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In recent years, Peter N. Stearns has established himself as the foremost historian of American emotional life. In books on anger, jealousy, "coolness," and body image, he has mapped out the basic terrain of the American psyche.

Now Stearns crowns his work of the past decade with this powerful volume, in which he reveals the fundamental dichotomy at the heart of the national character: a self-indulgent hedonism and the famed American informality on the one hand, and a deeply imbedded repressiveness on the other.

Whether hunting and gathering tribe or complex industrial civilization, every social group is governed by explicit and implicit guidelines on how to behave. But these definitions vary widely. The Japanese worry less about public drunkenness than Americans. Northern Europeans adhere to stricter standards than Americans when it comes to littering. Today, we swear more now and spit less, discuss sex more and death less.

With an emphasis on sex, culture, and discipline of the body, Stearns traces how particular anxieties take root, and how they express inherent tension in contemporary standards and a stubborn nostalgia for the previous nineteenth century regime.