What is meant by the term ‘risk society’?

Risk society is defined by Bauman and May as ‘a danger or threat that relates to what we do or even refrain from doing.’ (Bauman & May, 2001, Page 113) It has become more significant in recent times due to transformation and advancements in society. When the outcome or consequences of a situation are difficult to calculate, surprise becomes an element and risks are increased. But we cannot let this take over as this will lead to inactivity.

An example Bauman and May provide is the increase of genetically modified (GM) foods. They can be seen as positive in alleviating poverty, but also negative in the way it devastates soil and the long term health affects it can have on consumers. Additionally, in some actions we are not aware of the consequences immediately, such as the rising levels of carbon dioxide in the air. We cannot see, hear, touch or smell, it which makes it difficult to see it coming and the risks it brings.

Globalization is extending things to worldwide and making it more accessible to everyone. As the effects of globalization will never go away, we need sociology more than ever in order to understand ourselves in the present, if we have any hope of shaping the future. However, many people find it difficult to see beyond the confines of their neighbourhood and as Hans Jonas claims, although our actions may affect those who are in other parts of the globe, our moral outlook has not kept pace with these transformations. We do not see any moral responsibility for anyone we are not aware of our actions affecting. The distance between these people means they are in mit the view of their consequences. Thinking sociologically can help us understand ‘human shortcomings’ and help improve the world, for the future.