We explored the relationship between rural inequality and violence during the Colombian civil war. We found that a Colombian municipality was significantly more likely to suffer a massacre if it was home to large-scale cattle ranching. Our results thus suggest that specific patterns of violence can be highly correlated with social inequalities, and that such inequalities are context-dependent, counteracting the predominant hypothesis in the civil war literature that no such relationship exists. Second, we build on the literature’s understanding of the participation and role of economic elites in civil wars, delving into how their behavior is both a reaction to – and a driver of – conflict. Third and finally, we explore the ways in which context-specific inequalities, like the land accumulation caused by cattle ranching, are also related to patterns of violence.