

ABSTRACT:

Neoliberalism is capitalism in a financialised and globalised form which has dominated the western world for more than thirty years, since the conservative resolution of the social crisis of the late 1960s and 1970s. Its triumph signified the defeat or serious weakening of the social forces which had provided some balance to the power of capital and markets in the post-war period of the welfare settlement.

The neoliberal regime has significant consequences for the psychotherapies. In particular, the idea that individuals are deserving of support from society and government when they need it - in managing the inevitably stressful conditions of the life cycle (the early years, adolescence, the transition from school or college to employment, sickness, old age and bereavement) is being displaced by an ideology of total individual responsibility – ‘There is no such thing as society’, as Mrs Thatcher memorably put it. Those psychotherapies framed around relational conceptions of the self find themselves particularly out of key with this dominant way of thinking.

Governmental approaches to developmental needs become more instrumental, measurement-oriented and ‘disciplinary’ in this environment. Market incentives and disciplinary sanctions are introduced to ensure that institutions and their personnel conform to governmental directives. Professional autonomy and discretion, is decried as self-indulgent and reactionary, in the mental health field as in others.

There is pressure on psychotherapists to adapt to this instrumentalised, market environment to survive. ‘Going private’, retraining in ‘evidence-tested’ methods, supporting others’ adaptation to market pressures through ‘coaching’ are examples of this. The expressive ‘individualisation’ which is also part of the culture of neoliberalism, whose origins lie in the cultural liberation of the 1960s as well as in Thatcherism, is of course not entirely suppressed, and individuals continue to seek therapies which offer possibilities of self-understanding and growth. But the pressure is for such therapeutic approaches to become luxury goods, available only to those with the means to pay significant fees. What is at risk under neoliberalism is the idea that society should support the self-development and self-understanding of all its citizens, as an aspect of a modern kind of democratic citizenship.

This presentation will describe this situation, and consider what responses those in the field of the psychotherapies can make to it.