to open new windows for change? The panel looks at the mechanisms through which reparations politics become co-opted, whether through neoliberal commodification of identity, institutional capture that prioritises elite interests, or the narrowing of solidarity across differences, but also the opportunities that arise within this process. Reparations at this crossroads point to challenges of International Relations as a discipline: Which lenses and approaches help us to understand the discursive and material forces at play? How can International Relations intervene in this fast-moving debate? And what are the ethical and political implications for global challenges of international politics?

Track Classification: Colonial, Postcolonial and Decolonial Working Group