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## **UNIT 6 FEMINIST\***

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### **6.0 OBJECTIVES**

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In this unit, you will learn about the meaning of feminist political theory and important developments in the evolution of feminist political theory, i.e. first, second and third waves of feminism and political thought. After going through the unit, you should be able to:

- Trace the evolution of Feminist Political Theory;
- Discuss the differences between the political ideas of three different waves of feminism;
- Critique certain ideological standpoints within feminist thought that led to innovation in feminist political theory; and
- Elucidate different political debates within feminist political theory.

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### **6.1 INTRODUCTION: MEANING OF FEMINIST POLITICAL THEORY**

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The present unit aims to explore the meaning, origin and trajectory leading to the development of feminist political theory. The first wave of feminism focused on achieving political and legal rights for women as a tool for their liberation from the clutches of patriarchy. The second wave of feminism extended the domain of feminine politics against sexist ways of men to the private lives of women, giving rise to political ideologies like liberal feminism, Marxist

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feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism, and ecological feminism. The third wave of feminism presented a dynamic critique to the previous feminist political trends, which acquired a global recognition with inclusive ideologies like cultural feminism, black feminism and postmodern feminism.

Feminist political theory is a sub-set of the larger discourse of political theory. It adds the feminist dimension to political theory which is often seen as its neglected part. It also tries to expand the boundaries of 'what is political' by including concerns of women. The term 'Feminist Political Theory' emerged in the late twentieth century during the Women's Liberation Movement of the West (largely, in the United States and United Kingdom). It was envisaged that western political theory, for most of its history had ignored women. Feminist Political Theory, in contrast, saw women and their experiences as cardinal to political analysis of a given time and society. It raised a crucial question – why only men are powerful and privileged over women in any given society? It is also a constant engagement with feminist political thought on how to achieve an equal status for women. As a political movement, Feminism stands against political, cultural, economic and social subjugation of women. Feminist political theory tries to end domination of women by criticizing and transforming theories and institutions which stand for women's inferior status. However, the development of feminist political thought has been an uneven exercise with additions and disagreements emerging in the form of different waves of feminist ideology.

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## 6.2 FIRST WAVE OF FEMINIST POLITICAL THEORY

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The first wave of feminism referred to feminist activities, which largely took place in the United States and United Kingdom from 1820s to 1940s. The formal initiation of the wave is attributed to the *Seneca Falls Declaration*, drafted by *Elizabeth Cady Stanton* in 1848 in New York. The declaration highlighted new political strategies and ideologies for the feminist movement. It began with the idea of equal property rights and a dignified position within the household for women. Thus, it focused on women's economic, sexual and reproductive rights. However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the feminist activists shifted their attention towards political rights of women, especially to women's right to vote or women's suffrage. Some activists within the movement believed that women are morally superior to men, and therefore their presence in the political sphere would prove beneficial for the political process. Consequently, in Britain, Representation of the People's Act was passed in 1918, which granted women the right to vote. But, it was limited in its scope as the right was restricted to women above 30 years of age and that also to the ones who owned houses. Thus, the efforts of the feminists continued and the eligible age for women to vote was further reduced to 21 years, without any bar on the ownership of property. However, in the United States the wave followed a different political trajectory. Here, the feminist leaders like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone and Lucretia Mott believed that before achieving the right to vote for women, it was more important to champion the abolition of slavery. Gradually, the first wave in the U.S. is believed to have ended with the passage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, which granted the right to vote to women in all the U.S. states. In the non-Western context, the first phase of the women's movement is understood almost analogous with its Western time frame.

However, here it is interpreted in terms of women's participation and contribution in the anti-colonial nationalist movements from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early twentieth century. Women in these countries looked up to their western counterparts as an ideal and structured their demands on the economic, educational, and electoral rights demanded by them. For instance, In India, women's movement is traced back to the formation of Indian Women's Association in Madras in 1917. According to Dhanvanthi Rama Rau, the arenas for women liberation identified by this body were the same as could be identified with the first wave of feminism in the Western world, like equitable inheritance laws, right to divorce and widening of women franchise, etc.

### Check Your Progress 1

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Explain the first wave of feminist political theory.

