Building Character

As a rather frustrated young man, I used to constantly berate the public school system. I did not see the point of such fruitless exercises; memorization and recitation (no, regurgitation) did not construe learning to me. Needless to say, I was unable to escape this trivial system while in high school, but my parents always reminded me that it was *necessary* in order for me to continue on to college, to take the next *step into life*. This would entail going to a university, getting a degree, (hopefully) finding a job, marrying a beautiful young woman, etc. Louis Althusser would seize this opportunity to point out how, in doing this, I was submitting to an ideology that was attempting to provide the illusion of meaning in my life. Althusser suggests that ideologies, the imaginary “ways of life” upon which we base what is important and necessary, sneak up on us in this way through a process called interpellation. This refers to the method in which an ideology seems to call to or resonate with a person directly, as if it were a silent, secret guide to life, just waiting to be taken up. As interpellation calls to our inner desires and beings, ideologies bring out the subject in all of us, causing us to act and react in accordance with these imaginary relationships. In this sense, I do not rise up against my parents, slay them in defiance, and sail off toward the arctic circle seeking glory and adventure. Instead I bend to my ideology daily, which whispers to me that I owe it to my parents to attend school, marry a doll, and in general become a proud, happy, and successful son.

Ideologies also encourage us (anyone) to occupy the less-desirable subject positions through immaterial rewards. A Marxist would take this opportunity to point out that these oh-so-desirable immaterial rewards cost the “factory owner” at the head of every such system absolutely nothing, and allow them to pay their petty workers less. In a similar way, a water polo coach might tell you that the intense training, hard work, and “fun” are supposed to counterbalance the untold hours spent treading water and swimming. I can personally tell you that there is absolutely nothing “fun” about a sixty degree pool at five in the morning, but, through interpellation, I was driven to dive into that icy pool of liquid and train my hardest so that, when the time came for my hard work to be tested, I could prove myself an aquatic champion. This concept also reminds me distinctly of Calvin and Hobbes, in which Calvin’s father would always tell him that shoveling the sidewalk “builds character”. In one cartoon, Calvin points out that “every time *I* build character, *you* save a couple hundred bucks”, begrudging him for not caving in and buying a snowblower. While Calvin’s dad is attempting to instill values into his son (while also saving himself the trouble of shoveling the sidewalk), Calvin does not enjoy being the subject of this particular ideology, as he must suffer through the bitter cold. While I will likely one day inhabit Calvin’s father’s position myself, wanting to teach my son valuable life lessons, I am still able able to empathize with Calvin in this particular subject position - nobody enjoys when their ideology calls for them to be a cold and miserable.