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Reaction 6: "'Irrational' Elements in the Amarna Trade”  
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Summary:

Mario Liverani's article "'Irrational' Elements in the Amarna Trade" explores the complexities of diplomatic and commercial exchange in the Amarna Age by questioning the adequacy of framing these activities in strictly economic or rational terms. Drawing from Marcel Mauss' theory of the "gift economy," Liverani argues that many transactions, although formally resembling trade, were deeply embedded in a web of social, political, and ideological meanings. A central premise of the article is that the Amarna letters—often interpreted as records of commercial exchange—represent a distorted view if analyzed only through the lens of supply and demand.

The article highlights that exchanges between rulers (such as the rêbêsu of Egypt and Alashia) often involved identical goods, such as ivory for ivory or timber for timber, with no economically rational benefit. Liverani suggests that these exchanges were driven not by market logic but by the desire to sustain political alliances and social bonds. He provides numerous examples, such as Cyprus sending ivory to Egypt and receiving ivory in return, emphasizing the symbolic importance of reciprocity and social cohesion over utilitarian value. The "irrationality" lies in the prioritization of maintaining diplomatic relations rather than maximizing economic gain. These acts, though formally appearing inefficient from an economic standpoint, take on significant meaning when contextualized within the broader political and ceremonial obligations of the period.

Liverani further complicates the concept of economic rationality by introducing the idea of differentiated levels of exchange. Some exchanges operated on a ceremonial level, reserved for high-prestige goods like lapis lazuli or gold, while others occurred on a more mundane, commercial level involving silver or utilitarian items. These layers of meaning suggest a polycentric system in which value was not solely determined by scarcity or market demand, but by cultural, religious, and political considerations. For instance, the use of silver as money was limited and highly contextualized, reinforcing the notion that ancient economies often rejected universal standards of value in favor of highly localized and symbolic assessments.

Furthermore, the article underscores that many transactions were not concerned with material equivalence but rather with fulfilling obligations, preserving diplomatic ties, or demonstrating status. The inclusion of gifts that lacked apparent economic utility—such as identical counter-gifts or disproportionate exchanges—serves to emphasize the diplomatic function of trade in this era. Liverani contends that these practices cannot be dismissed as inefficient or irrational in a pejorative sense, but rather should be understood as manifestations of a different cultural logic in which economic behavior was inseparable from social relationships and political hierarchies.

Analysis:

Liverani's analysis is compelling in its interdisciplinary breadth, drawing from anthropology, sociology, and economic history to present a nuanced understanding of the Amarna trade. One strength of his argument is the clear demonstration of how narrowly economic interpretations obscure the deeper motivations behind diplomatic exchanges. By invoking Mauss and challenging the concept of rational utility, Liverani effectively undermines the reductionist tendency to interpret gift-exchange societies as primitive versions of modern market economies. This approach allows for a more holistic view of Late Bronze Age inter-polity relations, in which prestige, obligation, and symbolic capital play central roles.

However, the article does present certain ambiguities and raises questions that warrant further scrutiny. First, while Liverani identifies the dual levels of exchange (ceremonial and commercial), the criteria for distinguishing between them are not always consistent. For instance, he associates the ceremonial level with high-status items and the commercial level with silver or copper, but these categories sometimes overlap in the examples he provides. This blurring complicates the neat binary he proposes and suggests that the actual practice of exchange may have been more fluid than the framework allows.

Second, while the emphasis on irrationality is persuasive, it risks reifying the very categories it critiques. If all exchanges in the Amarna Age are framed as culturally rational within their context, the term "irrational" begins to lose analytical utility. Rather than labeling behaviors as irrational from a modern economic perspective, it might be more accurate to describe them as operating under a different rationality altogether—one that integrates political allegiance, ceremonial honor, and dynastic diplomacy. A more refined terminology could help maintain analytical clarity without resorting to relativism or contradiction.

Despite these concerns, Liverani's article succeeds in provoking a reevaluation of how economic behavior is conceptualized in pre-modern societies. His attention to the symbolic and ideological dimensions of trade opens fruitful avenues for comparative research and enriches our understanding of the Amarna period. If nothing else, the article compels readers to reconsider the assumptions they bring to the study of ancient economies and the criteria by which we define rationality in the first place.