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## 6.3 SECOND WAVE OF FEMINIST POLITICAL THEORY

The First wave of feminism proved both a boon and a bane for the women's movement. On the positive side, it united activists for a common goal and provided the movement its methodical structure. However, certain activists became complacent after achieving suffrage rights for women, seeing it as a complete liberation for women. It was only with the emergence of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s that the movement got rejuvenated, especially with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminist Mystique* in 1963. In this book, Friedan has pointed out that women still felt frustrated, owing to their confinement to the domestic chores in roles of a mother and a housewife. Consequently, the second wave feminism posited that the women question had remained unresolved despite accomplishment of legal and political rights. With the works of Germaine Greer and Kate Millet, what was earlier concerned with political rights of women, was now radicalized to include sexual, psychological and personal aspects of women's oppression. It was during the second wave that the slogan 'the personal is political' was coined by Carol Hanisch. Based on this, feminist activists saw political and cultural inequalities as closely interlinked. It was a period when personal lives of women were seen as a reflection of deeply political power structures of patriarchal society. Thus, unlike the conventional feminists, radical feminists of this period kept politics of the personal at the centre of their movement. Consequently, this wave saw protests against the Miss America beauty pageant in New Jersey in the late 1960s, as it was seen akin to a 'cattle parade' by the feminists, who saw such events as objectification of women's beauty.

While the first wave of feminism was identified with heterosexual white women, mostly belonging to the Western middle-class, the second wave toiled to bring together women of developing nations, and of colour based on the ideology of solidarity and sisterhood. Simone De Beauvoir in her 1949 work *The Second Sex* argued that the problem with feminist politics was that women do not say “we”, unlike labourers or blacks, foregrounding this argument in the observation that the women’s movement lacked solidarity. To tackle this problem, it was prophesied that women’s struggle is a class struggle, in which women form a social class in whose case race, gender and class come together to lead to their oppression at the hands of the patriarchal class. The emergent feminist political theory was a manifestation of intersection of three sets of ideologies - Liberal Feminism, Marxist Feminism (and its extension known as Socialist Feminism) and Radical Feminism. Besides this, during this wave, the feminists saw women having a better approach towards achieving solutions to social problems owing either to their long history of oppression or to their biological construction as more sensitive than men. In this context, the term Ecological feminism was coined to indicate that women are natural environmentalists, by virtue of being born as women.

### 6.3.1 Liberal Feminism

The feminist scholarship developed their political theory with Mary Wollstonecraft’s pathbreaking work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, first published in 1792. This classic book marked the beginning of the liberal feminist movement. Wollstonecraft argues for equal access to education for women and men, so that the former become as independent and morally strong as the latter, in the face of oppressive patriarchal traditions and institutions. Thus, it will ensure gender equality in the public sphere. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the discourse of liberal feminism was shifted, through the works of John Stuart Mill, who argued for equal economic opportunities, political rights and civil liberties for men and women. By emphasizing that the state should be an ally to the women’s liberation movement, the liberal feminists secured the right to vote for women in 1920 in the United States with the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment to the constitution. However, liberal feminists like Drucilla Cornell, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Catriona MacKenzie, Jane Mansbridge, Martha C. Nassbaum, Susan Okin and Gregory Bassham, etc. are often critiqued for over-emphasizing the need for women to become like men, subsuming the traditional roles of women.

### 6.3.2 Marxist Feminism

Marxist feminists do not comply with the reformist tendencies of their liberal counterparts; instead they associate oppression of women with economic, social and political structures related to capitalism. For Marx, capitalism is the defining feature of the West. Marxist feminists launched themselves in the late 1960s and drew their inspiration largely from the philosophies of Marx and Engels. While these philosophers did not particularly examine women’s oppression, their works provided powerful insights to decode the deeper structures implying women’s oppression. Thus, for Marxist feminists like Iris Marion Young and Alison Jaggar, gendered oppression is grounded on class exploitation and how labor is socially reproduced at domestic and work sites. For instance, Frederick Engels elaborates in his work *The Origin of Family, Property and the State* (1884) on how sexual and physical labour of women is assumed for child

reproducing and rearing within the institution of the family. By this principle, according to Marxist feminists the oppression of women is made to appear natural at the behest of patriarchal forces. Engels refers to this as the ‘final defeat of (the) female sex’ and to liberate women, he calls for a revolution against the capitalistic order of society. However, this stand within feminism can be critiqued on two grounds. Firstly, for its lack of recognition of other factors of oppression which work against women like ethnicity, race, etc. Secondly, it makes invisible the category of women who work as wage laborer, and subsumes it within the larger category of ‘wage labor’ which presumably involved *both* men and women. Thus, it does not discuss about the ways of oppression as faced by this very category.

