DESIRING CHANGE:
Sex and Gender through Race and Class
A National Policy and Organizing Proposal

Desire and gender are brought alive through the ways lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and intersexed people use their bodies; desire and gender are made poignant and meaningful by the ways we construct or deny our erotic passions and gendered identities in the course of daily life. People will risk everything to identify and act upon their desires. And they will live out their unique understanding of gender—no matter how dangerous or costly the results.

Sexual and gender differences are widely targeted and stigmatized. Because of sexual, racial and class ideologies surrounding queer desires and gender differences, queer people, including intersex and LGBT people, are often subjected to invasive state control, cultural and familial shame and rejection, and economic manipulation and marginalization. But the use of control and shame are practiced selectively in this country. Only certain groups and peoples are generally marked by sex and gender disgrace and subordination. These controls operate selectively and most seamlessly through the "natural" systems of class, race and religious theories and codes. DESIRING CHANGE intends to move sex and desire into the forefront of queer and progressive politics, and begin to build a progressive response that articulates who is targeted and why.

Defending queer sex is difficult. Advocating for the challenging of gender roles and gender assignment can be dangerous, and risks being marginalized. Even within the LGBT movement, sexuality and gender difference are often absent from the political agenda. At best, they are tolerated. DESIRING CHANGE challenges the LGBT and progressive movements to bring sex and gender issues to the center of their political agendas, and to create a coalition of groups and organizations that will value, defend and articulate a progressive agenda for radical sex and gender issues in the context of race and class in this country.

Refusing to consider sex and gender outside the context of class and race, DESIRING CHANGE will work to develop a project which articulates the value of human sexual yearning, the power of gender
divergence and the importance of desire for ecstasy into the core of our political understanding, so that a fiercely sex-positive analysis will again grace our movement. The power of this vision is naturally drawn from the inherent passion that brought each of us out, and gave us hope. This project generates promise from its willingness to advocate fearlessly for the creation of a culture capable of genuine sexual and gender expression, social justice and freedom.

The long-term goals of DESIRING CHANGE are clear. However, accomplishing them in a way that does not simply repeat the problems and omissions of the past will require considerable time, thought, and effort. When sex, race, class, or gender disappear from our movements’ priorities, it is not a simple mistake. Although inattention can be problematic in social movements, simple inattention is not the case here. The shame often associated with sexuality pushes it aside in many discussions, but it is not clear that more forthrightness about sex would resolve the matter. Rather, at DESIRING CHANGE we see that the very assumptions we have about sex and gender, race and class, structure our thoughts in such a way as to make these “mistakes” almost inevitable. We separate discussions of political issues about sexuality from questions of sexual practice, thus effectively privatizing sex even as we try to address it publicly through policy. We associate sex and gender, and we also associate race and class, thus giving primacy to each of those two intersections while subverting the interconnectedness of sex, race, gender, and class in society.

Because these acts of omission and silence are repeated in movement after movement, we know that simply trying harder to pull together movements that have consistently proven themselves incapable of recognizing and honoring differences within their own ranks, or of making stable connections with other movements, will not produce the desired result. Rather, there is something fundamentally wrong with our approach. Movements that have already been established, that are organized around single issues, cannot provide the starting point for a larger allied movement. We must identify new ways of organizing, and new ways of thinking about organizing, if progressive politics are to be revived in the U.S. *We need to change the way that change itself is made.*

If we begin with the Women’s movement, for example—a movement which has not accepted labor issues as a central part of its purview, then we cannot affect the way in which women’s issues are labor issues and labor issues are women’s issues. We must begin, instead,
with a broadly based agenda that assumes differences, then try to find commonalities—commonalities that we have currently exiled from view. The crisis of HIV and AIDS, and the lack of response in both the Women’s movement and the Labor movement, is a perfect example of the ways that single-issue movements fail to recognize and respond to new circumstances—even when their own constituencies are profoundly affected.

The major contribution of DESIRING CHANGE will be to develop organizing that addresses this intertwining of complex questions in a new way, leading to a deepening of the concept of intersectionality. Our project aims not only to address the ways in which individuals live at the intersection of race, class, gender and sexuality so that the issues are not separable, but also to address the ways in which the issues themselves are interlocking and, in fact, mutually constituting. The need for this is clear. Currently neither LGBT nor progressive movements support political agendas that articulate the connections between issues. Although we are told in vague terms that we should be “united for peace and justice”, we cannot say precisely how that unity is to be built.

One of the principles of DESIRING CHANGE is that the type of intellectual work capable of articulating these connections as part of an effective, progressive political program is best done in settings that bring together organizers and thinkers who are already working across issues. The work is already being done, but in sites that are small, scattered and isolated from one another. Additionally, most of the resources of progressive politics go to large, single-issue organizations. Our goal is to identify where this work is happening, bring resources and support to these sites, and create connections among and between them, so as to build a new type of progressive movement. We propose to begin at the points of intersection. Building a new movement outward from these points of intersection would provide precisely the material means of connection that so many attempts at alliance now lack.

