Introduction

In earlier times, maps often did a poor job of adequately reflecting actual geography; they were not often drawn to scale, they misrepresented many geographical features, and they left many areas blank or decorated with pictures of mythical beasts or phrases such as *Hic sunt dracones* (“Here be dragons” in today’s vernacular) denoting the fear of the unknown. Over time, as people explored the world around them and maps became a sorely needed tool in these explorations, cartography became more specialized; systematic gathering of information from explorers and travellers became more common; new technologies such as the compass, printing press, longitude, and latitude were employed; and maps gradually became more accurate and useful in understanding the lay of the land (and waters). Today, our map-making skills are more accurate still through the professionalization of cartography, the further development of technologies such as global satellites, and the creation of government and private bureaucracies that employ cartographers, produce and distribute their maps, and promote education, research, and development in the field. Theories of society have much in common with the evolution of map making and with the maps themselves.
The knowledge base of a culture becomes broader, deeper, and more reflective of empirical reality with experience, discovery, and contact with other sociocultural systems. The accumulation and empirical accuracy of this knowledge base developed slowly through human history; very often, the accumulated knowledge based on observation and reason was confounded by traditions, folklore, myth, and religious and political beliefs. The Enlightenment and the development of science, however, greatly sped up the process of attaining ever greater empirical accuracy. Science has a strong connection to the rigorous observation of the physical world. Because its accumulated body of knowledge is continually checked and replicated by other scientists, the practice of science gradually filters out the wishful and the mistaken; tradition and emotion; the mythical, political, and spiritual; it thus arrives at ideas, concepts, and theories that more closely approach physical reality and the relationships among objects in this reality. Norbert Elias ([1970] 1978, 23) elaborates further:

At one time, people imagined that the moon was a goddess. Today we have a more adequate, more realistic idea of the moon. Tomorrow it may be discovered that there are still elements of fantasy in our present idea of the moon, and people may develop a conception of the moon, the solar system and the whole universe still closer to reality than ours. The comparative which qualifies this assertion is important; it can be used to steer ideas between the two towering, unmoving philosophical cliffs of nominalism and positivism, to keep the current of the long-term development of knowledge and thought. We are describing the direction of this current in calling special attention to the decrease in the fanciful elements and increase in the realistic elements in our thinking, as characteristics of the scientificization of our ways of thinking and acquiring knowledge.

What Elias calls “scientificization” is more generally called “rationalization”—Weber’s concept of the process by which modes of precise calculation based on observation and logic increasingly
dominate the social world. As has happened with maps, our knowledge base, our mental map of empirical and social reality, has been refined; elements based on tradition, values, and emotions have gradually been replaced. Of course, many irrational elements stubbornly remain, particularly beliefs held by elites, because to hold them is in their material interest (rejection of global climate change comes to mind, but there are many others), or by large numbers of a population who feel that their interests, values, or traditions are directly threatened by the findings of science (evolution being one example among many). But in general and over time, the knowledge base of society is undergoing constant rational refinement. While this process began in the West, it has spread as a result of both conquest and peaceful contact.

Social theorists could be thought of as cartographers of the sociocultural world. Like cartographers, they attempt to determine on the basis of evidence what phenomena are real and how they are related to one another. They decide on what social elements they wish to map, what social processes and relationships they are trying to capture—from micro theories of interactions among bureaucrats to macro theories that attempt to cast in language the relationships among sociocultural systems. Like cartographers, theorists attempt to eliminate objects from their theories that are not relevant to the generalizations they are trying to make and to reduce the complexities of the characteristics and the relationships of their theories, all in order to produce a framework that can be used to better understand the sociocultural world. Finally, like cartographers, they learn from their own and others’ observations, from the maps that have been made before; their theoretical postulates are constantly checked by their peers and by new observations of social reality. Like a map of a given geographic territory, a social theory is judged on its parsimony and clarity of expression, and by the accuracy of the symbolic reflection of social reality that it creates. This book argues that the macro social theory created by the founders of sociology—as revised and refined by those who have followed—provides a very useful map for both understanding and navigating our world.