### 6.3.3 Socialist Feminism

Adding to the contentions of the Marxist feminists that capitalism acts as the primary reason of oppression against women, socialist feminists acknowledge patriarchal arrangement of power distribution as the secondary reason for the same. At the heart of the socialist feminist movement lies an understanding that women’s oppression is not a product of any one system of repression, rather it is a common outcome of multiple forces of discrimination like sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, and of course gender. Thus, in order to achieve liberation of women, the movement aimed at dealing with these issues collectively. However, since for socialist feminists, economic oppression and patriarchy constitute the basis of all other forms of subjugation, they argue that even though women are oppressed in almost all societies, the degree and character of oppression depends upon the economic realities of a given society. Socialist feminists like Barbara Ehrenreich, Sylvia Walby, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Donna Haraway, Emma Goldman and Selma James, etc. stress the significance of women’s role as birth-giver, child-rearer and socialiser, care-taker of the sick, and one who transforms the household in a place worth living for men who invest their labor outside. They argue that this emotional labor of women is often ignored owing to the patriarchal character of society. And even when women engage in what Marxists would call as productive labor in the job-market, they are subjected to biases like lower wages compared to their male counterparts and sexual harassment. Thus, socialist feminists organized themselves into women’s unions like the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union to demand justified rights for a dignified living.

### 6.3.4 Radical Feminism

The objective of the early radical feminists like Betty Friedan was to reclaim their disparaged identity which was methodically oppressed by the cultural construction of society. The radicals of the late 60s and early 70s were seen as raging materialists, stressing the material basis of patriarchy. For instance: New York City based radical feminist group the *Redstockings* preached that a woman’s decision to marry should be a rational strategy rather than surrendering to a false sentiment. In the wake of achieving this, they sought to do away with ‘gender’ itself as a meaningful social category. They viewed ‘gender’ as a socially contrived absolute category, where masculinity was construed in a complete opposition to the ‘other’ – i.e. the feminine. But, the modern radical feminists also acknowledged that gender differences are reflections of interactions between these two variables. For instance; many like Mary Daly, Susan Griffin, Julia

Penelope and Adrienne Rich have argued that women are closer to ecology, while men are to their sexuality. Although they are critiqued for being erroneously general in their observations, lacking any attempt to trace the origin of such a differentiation (whether biological or cultural); these feminists see this virtue as not a representation of oppression, rather of advantage over their male counterparts. Radical feminists made a departure from earlier socialist feminism by holding that oppression does occur at an individual level and it may not necessarily always be an institutional outcome. However, at this individual level, they believed that it is not by the virtue of being a male that a man can be called an oppressor, but only when he rationalizes his supremacy over women by virtue of being born a male that he is seen as an oppressor by radicals. Thus, they posit liberation of women as their primary political agenda, along with other objectives like inclusion of sexual politics into public discourse, legalizing abortion, demanding equal sharing of child care and household work, among others.

### 6.3.5 Ecological Feminism

Oppression of women and domination of nature are connected and mutually reinforcing, thus, they should be addressed collectively— this philosophical stand unites ecofeminists across the spectrum. Most of the ecofeminist scholarship like Alice Walker, Vandana Shiva, Ivone Gebara, Rosemary Ruether, Sallie McFague, Paula Gunn Allen, Andy Smith and Karen Warren amongst others, deals with the moral basis of human’s connection to nature. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, ecological feminism emerged with the intersection of environmental and feminist theories. The term was introduced in the book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*, meaning Feminism or Death, written by Francoise d’Eaubonne in 1974. Ecofeminists argue that patriarchy manifests itself in society through the dualistic structures of hierarchy: culture vs. nature, male vs. female, matter vs. spirit, white vs. non-white, etc. The established system of patriarchal oppression not just reinforces itself through the imposition of these binaries, according to ecofeminists, it even makes them sacred using science as well as religion as its tools. Thus, as long as these dualities continue to exist as an indispensable constituent of any societal structure, they would help patriarchy to flourish. On these grounds, ecofeminists defy the division of culture into any hierarchical binaries. Their historical methodology is therefore, suggestive of replacing hierarchical dualities with observing a relationship within the diversity. This methodology, by the virtue of its emphasis upon the strength of such diversities is a feminist approach, linking ideas of environment with that of feminism. The torchbearers of this ideology were Ruether in her 1975 work *New Woman/New Earth* and Mary Daly in her *GynEcology* (1978).

#### Check Your Progress 2

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Describe the salient features of the second wave of feminism.