We believe that people who are already working across issues are best positioned to develop a new vision of what progressive social change should look like. We are not interested in simply defending ground that is currently being eroded by conservative politics. This is for two reasons: 1) Even the relatively progressive policies of the U.S. government have serious inherent problems, problems that have been exploited by conservatives, as well as additional problems that have undermined the integrity of these programs and undercut their
constituencies. For example, "welfare policy" before its "reform" was a deeply flawed program that allowed some people to survive economic hardship, but did not promote economic justice or provide real economic opportunity. New ideas are needed to attract new supporters and build better programs. 2) The best defense of progressive possibility in America is the creation of a powerful vision that can energize supporting constituencies. The right has done this successfully over the past several decades, attracting constituencies whose economic interests do not align with those of the Republican Party, but who have nevertheless come to believe in the conservative vision as an overriding principle.

**DESINING CHANGE** wants to move forward rather than simply return to New Deal programs. The New Deal was insufficient, and the failure of the Great Society programs in the 1960s only intensified this insufficiency. We need greater vision, deeper change. Our hope is not to defend or return to the New Deal, but to build anew the vision and foundation for true justice and meaningful social change.

**DESIRING CHANGE** will enhance our ability to name and claim our uniquely gendered bodies and sexual desires; it will enhance our ability to build political understanding using the differences of class, race, and power by helping to construct a movement that does not leave desire and gender outside the door. Through our theories and our activism, **DESIRING CHANGE** will incorporate our unique and queerly comprehended perceptions of desire and gender into real alliance and real action, weaving it into the very fabric of our struggle to change the world.
Process So Far:
The project that has become DESIRING CHANGE began with small group meetings sponsored by the Barnard Center for Research on Women (BCRW) to determine the nature of the problem. We brought together a group of organizers, academics and artists who had worked in a wide variety of progressive organizations and who shared a frustration with the state of both LGBTQ organizing and progressive organizing more generally. We explored questions like: Why, despite on-going and creative organizing in a wide variety of sites does anything like a widespread and effective progressive movement seem so impossible in the current climate? Why, despite years of analysis about alliance politics, coalition politics, and intersections among differences, does most organizing remain focused on single issues? Why do even the most well-intentioned organizations and groups always seem to make the mistake of dropping some crucial axis of analysis and, thus, losing potential allies? Why is sexuality, in particular, so often likely to be dropped from progressive organizing even as the political right maintains a laser-like intensity on sex?

From these discussions, we concluded that we needed to find new ways of organizing and new ways of thinking about organizing if progressive politics is to be revived in the U.S. We need not just to make change in American society. We need to change the way that change itself is made.

While multi-issue organizing might be going on in a number of sites, these sites are isolated and disconnected. We need a sense of where innovative organizing is happening, how it works, and how various sites might be connected.

We also need to know why, even where certain intersections among identities and issues are happening, sexuality so often drops out of the picture. What are the connections between sexuality and economics or between sexuality and the war in Iraq?
Out of these discussions the plan for **DESIRING CHANGE** evolved. We felt that we could not simply proceed with organizing. To do so would risk simply repeating, once again the forms—and mistakes—of the past. Instead we needed to develop a process out of which we might learn how to organize differently and in so doing develop a new means of making change.

We chose to pursue an assessment of sites where innovative organizing is happening with the hopes of discovering: What enables such organizing? How is it structured? What problems do such projects face? How can they be connected? When does sexuality drop out? Why? Upon completion of the assessment, we will bring together a number of organizers to discuss how their work might be connected and expanded as the basis for a new kind of progressive movement, one in which sexuality is not relegated to the periphery of activity.

**Current Work Plan to be Completed with Funds from the Barnard Center for Research on Women**

**Fall 2005**: Complete the assessment. BCRW has hired Surina Kahn as a consultant to produce the assessment. For the past year, Surina has been interviewing organizers and assessing the current conditions of possibility. This assessment should be completed by the end of 2005.

**Spring 2006**: Planning Meeting for Conference. BCRW will bring the three principals in Desiring Change together with a number of the most innovative organizers to plan for a conference that will help to map out the next steps.

**Fall 2006**: Conference on Intersectional Organizing. BCRW will bring together those who are already doing exciting work so as to connect this work and to address a set of questions about how new types of change might be undertaken on a broader scale.

**Spring 2007**: Dissemination of the Conference Results. BCRW will support dissemination of the results of the conference through various media. BCRW has a record of publishing the results of its projects through the web, print reports, books and films, and we will pursue a number of various possibilities for this project as well.

*To move beyond publicizing the results of the conference, however, we will need addition external resources.*
Possible Future Directions for DESIRING CHANGE:

Because we are searching for new and innovative possibilities, it is impossible to determine in advance, what the outcome of the conference will be or how follow-up will proceed. We do, however, have some crucial ideas for how this process might work.

We imagine that two types of work will need to be done:
1) At the level of vision, we need to develop new concepts for both the broad vision of a better world that motivates organizing and for the practical work of organizing. We see these different conceptual foci as inter-related. Progressive organizing will not become more successful in the U.S. until we have a broader vision of change and we will not be able to realize that vision until we have new means of pursuing our organizing.
2) At the level of organization, we hope to develop a network among the organizing sties where the most exciting work is already happening. We see this as an effort both to strengthen existing organizing and to give it the chance to hold weight in relation to single-issue politics.

In short, we need both a new kind of think tank or institute, one that has the freedom to reconceptualize political possibilities and a new kind of organizing project, one that doesn’t simply start a new advocacy group, but that works to pull together the best organizing from around the country. Each of these projects will be strongest if undertaken in concert with the other. The project as a whole is large and would require extensive funds, but it has a greater chance of making a difference than do many other projects which simply proceed along well worn tracks of organizing.