POINT: Argue how different Africa would be (on a sliding scale of positive to negative) had the Europeans never exploited Africa.

'How can anyone claim Africa did not have societies before the arrival of colonialism? Political, economic and social structures existed in African society well before the 19th century. Frederic Caillaurd, during his quest to discover the source of the Nile, marvelled at the structures of Egyptian society. Massive empires existed in Zimbabwe and Zululand (to name two) and were crushed by the land grab of the colonial empires in the 19th century.'

Robin Walker

What caused Africa’s underdevelopment is a complex issue. Europe’s past (and present) exploitation of Africa played a significant part. Before the Europeans arrived in Africa, Africa had vibrant economic, social and political structures. These were severely disrupted by Europeans to create wealth for themselves.

European dominance over most of Africa through the transatlantic slave trade lasted 440 years, from 1444 to 1885.

Triangular trade

Starting from the arrival of Portuguese ships on west African shores in 1444, the Europeans set up an elaborate triangular trading system to transport enslaved Africans, import plantation produce, and export European goods to both Africa and the Americas.

'Shipments were all by Europeans to markets controlled by Europeans, and this was in the interest of European capitalism and nothing else.'

Walter Rodney

The transatlantic slave trade caused the forced removal from Africa of millions of Africans. This number included a large percentage of skilled tradesmen and women from a range of occupations and professions who were making their contribution to African societies. Without them, African societies themselves were weakened.

Africa had trading systems which had developed over hundreds of years – well before Europeans ever arrived on their shores. Europeans destroyed these systems in large areas of Africa when they developed the trade in enslaved Africans. Local systems were badly affected and overwhelmed by the demands of the new trade in enslaved Africans, a trade imposed by the better developed guns and ships of the Europeans.

Trade and domination

Slave trading undermined the ‘Gold Coast’ economy of west Africa. It destroyed the gold trade. Slave raiding and kidnapping made it unsafe to mine the land or to travel with gold. The Europeans’ demand for slaves made raiding for captives more profitable than gold mining. The transatlantic slave trade encouraged Africans to wage war against one another and conduct raids, instead of building more peaceful links.

Europeans used their superior shipping and skills and military power (primarily their guns) to dominate trade to and from Africa. Europeans became the leading traders of Asian and African consumer goods. This was particularly striking in the early centuries of trade. Europeans relied heavily on Indian cloths for resale in Africa. They also purchased cloths from several parts of the west African coast for resale elsewhere. Morocco, Mauritania, Senegambia, Ivory Coast, Benin, Yorubaland and Loango were all exporters to other parts of Africa – through European middlemen.

By the time that Africa had escaped the shackles of the slave trade and entered the colonial era, its main export was raw cotton. Yet its main import was manufactured cotton cloth. This remarkable irony points not only to technological advance in Europe but also, and most importantly, to the stagnation of technology in Africa owing to the trade with Europe. Europeans did not want African states to develop their own technology. They did not want them to be able to make their own manufactured goods.

African resistance and independence

Exploitation did not end with the ending of the transatlantic slave trade. Britain began to ban the trade in slaves from 1807, and it was not until 1957 that the Gold Coast – now Ghana – finally became the first African country south of the Sahara to become independent from European rulers. This period of time was filled with long, bitter colonial conflicts. These conflicts were not always wars in the usual way with armies and guns.

For 150 years after 1807, Europe tried to control Africa and its wealth. They used brutal massacres as well as treachery, for example involving the bribing of African chiefs, and betrayal of their treaties and agreements, such as with Queen Nzinga of the area now called Angola, in their attempts to do this. Africans would use all their available resources to defend their people and territories. They would fight back against the Europeans with guerrilla tactics, sabotage, non cooperation and by the destruction of those crops and businesses based in Africa that benefited the Europeans.

Many Africans fought and worked to gain political independence from Europe, often inspired by the 5th Pan African Congress held in Manchester in 1945. African countries did eventually gain formal political independence from the Europeans. However, Europeans still exerted a huge amount of influence on how African countries developed. Their natural resources were still mainly owned and managed by European investors. Europeans still owned much African land. Europeans were still the main buyers of African crops and minerals. Africans had to cope with these issues as well as many other legacies of the European controlling presence in Africa.

In addition to all of these developments, Africa also had to deal with some key events including the dividing up of Africa into distinct countries by the European powers that took place at the Berlin Africa Conference (1884-1885), and the impact of two world wars.

Ongoing exploitation

Some would argue that Africa has never freed itself from domination by the west. In the late twentieth century and in the twenty first century, the relationship between the west and Africa has been primarily one of exploitation. International trading agreements with Africa have been unfair on African countries. These agreements have been overly influenced by western big businesses. Such unfair agreements and relationships have allowed individual African officials to get rich while the region sells itself cheaply and develops no infrastructure.

This relationship of exploitation has been a common feature of the European intervention in Africa. It started with the arrival of the missionaries, and continued with the arrival of European merchants and mercenaries, and most lately, with the western multinational corporations.

Economic instability

When economists look at African countries they generally find their economies are weak. There are regularly many economic signs of this, including:

* a weak Gross Domestic Product (GDP, which measures the value of local production and its growth);
* the exports of primary products and agricultural products getting smaller;
* a low level of using modern industrial machines;
* a terrible national debt to richer countries and the gap between rich and poor getting bigger and bigger.

On top of this, many multinational corporations do not even sell African products using prices established by the laws of supply and demand in a free market. Increased costs of production are not passed onto the consumers who buy the produce, instead they are sold from the source in Africa at a lower rate which means less income for African workers and business. The global market also sets a price on most of Africa’s exports and so the higher production cost cannot be recouped. At the same time, a rise in productivity will not necessarily lower world prices by an increase in supply, because the demand may remain fairly small. Africa has mostly been caught in this economic cycle. This is a fundamental inequality in international trade and once this has been set up it is difficult to change.

To sum up, we can say that an unequal trading system has been imposed on Africa by Europe from the mid fifteenth century onwards. This unequal trading system, in one form or another, continues today. It has meant that African countries have never built up sufficient national wealth to invest in their infrastructure (in things such as roads and electricity supply) and industry so that they can develop as countries properly.

<http://www.revealinghistories.org.uk/africa-the-arrival-of-europeans-and-the-transatlantic-slave-trade/articles/the-underdevelopment-of-africa-by-europe.html>