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## 6.4 THIRD WAVE OF FEMINIST POLITICAL THEORY

According to Nancy Fraser's *Justice Interruptus* (1997) in the 1980s, owing to a greater emphasis on identity politics around gender differences, other frontiers of discrimination like class, sexuality, ethnicity and race did not fetch much attention from feminist activists. This led feminists towards self-introspection paving way for their reorientation. This led them to articulate feminist political theory in sync with other political struggles. The emergence of such an awareness amongst feminist intelligentsia led to the rise of third the wave of feminism in the mid-90s, influenced by the conditions of postmodernism and post-colonialism. In this wave, many ideas of gender, sexuality and heteronormativity as practiced by the activists of the previous two phases of feminism were inverted. For instance, the contemporary activists resumed the fashionable display of lipsticks, deep cleavage dresses and high heel footwear, which were earlier shunned away as the markers of patriarchal oppression. It was so because the young activists believed that it was possible for women to have push-up bra and brain at the same time. They saw ideals of feminine beauty as empowering with their chosen subjectivities, instead of seeing them as repressive objectification by sexist men. This was observed as a result of professional status and achievements of women made possible by the efforts of the second wave feminists. The third phase redefined femininity, which was strong, in control of their sexuality and assertive. Besides this, what contributed in the articulation of the micro-politics of the third wave was the *internet* revolution of the late 20th century. The internet also provided for women-only spaces in the form of e-magazines, which became an important platform for the dissemination of feminist ideas. Internet helped women overcome the geographical boundaries in expressing solidarity with women in the developing world and the women of color. Thus, the political approach of the third wave was more inclusive, multi-cultural and global compared to its predecessors. Its transversal political feminist theory was based on the premise that differences like race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, etc. should be celebrated as dynamism of one's subjective location. This echoed in the form of multiple political ideologies that developed during this phase — Cultural Feminism, Black Feminism and Postmodern Feminism.

### 6.4.1 Cultural Feminism

By 1975 radical feminism had given way to cultural feminism. Cultural feminists both derive and depart from their radical peers. They do agree with the latter that the freedom of women begins in their rejection of masochism, but they relegate material reality to the periphery of their experience. While radicals viewed the female body as an encumbrance, the cultural feminists, like Jane Alpert, Adrienne Rich, etc. in fact saw women's biology as a potent resource. Cultural feminists like Robin Morgan, Andrea Dworkin and Florence Rush make a distinction between femininity as identified by patriarchal order with virtues like submissiveness and passiveness vis-a-vis the natural characteristics of female nature, which they see as loving, caring and egalitarian. On the other hand, with the construing of masculinity as indelible, cultural feminists put the entire blame of female oppression on the assumed maleness of men, and not so much on the power dynamics within the patriarchal system. Thus, for Susan Brownmiller,

rape is a function of male biology. Finally, the cultural feminists argue for the preservation of gender distinctions, for according to them radical shift in society would be achieved only with restoration of culture into its female values of affection, nurturance and equality. By explaining feminism through the lens of female values, cultural feminists therefore, substituted political theory with their vision of united sisterhood.

### 6.4.2 Black Feminism

In the U.S., while on one hand the Women Liberation and Black Liberation Movements were growing at a rapid pace, black women did not feel politically represented by either of these. The former movement focused primarily on middle-class, white women; while in the second, black only meant black men. Thus, black women were becoming an invisible category and even within the Black Liberation movements they were being constantly subjected to sexism. Thus, Black Feminist Movement developed as a separate movement in response to this. The objective of the movement was to address how class, race and gender intersected to lead these women to their experience of oppression; and also suggest an action plan against the same. *Alice Walker* coined the term 'Womanist' to describe the Black Feminist Movement. She argues that womanist is to feminist as lavender is to purple. The tenets which were promoted through the movement included acknowledgement and praise for all aspects of womanhood, emphasizing self-determination, and raising commitment for the flourishing of both women and men. Thus, the movement called for stretching the individual capacity of women as well as cared for the flourishing of humanity. The movement also encouraged its women participants to stay connected with the community at large. Thus, Black feminism was a political struggle to combat oppression faced by any women of colour.

### 6.4.3 Postmodern Feminism

Postmodern Feminists make the *largest* departure from earlier debates within feminism with their argument that language is what constructs gender. Influenced with the arguments of Judith Butler's 1990 work *Gender Trouble*, in which she critiques the existing distinction between the biological sex and gender, which the earlier feminists argued is socially constructed. She argues that 'woman' is not a 'stand alone' category, it comes into existence with a bearing of multiple factors like class, race, ethnicity and sexuality. Such factors come together to construe the identity that we call a 'woman'. On the basis of this argument, she posits that neither any one of these factors is singularly responsible for women's oppression, nor would handling any one of these lead to a solution to the problem of subjugation of women. For her, gender is performative and cannot be construed in any binary. That is to say, she points out towards inseparability of the body from social norms and language. For instance, Medical professionals have the potential to surgically transform an infant with ambiguous genitalia into a girl who is culturally accepted as a 'proper' girl. Also, modern technological interventions in the field of medicine have also made sexual reassignment surgery a reality, which has made the whole category of gender malleable by blurring the boundaries between man and woman. Postmodern feminists like Donna Haraway, Mary Joe Frug, etc. argue that all women do not share common experiences of oppression. Thus, they attach extreme importance to the categories of queer, homosexual, and transgender, etc. in order to understand the identity politics concerning modern-day women.



**Check Your Progress 3**

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.  
 ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Describe the third wave of feminism.

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**6.5 FEMINIST POLITICAL THEORY IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS**

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Academics have pointed out that international politics has been ‘gender blind’ and feminist writing started to make an impact in international politics in the 1980s. Some of the classic works include — *Women and War* (1987) by Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* (1989) by Cynthia Enloe and *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global security* (1992) by J. Ann Tickner. Feminist scholars have argued that international politics is not only about security, power, war and states and there is a way in which gender shapes global politics. They have argued that the role of masculinity and power is overemphasized in global politics. Barbara Ehrenreich has pointed out, “Men make wars ... because war makes them men”. Unlike the Realist conception of security centering on state, feminists give importance to human security centered on freedom from want and fear. War itself is seen as a gendered phenomenon as most of the senior positions in the military and political positions are dominated by men. It is also the impact of some myths like the need for masculine male ‘warriors’ to protect helpless women and children. Jean Elshtain has dealt in detail with the myths of Man as a “Just Warrior” and Woman as a “Beautiful Soul”. She has argued that this division serves to recreate and secure women’s social position as noncombatants and men’s identity as warriors. Cynthia Enloe has argued that work of women as plantation workers, wives of diplomats and sex workers on military bases should form a part of global politics. J Ann Tickner criticized Hans Morgenthau’s six principles of Realism and argued that national interest is a broad topic which cannot be defined in terms of power only. Instead of competition, cooperation is required to deal with issues like the nuclear war and environmental degradation.

**Check Your Progress 4**

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.  
 ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Discuss J Ann Tickner’s criticism of Realism.

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## 6.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit, we have discussed basically three important things — the genesis of feminist political theory, the major waves or phases in its development and the important ideological currents that developed within these phases and influenced the trajectory of the consolidation of feminist political theory. The first wave of feminist thought emerged in New York in 1848 with a major impetus on achieving right to women's suffrage in order to free women from the oppressive ways of patriarchal society. However, the advocates of the second wave critiqued the existing political thoughts as limiting, and expanded the politics of rights of women to the private sphere of their domestic lives. It was argued that women need liberation from their constraining roles as child bearer, child rearer and a home-maker. The solution was seen in fetching economic opportunities for women in the job market. While the first wave feminist activists were not so dynamic in their demands, those in the second wave radicalised the front of feminist political theory. They on the one hand, projected women as domineering and on the other, saw the feminine body as the major instrument of oppression at the hands of sexist patriarchal forces. This confused the advocates who brought about the third wave of feminism. They argued that it was possible for women to have both - the brain and the push-up bra. With this the radical feminism gave way to cultural feminism, which engulfed women of colour and of developing world in their movement, thus, expanding the political dialogue between various movements of the time. Whereas the second wave of feminism was introduced by the political thoughts of liberal, marxist, socialist, radical and ecological feminism, the third wave was marked by cultural, black and postmodern feminism. Liberal feminism brought the idea of gender equality to the public sphere for the first time in the nineteenth century. They sought the role of state as an ally in the women's movement in order to seek their liberation. The radical feminists took the politics of women's liberation to the individual level and the dynamics of feminist political theory was narrowed from macro to micro discourse. Cultural feminists called for universal sisterhood and endeavoured to unite women of different colour, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and classes for a common goal of liberation. In this, black feminism was a political struggle to combat oppression faced by any woman of colour. Postmodern feminists look at the categories of queer, homosexual, and transgender, etc. as extremely important in order to understand the identity politics concerning modern-day women.

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## 6.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Your answer should highlight following points:
  - Seneca Falls Declaration (1848).
  - Focus on women's suffrage (including the struggle for it).
  - Situation in the non-Western world.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Your answer should highlight the salient features of Liberal, Marxist, Socialist, Radical and Ecological feminism.

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Your answer should highlight the main features of Cultural, Black and Post-Modern feminism.

### Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Your answer should highlight that J. Ann Tickner criticized Morgenthau's six principles of Realism and argued that national interest cannot be defined in terms of power only.

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